

SunSentinel **OPINION**

NANCY A. MEYER
Publisher & General Manager

ROSEMARY O'HARA
Editorial Page Editor

JULIE ANDERSON
Editor-in-Chief

SUN SENTINEL EDITORIAL

Pulling for business group to flex our region's muscle

It's good to see South Florida's three major chambers of commerce join hands to address key issues facing our region because given the challenges we face, our business community needs a bigger bullhorn.

When business leaders get involved, politicians listen, as they did last year after the CEOs of Orvis and Maverick Boats met with then-Gov. Rick Scott and legislative leaders to explain how Lake Okeechobee's runoff was hurting their businesses, which hurts jobs.

Imagine the impact South Florida businesses could have on other regional challenges if they sang from a shared songbook on the public stage. Add in their employees and you've got a chorus that couldn't be ignored.

Frankly, South Florida doesn't get the respect it deserves. Our three counties — Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade — send a lot more money to Tallahassee and Washington D.C. than we get back for roads, water projects, affordable housing, courts, social services and more.

Just this year, we could only watch as state lawmakers raided the affordable housing trust fund for other priorities and decided to spend future transportation dollars on three new tollroads through the boondocks.

South Florida is too soft-spoken. We need to carry a bigger stick. So this new regional business collaborative, called the South Florida Business Council, is welcome news.

Sure, the region has plenty of muscular business groups, including the Greater Fort Lauderdale Alliance, the Business Development Board of Palm Beach County and the Miami-Dade Beacon Council. But because economic development groups get public money to attract or retain businesses, they're reluctant to join the public debate for fear of biting the hand that feeds them.

Broward also has the Broward Workshop, a group of CEOs that weighs in on some public policy issues, though not at the

scope or scale proposed by this regional collaborative.

The goal is not to duplicate the work of the economic development groups, said Dan Lindblade, president of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce, during a meeting with the Sun Sentinel Editorial Board. "But somebody has got to lead."

Anyone who doubts the power of a business group to lead its region's prowess should take a look at Orlando, Inc., the powerhouse business group that keeps Central Florida at the front of the line when state spending decisions are made.

The success of Orlando Inc. — which unlike South Florida's new collaborative, includes county economic development groups — spurred the Tampa Bay Partnership to similarly muscle up its region's influence.

"Regionalism is something that we've seen in other communities that have been highly effective, whether it's wooing a new business, going to Tallahassee or Washington D.C. on certain issues, or just improving the quality of life here," said Christine Barney of rbb Communications in Miami-Dade, who chairs the new council.

"There's an awful lot the three counties should work on together to be more efficient and to have a stronger voice, especially against competitors like the Orlando corridor. When they come in together, they have more of an impact. So we need to be standing together."

Hear, hear!

"Mobilizing the business community cannot be a bad thing," said former Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jack Seiler, the group's chairperson-elect. "So many times the business community sits on the sidelines on some of these very major public policy issues. Now you have leadership in all three counties saying, 'We're not going to sit on the sidelines.'"

The regional effort to land Amazon's HQ2 inspired the three chambers to work

"There's an awful lot the three counties should work on together to be more efficient and to have a stronger voice, especially against competitors like the Orlando corridor."

Christine Barney, rbb Communications

together on other regional issues, while remaining competitive on local deals. The arrival of the go-fast inter-city train formerly called Brightline also crystallized the region's connectedness. So did the South Florida Regional Climate Compact, which coordinates sea-level rise projections across county lines. So, too, did The Invading Sea, the editorial board collaborative of South Florida's three major newspapers, which is raising awareness about sea-level rise.

Not only is this business collaborative a needed shot in the arm for South Florida's political muscle, it could also be good for chamber business. For like service clubs, religious institutions and fraternal organizations, the digital era also has disrupted chambers of commerce. With businesses having so many more ways to network and reach customers, chambers are struggling to attract and retain membership.

But joining the chamber could become a lot more attractive if members are given the chance to be heard on — and help address — the challenges facing our communities.

When the council broke ground four months ago, committees from each chamber — the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Commerce of the Palm Beaches — deliberated which issues to tackle first. Health

care was big, but so was securing some quick wins.

They settled on five: mobility and transportation, starting with advocating for federal grants to bypass Tallahassee; education quality, with a watchful eye on school funding, school choice and student safety; water management, focusing on sea-level rise and beach renourishment; affordable housing, especially transit-oriented development and ending the legislature's annual raids on the trust fund; and tourism growth, targeting support for Visit Florida and beach restoration.

The group also plans shared events, including a 2020 global summit on best practices for dealing with climate change, a most worthy endeavor. For unless more is done to prepare South Florida, business leaders now understand that rising seas will affect insurance costs, long-term lending, stormwater and drinking-water systems, mobility, land loss and our future. And with CEOs getting more engaged, Washington and the Florida Legislature could finally come onboard, kicking and screaming.

We suspect the new business council would have more oomph if it included the county economic development organizations. The organizers said other groups are interested in joining, but they first want to walk before they run.

We're pulling for them. All of us should pull for them. Because South Florida is stronger together.

Disagreements are sure to follow as this new business council enters the public fray. But if it plays nicely across county lines, it is our best hope for addressing shared problems and securing our turn at the front of the line.

Editorials are the opinion of the Sun Sentinel Editorial Board and written by one of its members or a designee. The Editorial Board consists of Editorial Page Editor Rosemary O'Hara, Sergio Bustos, Steve Bousquet and Editor-in-Chief Julie Anderson.