

Make South envy of rest of country

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With the Tennessee Legislature in full swing, perhaps now is a good time to look at some big visions to help the state and region move forward.

Across the South, legislators often are sidetracked by policy red herrings - things that are really nonissues compared to generational regional problems involving education, poverty and health care.

Many seem to find it easier to deal with gay marriage, abortion or gator-hunting rules than serious reforms that would change an unfair tax system or generate new and better jobs or fix health care. Instead of solutions for addressing big problems, many Southern leaders today seem to kowtow to increasing partisanship and offer small sound bites for big problems to fill the media's daily craving for more.

It doesn't have to be so. When President John F. Kennedy proposed putting a man on the moon, he didn't say it should be done "someday." He put a time frame on his big vision - that it should be done by the end of the 1960s.

Such a big vision statement linked with a date for completion might be called a "measurable vision." In November, the nonpartisan Center for a Better South

convened a group of more than two dozen Southern leaders and thinkers to develop such visions for the South.

Participants sought to view our continuing problems in new ways that included measurable and attainable goals.

For example, education. In his recent State of the Union address, President Barack Obama said, "The best anti-poverty program around is a world-class education."

At our Davidson conference, thinkers suggested linking jobs to educational improvements:

"To compete in a 21st century global economy, each Southern state must increase its high school graduation rate and have 60 percent of native Southerners and new residents with post-secondary degrees, including associates' degrees from technical colleges, by 2020."

Wow. Sixty percent would be huge for Tennessee where 22.2 percent of people 25 and older hold bachelor's degrees. Since college grads earn about twice as much as high school graduates, think what a better-educated Tennessee would

mean to people's paychecks and quality of life.

The Agenda for a Better South also calls for Southern leaders to strive for these improvements:

- Boosting wellness. Each Southern state should increase life expectancy to levels on par with Canada.
- Improving energy efficiency. Each Southern state should develop a state energy plan that improves per capita energy efficiency by 20 percent in 2020.
- Reforming taxes. Each Southern state should adopt or change tax structures by 2015 that expand the tax base while lowering the rate to ensure revenue sources match or exceed the growth rate in the state's overall economy.
- Investing in infrastructure. Each Southern state must invest 90 percent of its capital budget spending on priorities identified in its infrastructure capital planning process.
- Cultivating governance. Each Southern state should develop

and implement a benchmark citizen trust survey by 2011. By 2015, each state's levels of trust in state government should increase by 20 percent over the benchmark.

- Ensuring opportunities. Southern states should reduce disparities in the treatment and well-being of different groups to foster a more inclusive, creative, productive and prosperous South. By 2012, each Southern state should adopt measures to drive significant reduction in identified disparities of at least five major categories.
- Fostering safe communities. Each Southern state should reduce the rates of violent crime to below the national average by 2020.

The South has come a long way in the last 50 years. But if we don't think ahead, Tennessee and 10 other Southern states may remain burdened by the past in multiple measures of quality of life.

It's time for our leaders to think big by embracing a new Agenda for a Better South so our region is the envy of the world.

Andy Brack is president and chairman of the Center for a Better South, which is based in Charleston, S.C. You can read more about The Agenda for a Better South at: www.bettersouth.org/agenda.htm.