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San Diego Provides Lessons for Atlanta Region's Leaders, Young and Old

“People in power stay in power by nature. You have to be intentional about who you bring to the table.”

– Bill Bolling, founder, Atlanta Community Food Bank & FoodWell Alliance

“This is really, in essence, why we’re on this trip... At the end of the day, what we want to see is how are we going to identify, train, nurture, support and sustain the leaders of the future?”

This quote sums up what ARC’s annual LINK trip is all about. Each year, more than 100 metro Atlanta leaders visit another metropolitan region to see and discuss the issues both regions share.

In recent years, ARC has tried hard to expand the group, diversifying it across gender, ethnicity, business sector, and more, to introduce more regional influencers to metro Atlanta’s issues and to each other.

Why San Diego

Known for sand, surf, and its proximity to Mexico, the San Diego region at first blush doesn’t seem to have much in common with metro Atlanta. But it didn’t take long for participants on the trip to discover that the two regions share many attributes – and challenges.

Both regions are dealing with a rapidly growing population, increasing housing costs, stagnant wages, and a lack of homegrown talent to fill the jobs of the future. These were the topics of discussion on for more than 120 metro Atlanta leaders during the three-day 2018 LINK trip to the San Diego region.

Aside from shared issues, Atlanta leaders wanted to learn about San Diego’s leadership in the technology and robotics fields, how San Diego and Tijuana use their proximity to benefit both economies, and how our region might avoid the homelessness crisis confronting Southern California today.

There was much to learn, and the group got right to it.

DAY 1 – WEDNESDAY, MAY 9, 2018

Collaboration is Key to Success

LINK participants visited Liberty Station, a sprawling 361-acre mixed-use development in the former Naval Training Center San Diego which served as host of the first day’s activities. From its opening in 1923, the Naval Training Center was where most of the U.S. Navy’s sailors prepared for combat until it was closed in 1997. Today, it is home to businesses, nonprofits, art galleries, residences, offices, schools, and a rambling waterfront park.



Two panel discussions were held at Liberty Station. One focused on San Diego’s innovation economy, while the other explored the CaliBaja binational megaregion. But a common theme emerged that dominated the discussion: the importance of collaboration.

Takeaways from the day’s sessions included:

- » San Diego area businesses, like Qualcomm and Northrop Grumman, are working with local school systems to prepare students for STEM careers.
- » The region’s businesses sometimes share resources to help each other solve tough problems. For example, Qualcomm programmers might help a genetics company write the computer code needed to help them study the genetics of Alzheimer’s, cancer, or other medical issues.
- » Business leaders on both sides of the Mexican border recognize that their citizens possess skills that are different from those on the other side. And, over time, they have developed a binational economy that depends on the two sides respecting each other and working together to produce a shared result.
- » Officials from San Diego and Tijuana travel together to visit their nations’ capitals and discuss their region’s needs with legislators. And rather than being cautious during the current tensions between their countries, they see the tension as an opportunity to better educate their legislators about their symbiotic relationship.

“San Diego’s Chicano Park offers boundless ideas for murals and sculptures to transform spaces created by roads and bridges into artful public parks.”

– Michael Halicki, executive director, Park Pride

These discussions led one LINK participant to note that Georgia has several business sectors spread across the state, such as cyber security in Augusta and shipping in Savannah. The group wondered if there are ways Georgia’s metro areas could better share resources and work together to improve the economy of the entire state.

One example was in the Atlanta area’s workforce development organizations, of which there are currently four publicly-funded workforce boards and any number of private groups, movements, etc.

“We need to merge the public and the private pieces of our workforce into one regional workforce organization,” said Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta CEO Alicia Philip. “We’ve got some public entities and some private ones. Nobody’s working together, and it needs to be one really strong workforce organization that can raise money and do different things.”

DAY 2 - THURSDAY, MAY 10, 2018

While each discussion on a LINK trip brings something new, a theme seems to develop each day. There was no doubt that the theme for Thursday, and really the entire trip, was housing affordability.

