

The Triangle Has Responsibilities as a World Class Region

Edward M. Bergman

What is one to make of recent news accounts that reveal major difficulties in the Triangle region? We have all seen articles lately that trouble many observers. Research Triangle Park growth has stalled, and senior officials are leaving their posts. The Research Triangle Foundation's directors are considering numerous options for the Park's future development.

Traffic congestion, worsening summer shortfalls in water supply, escalating threats to the natural environment and the many risks associated with a "microelectronics/Silicon Valley" scenario have arrived, although the scenario itself and Sematech have not. The growth of technologically based industries and advanced service businesses threaten to displace the region's traditional industrial base—and, with it, the loss of jobs held by many long-time residents.

Finally, while the region's economy appears to be restructuring on all fronts, its very strength now attracts both the able-bodied and most needy citizens from eastern North Carolina's nonmetropolitan counties. The Triangle may in fact be draining energy from its weaker hinterlands, while also inheriting many of its problems.

How significant are these facts and what sense, if any, can be made of them regarding a development outlook?

This economic restructuring is changing the very character of the region. Our region is not merely larger, it has become altered in fundamental ways. It is no longer merely the sum of three urban counties and cities; it has become a metropolitan region.

This metropolitan region continues to rely upon technological industries, but it relies less now on corporate centers in the Research Triangle Park as its driving force. Relying on new, advanced services to entrepreneurs, new firms are now spinning off in "business incubators" and industrial-office parks.

Similarly, new consumer goods and services demonstrate the existence of this new "metropolitan market."

This metropolitan quality now pushes our region closer to the economic environment of the California and Massachusetts Bay areas. The Research Triangle Park must acknowledge these fundamental alterations and "fine tune" its strategy accordingly.

The very pressures of traffic congestion, water shortages, and so forth have provoked novel regional approaches required of what is now called a "world class" metropolis. Completion of Interstate 40, expansion of Raleigh-Durham Airport, major university plans under way, and close competitions for national technology installations are responsible for support of a regionwide development strategy. As public and private investments accumulate, they provide the foundation of a world class region, but with this ambitious standing comes new responsibilities.

We should not overlook the opportunities to share these benefits with all the citizens in our region. Shortages of skilled labor present an excellent incentive to retrain local workers in our community colleges and university programs who can meet needs for new skills. But our responsibility need not end at the metropolitan borders. The very success of our most vital industries bids up land costs and wage rates, which then force out some traditional firms.

Rather than dismiss such displaced firms as inevitable market casualties, a more responsible regional policy would establish plans to relocate firms among the nonmetropolitan counties surrounding the Triangle. This approach complements development of Triangle East and Triangle South.

It is manifestly in our best interest to acknowledge the metropolitan region we have become. What otherwise appears as a series of independent problems can instead be seen as facets of a new development phase. It is well worth the effort to examine each development episode as it arises, but how each fits into the Triangle's new metropolitan mosaic also deserves our closest attention. □

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