



Reality Check can guide region's growth

Our region is going to grow. The Central Midlands Council of Governments estimates that by 2040, we will add 450,000 new residents to the 860,000 people that already call this area home. That growth equates to 174,000 new housing units and 169,000 new jobs. It also means 93,000 K-12 students and 66 new K-12 schools, plus all manner of additional infrastructure.

The growth is going to happen. The only question is will we grow by choice or by chance?

Reality Check Midlands, an initiative of the Urban Land Institute, hopes to lead us to choice.

Reality Check is a one-day, hands-on regional visioning exercise designed "to create a collective and enduring roadmap that will establish the Midlands as a prosperous and sustainable place to live, work, visit and play" for the next 30 years. Midlands Reality Check will be held at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center on Oct. 22.

With Columbia at its center, the Midlands Reality Check region runs from Sumter on the east to Winnsboro on the north to roughly Newberry and Batesburg-Leesville on the west to northern Calhoun County on the south. It encompasses all of Richland and Lexington counties, and parts of Sumter, Kershaw, Fairfield, Newberry, Saluda and Calhoun counties.

Reality Check was created by the Urban Land Institute about 15 years ago as a tool for building regional consensus related to growth issues. Founded in 1936, ULI has a worldwide membership of more than 30,000. The nonprofit research and education organization is dedicated to providing "leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide."

Members represent all disciplines of land use. The ULI SC District Council was formed in 2005 and is one the U.S.'s leading ULI councils. South Carolina has about 500 ULI members and about 100 of them live and work in the Midlands.

Again, by way of full disclosure, I have been a ULI member since 2009.

The Midlands Reality Check is being led by a team of our area's ULI members co-chaired by Herbert Ames of Edens and Irene Dumas Tyson of The Boudreaux Group. The exercise is being funded by local government and private sector investors.

Reality Checks have been held across the country from Seattle, Los Angeles and Phoenix to Baltimore, Richmond, Raleigh/Durham and Jacksonville to most recently Charlotte. Both Charleston and the Upstate have held Reality Checks.

The actual exercise, also referred to as the game, puts participants in diverse groups of 10 around a large scale regional map and asks each group to plan for the expected growth using red Legos to represent increases in households and yellow Legos to represent new jobs. Each table also receives pieces of colored yarn that can be put on the map to represent needed highway or other transportation infrastructure as well as outline greenspace. Players are told to place all their Legos on the map answering the questions – How should we grow? Where should we grow? Where should we not grow? But in order to answer those questions and before any Legos go on the map, each table must first come to a consensus on its guiding principles.

Each table's "Guiding Principles" and the result of their Lego placement will be captured, synthesized and presented in a Results Summit two days later on Oct. 24 where not only the participants but also anyone else can come, hear and discuss the results and implementation steps. The idea is to launch a "transformational dialogue." Additional details on the summit will be released later.

Midlands Reality Check will bring together some 300 leaders to participate in the visioning exercise. That breaks down to 30 tables playing the game. Each table will be balanced with a diverse group representing private, government and non-profit entities. Each table will be mixed by racial, ethnic, sexual and age and geographic diversity.

You can certainly expect individuals involved in the land planning industry such as developers, architects, engineers and planners. But you can also expect students, environmentalists, educators, and civic and community leaders.

While most of the 300 participants will be chosen by a local selection committee tasked with seeking the right balance for each table, 30 slots, one per each table, will be filled through a public application process.

To apply, go to the ULI South Carolina website at www.southcarolina.uli.org and click on the Reality Check tab. Midlands Reality Check is also seeking volunteers to help with the exercise and you can find an application for that as well, as well as detailed information about Reality Check. You'll also find links to Facebook, Twitter and You Tube postings.

C. Grant Jackson is senior vice president/community development for the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce. He can be reached at (803) 733-2513 or at gjackson@columbiachamber.com.