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Southern demographics and growth provide opportunities

By Tom Ross

Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. – We Southerners have never really all had the same quality of life or culture.

Having spent my entire life in the South, I certainly understand when people refer to the Southern way of life or the Southern culture. But I have never felt the people of the South were as homogeneous as some believe. We have always had diversity in the way we live our lives, in our beliefs and backgrounds and in what we value.

Our Southern diversity has been healthy in many ways and has created difficulties in others. Issues of race, for example, have confounded the South for most of its history. It is projected that a majority of the residents of the South will be people of color by the middle of the century. The juxtaposition of race and changing demographics increases the need to face head on the issues created by our differences and for all of us to learn to live together respectfully.

In fact, the diversity of cultures, ideas and beliefs is now changing rapidly in the South. The in-migration from other states and countries has resulted in the presence of people from more different cultures than have historically been represented. These changes create an opportunity to build a more open, inclusive South upon which I hope we seize.

Another way our lives are changing in the South is with respect to growth. Historically, we have had communities that never had to worry about clean air and water. We have always had recreational space and open space for hiking, hunting and fishing. We used to laugh at the transportation problems facing Los Angeles and New York.

But this rapid growth and its impact are placing our long-valued clean air, water and open space at risk. The American South is growing exceptionally fast and will add millions of new residents in the next 25 years. This growth will likely result in more urban sprawl, less open space for recreation, high energy demands, strains on the affordability of housing, increases in air and water pollution and inadequate water quantity.

Rates of development are having a negative impact on our environment and thus, our quality of life, and we are not appropriately planning for this growth. With the population growth in the South continuing to outstrip most of the rest of the country, we must look for ways to protect our water quality and quantity. We must deal with automobile emissions and pollution from coal-fired power plants so we will be able to breathe clean air. We must

enact thoughtful zoning and land use policies that preserve green space, keep our water clean and allow for adequate recreational sites.

If we fail to begin to act now to deal growth, we will not have the same quality of life to which many of us became accustomed growing up in the South. The good news is that if we act now by taking steps to avoid many of the negative consequences of growth, we will go a long way towards protecting the quality of life we have known and loved in the South. Similarly, if we take progressive steps forward to deal with the opportunities of changing demographics, we can build a stronger South for everyone.

Tom Ross, a former North Carolina superior court judge, is executive director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (<http://www.zsr.org>), a private philanthropic grant-making organization with assets exceeding \$425 million. This commentary is excerpted from an interview with the Center for a Better South. To view the full interview, go to: <http://www.bettersouth.org/fivequestions>

PHOTO NOTE TO EDITORS: This op-ed is taken from the November FIVE QUESTIONS interview by the Center for a Better South. You can view the whole interview and download a high-resolution photo of Ross at: <http://www.bettersouth.org/fivequestions/index.htm>

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