GREENVILLE, S.C. — They’re quite a mayoral couple. From Atlanta: Shirley Franklin, Democrat, African-American, spunky, results-focused, no-nonsense. From Charlotte: Pat McCrory, Republican, white, business oriented, driving force of the new light rail system destined to remake Charlotte in the next generation.

Working in tandem, with bipartisanship rare in today’s America, Franklin and McCrory have been pushing for a common action plan to build imaginative and “green” infrastructure systems for the South’s dominant “megaregion” string of metro areas, centered on Atlanta and Charlotte but extending as far as Raleigh on the east, Birmingham on the west.

Last week, with other regional mayors, they gathered in Greenville to steer and name their new organization—the “Piedmont Alliance for Quality Growth – Mayors, Business, Academia.”

So what’s the need? Says Franklin: “I used to think of the Atlanta metro region as my sphere. But now I know—I’m in a megaregion which will increasingly influence the ability of America to prosper.”

 Adds McCrory: Neither Washington nor the state governments are anticipating the Piedmont metropolitan regions’ pressing and interconnected infrastructure needs.

“Shirley and I are very competitive for jobs,” he adds. “But if we don’t have our energy, transportation and water needs of the future in focus, our economic and quality of life future is in jeopardy.”

A top example: with 4 million more people projected for the region, plus an anticipated increase in truck traffic to and from Southeast ports, the maps of likely interstate roadway traffic show horrendous 20-25 year increases. Passenger rail is a clear alternative for intercity trips. But the region’s few trains are slow and infrequent. Planning for quality regional rail service—not to mention the true high-speed trains now
becoming the international norm—is anemic, lagging behind other U.S. megaregions.

Water is another troubling issue. The Piedmont relies on numerous lakes and rivers for drinking water, recreation, electricity generation by utilities, and manufacturing. But future supply is endangered by increased demand and a history of often careless, ecologically harmful development. Plus, water wars between the region’s states are a decades-old story, with Charlotte and Atlanta both caught up in different federal court suits right now.

“Now we’re fighting each other” says McCrory. “Who wins that battle?”

The new Piedmont Alliance is loosely affiliated with America 2050, a public policy group focused on rapid rail and other strategies to make the U.S. more competitive and sustainable in this century. Meeting at the Library of Congress in Washington last month, the 2050 group heard progress reports from the 10 megaregion alliances that it’s sought to inspire, ranging from the Northeast Corridor to the Great Lakes to Southern California.

The Piedmont Alliance has enjoyed a major push from the research and organizing assistance provided by Georgia Tech’s Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development. The center’s director, Catherine Ross, is author of the newly released book “Megaregions: Planning for Global Competitiveness.” Harry West, her colleague, is admired nationally among regional groups for his 28-years as executive director of the Atlanta Regional Commission. Clemson and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte are also supporting the new Piedmont effort, as well as such firms as Duke Energy, GE, IBM and Georgia Power.

Piedmont Alliance supporters are hoping such an impressive lineup will keep the effort rolling—and inspire more top-level mayoral leadership—even when McCrory and Franklin finish their mayoral terms and retire (this December and January, respectively).

But in a special way it was the soul of the South’s best urbanity, as much as the heavy hitters image, that gave a special lift to the Greenville meeting. The city’s mayor, Knox White, led the visitors on a walk down Greenville’s Main Street. It’s lined with distinctive shops and restaurants. The traffic has been restricted to two lanes to accommodate broad sidewalks and “take it slow” diagonal parking. The visitor is treated to distinctive, easy-to-read street signs.

And something more—Every block there’s a sign saying how many more to Falls Park. And what’s Falls Park? It’s the site of the stunning 28-foot falls of the Reedy River, a piece of wilderness directly in the
center of town, where the first European settler set up his trading post in 1768.

And if the sound of rushing waters weren’t enough, there’s a breathtaking, curved pedestrian suspension bridge, 355 feet long, allowing splendid views of the falls and surrounding gardens.

For 40 years after World War II, the falls were covered over, totally obscured by a highway bridge. Mayor White led the campaign to tear down the bridge, restore view of the falls and build the suspension bridge and park. People are actually allowed to go down and play on the rocks. “Many people get engaged here,” he told me.

The intriguing question some Piedmont Alliance guests posed: Could today’s South think in terms of a “series of Greenvilles” –workable, livable, distinctive communities–and infrastructure with a heart, adding quality to megaregion “bigness”?

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benefit by integrating parks and openspace into our policy, planning and development. I hope the megaregions will help to create a network of new public parks in a time of significant fiscal challenges.

HOWARD J WOOLDRIDGE
Posted November 30, 2009 at 6:46 am | Permalink

Kudos for making a city more friendly, more pleasing. Kudos for regional coop. However, we should have a population policy. What is the advantage of America going to 400 million? name one.