

Area colleges join together to provide solutions to improve region

The Joint Urban Studies Center (JUSC) has recently released two reports that address the decades of economic and demographic decline in Northeastern Pennsylvania. These reports are full of new ideas to help rejuvenate municipalities in the region and they call for action by government, non-profit, education and business leaders on recommendations designed to reform government on many levels.

As members of the JUSC advisory board, we appreciate the opportunity to present these ideas to the citizenry for comment and support.

Although the past has been cluttered with plans and ideas that have not been implemented, and it remains difficult to cut through red tape, we must remain encouraged because the time for action is now.

The JUSC -- a partnership of institutions of higher learning and businesses -- was formed to help small to mid-sized communities solve their problems by researching government reforms that have worked elsewhere and by providing the local consultation and analysis needed to implement the recommendations. The center uses the region's institutions of higher education to engage communities in economic development planning that is backed by research, energized by broad participation from stakeholders, and validated by successful implementation.

All of the recommendations in the reports are based on exhaustive review of best practices.

Our first report, "Strategies for Renewing the Cities of Northeastern Pennsylvania," contains 40 specific recommendations that can be implemented to achieve economies of scale and much-needed governmental reform.

The recommendations range from ways to change local zoning codes to encourage economic growth, to ways in which standards for new construction and rehabilitation can unify a community's image. They also include proposals to regionalize planning and consolidate local government programs and services such as public safety and municipal trash collection to achieve improvements in service and economies of scale.

Just as important is the center's desire to fight apathy by increasing participation of faculty and students in solving the region's problems. *The JUSC has students working as interns and uses faculty-sponsored research. The long-term purpose is to find ways to engage and empower the next generation of leaders and to keep them right here in Northeastern Pennsylvania.*

The JUSC's action plan calls for a meeting of the county commissioners of Luzerne and Lackawanna counties and the mayors of the largest cities in the region in the near future. The meeting will focus how to approach solving specific problems on a regional basis. Our goal is to prioritize several recommendations for immediate action.

In addition, the JUSC encourages every municipal organization in the region to allow us to use our expertise to help them plan and execute reform ideas.

A companion JUSC report, "Why Aren't We Average," released last week provides even more detailed information on the region's economic and demographic decline. While this is not breaking news, what is new is the extent of this information and the plans for prosperity contained in both reports that address the underlying causes of this decline and are designed to get Northeastern Pennsylvania back in the game. *Indeed, JUSC's expertise lies in developing this information and in working with governments and nonprofits to provide customized strategies for implementation after a thorough review of the client, community, or organization. This type of assistance is different from other government and non-profit agencies because it results in concrete action plans to get the job done.*

Concerted and planned action is all the more important because during the next decade this region is likely to grow significantly as a result of in-migration from the major metropolitan areas of New York City and Philadelphia. We must recognize that — even with significant changes — immediate impact is not realistic. What we are looking for is a strategic and linked set of actions that not only revive our region, but also assure long-term development patterns that are smart and sustainable.

JUSC will continue to provide data, customized strategy development, and best practices to assist stakeholders in moving the region forward. We will also continue to promote regionalism as the best method for reaching beyond political and jurisdictional boundaries to address common problems.

Both reports are available on the JUSC's website: www.urbanstudies.org. For more information you may call the center at 570.408.9850.

Joint Urban Studies Center Advisory Board

William P. Montague, Founder

Tim Gilmour, Ph.D., Chairman

William B. Sordoni, Vice Chairman

Thomas Baldino, Ph.D., Chairman Academic Advisory Council

Steve Barrouk

John Cefaly

Denise Cesare

Scott Dagenais

Jim DePolo

Patricia Donohue, Ph.D.

Rusty Flack

Jeffrey Folk, MD

Mary C. Hines, Ph.D.

William R. Host, MD

Thomas E. Lawson
William Leandri
David Lee
Melanie Maslow Lumia
Michael MacDowell, Ph.D.
Tom O'Hara, C.S.C., Ph.D.
Scott Pilarz, S.J., Ph.D.
Russell Roberts
Thomas Romanowski
Eugene Roth
Susan W. Shoval