Cooperation on rail, energy, water on table as region's mayors gather

By Rudolph Bell
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The mayors of Atlanta, Charlotte and Greenville talked here Tuesday about cooperating on major planning issues such as water supply, transportation and energy.

Mayors Shirley Jackson of Atlanta and Pat McCrory of Charlotte met twice for the same purpose earlier this year in their cities and decided to continue the conversation in Greenville, McCrory said.

The Mayor’s Megaregion Meeting was billed as a conference on infrastructure needs in the Piedmont Atlantic Megaregion, an area that includes all of five states and part of a sixth.

But most of the attendees are from the I-85 corridor between Charlotte and Atlanta and much of the discussion Tuesday focused on that area.

The conference continues today at the Hyatt Regency hotel downtown with discussion of how a formal organization might be formed and funded.

Franklin said the idea of fostering a regional dialogue on planning came from professors at Georgia Tech. The conference was organized by mayors instead of governors “because mayors decided to do it,” she said.

Greenville Mayor Knox White said the gathering recognizes that “Greenville is tied economically more closely to Atlanta and Charlotte than to most other areas of our own state.”

Also attending Tuesday were the mayors of Gastonia, N.C., and Macon, Ga., as well as city and regional planners, professors from Georgia Tech, Clemson University and the University of North Carolina Charlotte, and corporate executives from various companies, including Duke Energy, Georgia Power, International Business Machines Corp. and General Electric Co.

Water supply surfaced as a key issue in a wide-ranging discussion among attendees. Both Atlanta and Charlotte are caught up in federal lawsuits over water rights.

Jackson said Atlanta has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the litigation and has two federal judges telling it what to do.

Charlotte is seeking to intervene in a lawsuit filed by South Carolina Attorney General Henry McMaster against North Carolina over water rights in the Catawba River. The case is before the U.S. Supreme Court.

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

White said he figures the region’s next water reservoir will be jointly developed by more than one community.

Passenger rail is another area of possible collaboration between the cities.

“There’s only so much we can widen I-85 between Atlanta and Charlotte for the next 50 years,”
McCrory told The Greenville News, “Sooner or later, the congestion will overwhelm us, and we’ve got to have a choice over that congestion, and the choice most likely will be rail.”

McCrory said Greenville could play a key role in planning for the region.

“For example, if we can’t trade our products between Charlotte and Atlanta because of the traffic congestion in Greenville and Spartanburg, we all lose,” the Charlotte mayor said.

Henry West of Georgia Tech’s Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development displayed maps showing the location of universities, ports, power plants, national parks and forests, interstate highways and passenger rail routes in the Piedmont Atlantic Megaregion. The region, one of ten so-called “megaregions” across the United States, includes both Carolinas, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and northern Florida.

Bob Becker of the Strom Thurmond Institute for Government and Public Affairs at Clemson, said Greenville is a “linchpin” since it’s situated between Atlanta and Charlotte.

“It’s certainly going to be a player in the region,” he said.