



Block Party Proves A True Reality Check

By KAREN BRANCH-BRIOSO The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - The group gathered Friday at the Tampa Convention Center - CEOs and chefs, developers and deejays, educators and environmentalists, businesspeople and political powerbrokers - all had one thing in common.

They wanted to get their hands on the Legos.

The small plastic children's toy became a tool of power Friday at Reality Check Tampa Bay. The event was spearheaded by the Tampa Bay Partnership, a group that recruits companies to the area, and the Urban Land Institute, a group that promotes responsible growth and has conducted similar regional growth exercises in places such as Washington, Los Angeles and Dallas.

The Tampa Bay area exercise turned more than 300 people into "growth gods" for the morning. But first came the evangelization from Ed McMahon, an Urban Land Institute fellow whose speech had all the trappings of a sermon:

"The book of Proverbs says: 'Without vision, the people will perish,'" McMahon said.

Then, with borderless maps of the seven-county region spread before them, their charge was to find a place for 3.2 million new people and 1.5 million new jobs expected here by 2050.

For the players, that meant placing 1,015 yellow Legos for homes and 408 red Legos for jobs on each of 32 maps on tables across a large ballroom. They crisscrossed the region with orange ribbons for mass transit. Purple ribbons were new roads. With as many as a dozen players at each table - deliberately drawn from different counties and job descriptions - they didn't always agree.

At Table 4, after St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Baker saw that a colleague had stacked a tower of yellow Legos in the downtown area of his city, he plucked them from the map. He put some back. But then the rest made their way to other parts of the region.

"You want to increase residential density and jobs downtown, but that was too much," Baker later told the Tribune. He also took issue with someone's decision to place a purple ribbon - for new roads - to mimic a controversial proposal for a Heartland Parkway stretching south from northeast Polk County to Fort Myers.

"I don't necessarily agree with that. I would be concerned that building new [highways] would create more sprawl," Baker said.

The groups started by deciding their guiding principles. Table 31 had a frenzy of suggestions:

"I say we place an emphasis on mass transit," said Anita Jimenez, a personal chef from Ruskin.

Steve Queior of the Sarasota Chamber of Commerce said: "Inadequate housing is huge."

"Water's the problem," said Ron Morrow, a retired banker from Polk County. "That's the one we need to deal with."

Mass Transit Popular

In the end, most of the table's players from the traffic-conscious Bay area were pushing for some form of mass transit - and some more roads. At Table 30, one of the orange ribbons for mass transit stretched across the Bay from St. Petersburg to Apollo Beach: a passenger ferry. Some tables created a beltway east of Tampa curving from Pasco in the north to Sarasota in the south.

Table 14, which had such a beltway, also had mass transit lines extending like bicycle spokes from downtown Tampa to other parts of the region. Pasco County School Board member Kathryn Starkey frowned at her colleagues' massive amounts of Legos, yellow and red, all across Manatee and Sarasota counties - even to the eastern, agricultural fringes of Myakka.

"You're creating a New Tampa down there," Starkey said. "We need more spokes!"

Gathering A Rare Event

Despite its bumpy moments, Reality Check Tampa accomplished something that is rare in the region. It brought together people from seven counties - Hernando, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas, Polk and Sarasota - to plan how they should grow together. Not as individual city zoning commissions, nor as counties.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the people of seven counties and many municipalities and a greater number of special interests groups to transcend all of that to become one body, envisioning Tampa Bay," said the Rev. James T. Golden, a Bradenton city commissioner and a member of the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council, one of the event sponsors.

It won't end there, insisted SunTrust Bank's Tampa Bay Chairman Dan Mahurin, the co-chairman of Reality Check Tampa Bay. He announced that the organizers will analyze the results of Friday's exercise and make efforts to advance it - and get more citizens involved - through something called One Bay.

Anyone interested in that effort can learn more and subscribe to the group's mailing list by going to www.myonebay.com.

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