



THE PLAIN DEALER

Time's running out

Regional leaders are about to unveil broad goals for NE Ohio's future; making them reality is crucial

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Six years ago, this newspaper launched A Quiet Crisis, a series about problems that were sapping Northeast Ohio's economic vitality, destroying its jobs and sending its children packing.

"In many ways it is a crisis more devastating than the usual kind," Editor Doug Clifton wrote in June 2001, "because it is nearly invisible and generates only sporadic headlines."

Sadly, since then, the crisis has only become more obvious and the headlines more frequent.

It's not as quiet as it used to be: Thousands of residents flee for better prospects; waves of homeowners surrender their biggest investment to foreclosure; poverty seeps through the suburbs; personal income and job growth lag the national average; a college education slips out of reach for too many; and big companies merge and move away. Those who remain watch taxes rise and services decline.

To be sure, bright spots exist, although most of the promising prospects need more time before they can truly be judged. Some of the brightest - such as the business investment groups BioEnterprise and Jump Start Inc., and efforts by governments to trim costs by working together - are responses to the region's troubles.

Another hopeful force, a \$44 million economic development effort driven by local philanthropies called the Fund for Our Economic Future, has spun out some bold ideas. They include an enormous three-year process called Voices and Choices, which collected from 20,000 residents ideas about how to turn the region around, as well as the establishment of a sophisticated set of economic indicators to measure reality and an annual survey to keep gauging opinions on critical issues, like school funding and discrimination.

A regional approach to economic development makes sense. Most leaders agree with the concept, if not the details. Increasingly, citizens do, too.

On Friday, with many partners, the fund will unveil an action plan called Advance Northeast Ohio to:

Increase and expand business.

Improve work-force development.

Boost employment and business opportunities for minorities and the economically disadvantaged.

Make government more cost effective.

State and federal leaders will be there. So will heads of major cities, philanthropies and nonprofits, as well as educators and business, civic and labor leaders.

The fund is calling on its partners to endorse the action plan and commit to it.

These targets are not short-term goals, nor are they prescriptions with specific instructions. Some might fault them for that.

But a region as big and diverse as this one needs flexible approaches.

Northeast Ohio's leaders and residents must work together on all four areas. And they must do so with a sense of urgency.

If the local economy continues to sputter, if the region's goals remain timid and if we just talk and talk and talk, no one person will take the fall.

We all will.

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