The theme got rolling with the day's first panel discussion about the large military presence in the San Diego region. Panelists discussed the fact that many military families are unable to afford housing in San Diego and are living far away from the bases where they work – some are living across the border in Mexico where the cost of living is much lower.

The day's second panel was about housing affordability. That was followed by another related discussion regarding the region's growing homeless population.



“I thought it was very telling that in every session, affordable housing came up,” said Sarah Kirsch, executive director of the Atlanta office of the Urban Land Institute. “I mean every single session, no matter what the topic was supposed to be, they discussed affordable housing as a challenge in that area. That shows that we can't study this problem from just a housing perspective, or a jobs perspective, or any one perspective. It impacts every aspect of life in metro Atlanta.”

The fact is that roughly 1 million San Diegans are not living at a self-sufficiency level. The San Diego region is able to meet just half of its affordable housing needs.

“When a panelist says his kids can't afford housing in San Diego, you know housing affordability is a huge problem for the region.”

– Anthony Rodriguez, Co-Founder & Producing Artistic Director, Aurora Theatre

Finding Solutions to Housing Affordability Issues

The region's leaders are rolling up their sleeves and trying to get the housing crisis under control. The San Diego region has a history of working together across sectors, and this collaboration is yielding innovative solutions.



For example, the U.S. Navy is working with Lincoln Property Company, a real estate development and management firm, to provide premier military housing, and the San Diego Military Advisory Council is exploring solutions, such as greater housing density and land swaps, with area cities and the county.



Ron Roberts, Supervisor of San Diego County, explained that the problem of homelessness is exacerbated because of the high cost of housing in the region. San Diego has the fourth-highest homeless population in the country yet currently has only 42 beds for every 100 homeless persons.

Mary Lydon, Executive Director of Housing You Matters, talked about innovation and the need to move nimbly. San Diego recently created a homelessness registry to help organizations react quickly when services become available for an individual. Other innovations being explored by leadership include housing placed on church properties and new policies to support small houses and co-housing.

While officials acknowledge they will never completely solve the homelessness issue, they said it can be managed in a way that improves many lives.



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FORWARD

LINK Forward Traverses San Diego Region, Dives Deeper into Tough Issues

For the second year, a second group of about 20 Atlanta leaders joined the LINK group on Wednesday but had their own sessions on Thursday that featured deeper dives into some of the most pressing issues.

This group, LINK Forward, began their day at the University of California San Diego, where they saw the booming campus and heard about San Diego's past, present, and future from Dr. Mary Walshok, the school's Vice Chancellor for Public Programs and Dean of Extension. She is considered the region's most knowledgeable historian.



The group next visited the Mexican border, holding a discussion inside the Cross Border Express (CBX), a privately-owned port of entry that feeds directly into Tijuana International Airport. For a \$30 round trip, travelers enter in San Diego, pass through security, and walk through a 400-foot passage into the airport, which offers more international flights than San Diego's airport.

"A higher percentage of your exports in Georgia go to Mexico than the percentage of our exports here in San Diego and California."

– Dr. Nikia Clarke, executive director, World Trade Center San Diego

LINK Forward participants were particularly impressed with the way U.S. and Mexican economic development organizations have been able to consistently work across a national border. Some noted that metro Atlanta and other regions often struggle to work across local political boundaries. Even during tense political times, the San Diego-area panelists were optimistic about their continued ability to collaborate for the good of people on both sides of the border.

LINK Forward ended its day with discussions on a range of topics that included growing new leaders, economic development and affordable housing.

The final conversation of the day was with Janice Brown, the newly-elected chairperson of the San Diego Economic Development Corporation. Just one day into her position as chair, Brown animatedly displayed optimism for San Diego's future while also pointing out the barriers preventing the region from reaching its potential.

The group and Brown shared many ideas about how to overcome these barriers, which are common to both regions, such as the rising cost of living, stagnant wages, and a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots.

