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Charleston Gazette-Mail / Daily Mail Opinion Page

Terrell Ellis: Our region can achieve more by working together (Daily Mail)

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Opinion columnist Mark Sadd's commentary in the [April 24 Gazette-Mail](#) ("Charleston, Huntington should be sisters, not sibling rivals") exposes a very real and critically important issue: Charleston and Huntington must work together to grow opportunities for the entire region and state.

Sadd sums up what he views as the past relationship between the two cities by stating, "To hear Charleston and Huntington tell it, they are on nearly opposite sides of the earth. Their emotional remoteness has something to do with ample small-mindedness among the leadership ranks of both cities and the lack of imagination of West Virginians to think beyond their borders, or their lawns."

While I have seen examples of this over my decades-long career, I believe that scenario and mindset to be one of the past. The political and community leadership in both cities, from my vantage point, have a collegial and cooperative relationship.

Frankly, I believe we are at precisely the right time to leverage the positive working relationship between our cities and the areas in between to move our region, and the state, forward.

In fact, Advantage Valley is working to do just that. As executive director of Advantage Valley Inc., a private nonprofit organization representing the Charleston and Huntington metropolitan statistical areas, I'd suggest we are stronger together than apart.

From an economic development perspective, we are more appealing as a region than as individual cities or towns.

Regions often provide a better framework for addressing significant and far reaching economic development challenges and opportunities because their boundaries are typically based on economic considerations, rather than geographic or political ones.

Because commuting patterns, supply chains, industry clusters and labor markets spread across regions, businesses typically think more about these than about jurisdictional distinctions when determining where to locate.

Consider that our region has a combined population of nearly 600,000 when encompassing Boone, Cabell, Clay, Kanawha, Lincoln, Putnam and Wayne Counties. The six major highway systems, two primary railroads, four navigable rivers, two commercial airports and an inland port facility are defining regional strengths.

Our transportation assets, coupled with a large metro population, access to government decision makers, quality education and health care options and available workforce, offer significant advantages to companies interested in expansion opportunities in the Mid-Atlantic.

The region also features several significant primary industry clusters, to include: automobile parts suppliers; chemicals and plastics; advanced manufacturing; health care; and energy (natural gas and coal, primarily). We have a lot going for us as a region and we need to tell our story in a very defined, measurable way.

In Sadd's column, he states, "Both cities would do well to do more together. There have been tepid efforts, including the Advantage Valley initiative, which, to me, has always begged key questions: Which advantage? Which valley?"

I answer by stating we need to focus on a "one region, myriad advantages" strategy. And the Advantage Valley organization is doing just that. Within the past six months, we have been awarded more than \$1 million in grant funding to pursue several "rubber-meets-the-road" economic development initiatives. From the Upper Kanawha Valley to the Ohio River we are:

- Increasing the inventory of shovel ready sites, with an emphasis on redevelopment of vacant and underutilized sites.
- Developing a site development funding strategy that leverages both public and private sector investment products to provide gap financing.
- Conducting a market analysis to identify growing and emerging industries and business development opportunities that can be cultivated within the region.
- Deploying business retention representatives in county-level development authorities to help existing manufacturers and other businesses impacted by the decline in coal.
- And, we are marketing the Advantage Valley as one region with our county-level partners.

The success of these initiatives requires cooperation from many, including local governments, business organizations and economic development agencies.

As a region and state we face many challenges. However, by acting in concert with all of our local partners, we are stronger in promoting our many advantages and more effective in addressing our challenges.

Throughout West Virginia, there have been actions taken by public officials, private citizens and the business community to forge alliances and relationships across communities and localities. Advantage Valley is just one of those examples.

We must pool our resources to create regional identities, align economic development strategies and create new opportunities for growth and development.

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