To get ahead, Ohio must think metro

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During this time of national and global economic turmoil, Ohio must actively create a prosperous future by taking stock of its assets and planning for the long term.

To position Ohio for prosperity, metropolitan areas — networks of urban, suburban and rural areas inextricably linked by social and economic ties — must be central to any strategy to bolster competitiveness.

Why?

Because metropolitan areas concentrate the assets that drive prosperity in the 21st-century economy: innovation, human capital, infrastructure and the quality of place.

Ohio's 16 metropolitan regions account for 81 percent of the state population, 84 percent of jobs and 87 percent of output. Greater Akron embodies those statistics in microcosm, with a population exceeding 500,000 and almost 15,000 businesses supplying 279,000 jobs and $10 billion in annual wages. Moreover, Akron is at the center of a larger set of metropolitan assets, namely the Northeast Ohio regional economy.

By leveraging past expertise in tire and rubber manufacturing and research and development into world leadership in today's sophisticated polymers, Akron and its university have helped Ohio dominate the industry. One-fourth of Ohio's largest companies work with soft materials and polymers. Their combined revenues exceed $147 billion, and they employ more than 56,000 Ohioans.

The University of Akron led the region's transition into polymers and provided technologies for emerging enterprises, including specialty polymers in medical devices and nanofibers for super-absorbent diapers, air filters and small-engine muffler catalysts. In seven years, the university's Research Foundation — which manages an ever-expanding portfolio of 344 issued and pending patents — generated $12.3 million in licensing revenues and $200 million in research funding, and spawned 28 start-up companies.

The university's $500-million ''New Landscape for Learning'' has significantly remade our downtown campus with 12 new buildings, 17 major renovations and 34 acres of green space, with additional projects under way. Our University Park Alliance has garnered $13 million in grants from Knight Foundation and leveraged $200 million in other University Park neighborhood investments.

Though we have made strides with regional approaches to economic development, downtown redevelopment and state partnership on business incubation, we need our state leaders to address the harmful legacies of outmoded state policies — legacies that hinder our metropolitan areas and our ability to compete.

Already there is a coalescing group of state leaders who understand this and are working to address it, including Gov. Ted Strickland and key members of his administration. They joined 1,000 others to participate in a fall bipartisan gathering — sponsored by the Brookings Institution and Greater Ohio — to advance the cause of Ohio's ''core communities'' and the anchor institutions that hold so much potential for economic competitiveness and growth.

But the vestiges of the past loom large. Specifically, state policies encourage sprawl, causing cities to bear the costs of a vacant-property crisis and maintaining older infrastructure, and to fund schools through property taxes.

State transportation policy disfavors mass transit and other automobile alternatives and spends a disproportionate share of road and bridge spending outside major cities, urban counties and metropolitan areas.

State economic development policies subsidize activity in newer, often wealthier jurisdictions. This includes state enterprise zones, tax incremental financing and other policies originally designed to aid distressed communities. Simply put, Ohio continues to subsidize sprawl to the detriment of its metropolitan areas and core cities.

In addition, state governance policies chop the state into thousands of cities, municipalities, and townships — with overlapping administrative structures costly to taxpayers — and then delegate land use and zoning powers to every single one of them, essentially declaring a free-for-all between various jurisdictions instead of encouraging alliances.

If we are to prosper, this mish-mash of outmoded and conflicting rules and practices must be replaced with a strategic approach. We must end one-size-fits-all economic development strategies that fail to take into account varying metropolitan strengths and weaknesses. We must quit spreading around state resources so that everybody gets a little but nobody gets enough to make a difference.

Instead, before we spend another dollar, we need a baseline accounting of Ohio's metropolitan assets and goals for their use. Only then can we measure our performance.

We also need the state to foster both regional collaboration and innovation in governance. The state should support county- or metro-wide efforts to share services, increase efficiencies and minimize costs, rewarding cities and suburbs that share tax revenues from new commercial and industrial development and ending wasteful competition that weakens Ohio as a whole.

By being strategic and changing the way we do business, Ohio can be a model for the rest of the nation and re-emerge as a 21st-century economic powerhouse. It's time to take stock in Ohio and collaborate to compete nationally and globally.

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