The San Diego-Tijuana area is frequently referred to as the Cali-Baja megaregion, and the economy of the region depends heavily on cross-border collaboration in the business, government, education, and nonprofit sectors. From protecting the Tijuana River, to protecting citizens of both countries from the dangers of the opioid epidemic, citizens and leaders of the Cali-Baja megaregion are closely connected and have learned to appreciate each other's strengths.

Dr. Nikia Clarke of the World Trade Center San Diego pointed out that products might cross the border six or eight times during the production process before finally being deemed an “export” of one country or the other. Likewise, one-in-five students on either side have attended school on the other side.

“We are a region of six million people with a border down the middle,” Clarke said. “Our goal is to make the border as invisible as possible.”

And helping to make the border invisible is the Cross Border Xpress facility, where the LINK Forward group got a tour and heard from Clarke over lunch.

LINK Forward is a group of 20 LINK veterans who break away from the larger body for one day and dive more deeply into key issues in small-group discussions with local experts.

The Cross Border Xpress (CBX) is a privately-owned terminal of the Tijuana airport with an enclosed bridge across the border into San Diego. Airport patrons can, for a fee, enter and go through security on the U.S. side before crossing directly into the Tijuana airport where they have access to more international flights than the San Diego airport can offer. It's essentially a one-stop shop for airport patrons from north of the border.

Leadership Is Not Determined by ZIP Code

“There is leadership in all of us,” said Dwayne Crenshaw, co-founder of RISE San Diego, a nonprofit that seeks to foster and support ordinary citizens who want to become community leaders. A lot can be learned about Crenshaw and RISE when you know that his partner is a former political opponent who also grew up in a poor, minority neighborhood.



The RISE mission is explained best on its website: rise.sandiego.org

“It’s not just at City Hall. It’s not simply in the courtroom, classroom, or boardroom. Rather, it’s at its greatest in neighborhoods – at the coffee shop, in living rooms, on the trolley, and in the church basement. Leadership knows no boundaries... The best solutions emerge when everyday people discover their leadership potential and become agents of change.”

Crenshaw brought several alumni from RISE to discuss the impacts they have had on their communities. One formed a nonprofit that helps high school students from poor neighborhoods continue their educations, and another is about to celebrate the groundbreaking of a much-needed senior center that she shepherded through the approval and permitting process after more than 25 years of struggle for local seniors.

The inspirational messages from these newfound leaders inspired the LINK Forward group to want to be even more inclusive when they got back home to Atlanta.

“People in power stay in power by nature. You have to be intentional about who you bring to the table,” said Bill Bolling, founder of the Atlanta Community Food Bank and FoodWell Alliance. “This is really, in essence, why we’re on this trip... At the end of the day, what we want to see is how are we going to identify, train, nurture, support and sustain the leaders of the future?”

The LINK contingent found plenty of leaders in the San Diego region. They brought back many lessons to apply to issues we are grappling with in metro Atlanta.

Optional Tours

As is tradition, Thursday’s panel discussions ended early in the afternoon and LINK participants scattered out, taking any one of four optional tours that focused on different issues.

Balboa Park Arts Tour - One group visited the 1,200-acre Balboa Park, home to more than 29 arts, science, and cultural institutions, including the Dan Diego Museum of Art, San Diego Youth Symphony, and the San Diego Zoo. All of these institutions are members of a partnership called the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership.

Bus Rapid Transit – One group took a drive in the I-15 Express Lanes, where the region’s “Rapid” BRT service runs. Their tour guide told them all about the operations of the BRT system as they traveled.

Cross-Border and Tijuana Maquiladora Tour – One group crossed the border at the very large Otay Mesa crossing to visit a manufacturing facility that is one of more than 750 extensions of U.S. companies doing manufacturing in Tijuana. This model, called the “maquiladora” model, means that many products cross the border dozens of times before being sold in the U.S. and around the world.

General Dynamics NASSCO Shipbuilding Tour – One group visited the waterfront in San Diego Bay to see the operations of General Dynamics NASSCO, a company that traces its roots to San Diego and runs the largest full-service shipyard on the U.S. west coast.

