

The Times

Planning for 'One New Jersey'

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On July 23, four hundred people filed into Princeton University's Frist Campus Center. They came from all walks of life from across the state, urban and suburban: pastors, mayors, policy experts, faith leaders, civic organizations ... and they stayed for the entire day! That is a story in and of itself, and we thank The Times for telling it ("Summit: Planning has to hit all bases," July 29).

This diverse group came to explore new ways to address perhaps the most vexing -- but surprisingly connected -- issues facing New Jersey: the economy, segregation (economic and racial), property taxes and the environment. The group was non-partisan, with Democrats, Republicans and independents agreeing that property taxes are too high -- but so are poverty levels in our cities and older suburbs. We have too much government -- but not enough outrage or action over the low performance of many of the state's high schools.

Typically, these types of complex issues are discussed by policy wonks, government officials and special-interest groups. But this was not a typical forum.

Organized by the New Jersey Regional Coalition (NJRC), a 7-year-old statewide grass roots group, in partnership with Plansmart NJ, a 40-year-old policy and planning organization, the summit offered hope that leaders from places all over New Jersey can really "Build One New Jersey" -- the title of the gathering.

Experts shared ideas from around the country on how to deconcentrate poverty in places like Trenton, while also reducing taxes. Local leaders talked of how competing "small box" towns and cities in New Jersey -- all 566 of them -- can find ways to cooperate and act like more effective "big boxes."

In particular, the forum sought ways to align federal and state policies to a healthy agenda for New Jersey. Participants debated ways to link cities and older suburbs through targeted transportation investments, building affordable housing where jobs and opportunities exist, strengthening New Jersey's ability to plan across towns and regions and reducing reliance on property taxes.

Ron Sims, President Obama's deputy secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, praised the group and the summit, and then offered a glimpse of a new HUD, where poverty-related challenges are tackled on a regional, not just urban, level. He predicted a time in the near future when "one's ZIP code will no longer determine their life chances."

Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno challenged New Jersey's former top-down approach to planning, encouraging everyone to engage in the process.

David Rusk, national housing expert and frequent New Jersey analyst, introduced an "opportunity index" that measures the economic and social health of each town in New Jersey. The index can serve as a guide for state and federal aid, infrastructure spending and housing investments to drive urban revitalization, curtail sprawl, break up urban poverty and bolster older suburbs such as Lawrence, Hamilton and Ewing townships.

Perhaps more important than the policy debate was the clear-eyed assumption that if leaders from across the state do not get together and forge a "One New Jersey" alliance, real change will not happen. Too many powerful interests are being served by the current rules of the game -- and the majority loses.

But to forge that alliance, we need to tackle a fundamental divide: By most measures, we are one of the most economically and racially segregated states in the country. The summit acknowledged that challenge,

then exemplified how to overcome it: through honest dialogue, connecting with people who don't look like or live near you, and committing to foster and defend diversity, knowing that it benefits everyone.

Perhaps, out of the dark clouds of partisan bickering and divisions in New Jersey, we may have a silver lining. Local citizens are mad as hell, willing to work alongside, not behind, policy wonks and public leaders to create a thoughtful package of reforms that average folks can understand and rally around. The Rev. R. Lenton Buffalo Jr., NJRC chairman, noted, "In the past, our state and federal policies have helped drive disparities, segregation and sprawl. A new set of government policies can also reverse these trends by investing in cities and older suburbs, developing a stronger state plan and tracking the health of local towns through the opportunity index."

The NJRC's One New Jersey project seeks to create a better New Jersey by blending smart policy ideas with pragmatic, hard-nosed organizing of public leaders and citizens throughout the state -- no matter what their ZIP code.

For more info, go to njregionalequity.org.

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