DAY 3 – FRIDAY, MAY 11, 2018

One of the highlights of the 2018 trip was the morning spent at the Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center, home to Olympic and Paralympic athletes in training. While LINK participants only competed in Bocce, they were excited to be in the presence of great athletes and leaders.



The training facility also provided the most quotable moment of the trip. Atlanta City Councilman Amir Farokhi summed it up best with the following Twitter post:

‘Didn’t come to [@AtlantaRegional](#) #AtLINK to cry but was deeply moved by the selflessness of guide runner [@Mr_Jerome_Avery](#) & the spirit and joy of blind 4-time US Paralympic medalist, world champ, and WR holder in long jump [@LexGillette](#) “No need for sight when you have a vision.”’

Options are the Key to Moving People Around the Region

When LINK made its first trip to San Diego in 2001, the region was abuzz with talk of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), a transit service with buses that act like trains, operating in their own lanes with raised platforms and fixed routes – but with the flexibility for future route changes if needed.

One of the reasons for this year’s follow-up trip was to see San Diego’s BRT in action. Launched in 2014, Rapid carries passengers along I-15 in HOV lanes and is providing another option to the car for people who live or work north of the city.

Construction began in 2016 on the South Bay Rapid corridor with 11 stations along its 21-mile route, connecting residents to jobs and amenities downtown and south of the city, all the way to the Otay Mesa border crossing.

Along with providing more miles of service, South Bay Rapid will act more like true BRT. It will have dedicated bus-only lanes, a direct connection to the HOV lanes on I-805, limited stops, and real-time information for passengers at the stations. Buses will run every 10 minutes during rush hour.

LINK participants had the opportunity to see BRT buses during peak travel times and to ride the region's light rail service. Some came back with a better idea of what BRT can mean for a large metro area with limited financial and political resources.

They also heard from leaders of the two major transit systems and a local elected official. They agreed that one of the keys to their success is collaboration.



“We try to collaborate as much as possible, especially at the three commuter rail stations where our services overlap” said Matthew Tucker, executive director of the North County Transit District, noting that one crucial step was to consolidate many small transit systems into two large ones. “We share a lot of technology, like fare collection and traffic management.”

This was promising to LINK participants as they compared this to the consolidation of metro Atlanta's many transit systems under the umbrella of the new Atlanta Transit Link (ATL).

“Transit is part of a toolbox. The discussion doesn't have to be all or nothing. Transportation needs to meet the expectations of the community.”

– Matthew Tucker, executive director, North County Transit District

The transportation panel was followed by a discussion of Smart Cities, Mobility, and Autonomous Vehicles. San Diego is a leader in many of these areas, serving as a testing ground for growing smart cities technology.

Education on the Beach

It may have felt like they were playing hooky, but the participants held class at the YMCA's Camp Surf at Imperial

Beach. Surrounded by surfboards and tiki wood, they discussed the topics of Building the Regional Economy through a Prepared Workforce, and Resilience Planning and Conservation.

Participants learned that schools in the area are trying to de-emphasize standardized tests and focus more on life lessons and making sure that everyone learns the skills they need to graduate and join the workforce. The school system posts information in the schools about how many jobs there are for people who learn a trade, and how much those jobs pay.

“I thought it was my job to prepare kids to get good test scores, then go to college,” said Dr. David Miyashiro, superintendent of the Cajon Valley Union School District. “Then I realized this was malpractice.” He said the district now works to help teachers in grades K-12 be more like career counselors.



Inmates in San Diego jails are taught the skills needed to fill the jobs that are most in demand. The region's workforce entity, which combines public and private systems and funds, is truly focused on ensuring there are enough home-grown workers to fill the jobs of tomorrow.

Water, and San Diego's struggles to share with its Mexican neighbors who have fewer regulations around treatment and quality, was the primary subject of the Resiliency discussion. Another important point was that resilience can, and should, be a proactive part of the planning process rather than a reactive component. The emphasis in San Diego is to find solutions where both the economy and the environment win.



Atlanta Regional Commission

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