

# The Greater Columbus Region



## The Region

The six-county Columbus metropolitan area covers 3,142 square miles in the center of Ohio. After Columbus became the state capital in 1816, the city prospered thanks to its location on the Scioto River, which attracted money, visitors and settlers. In the second half of the 20th century, when much of Ohio suffered from industrial decline, Columbus grew because its economy was based on state government, education, finance and insurance and light industry.

Many state government agencies and resources are located in the area because Columbus is the capital of Ohio. The presence of The Ohio State University, with more than 60,000 students, also makes it a university town. The university ranks sixth among public and private universities for industry-financed research and development. Fortune 500 companies headquartered in the region are Nationwide Insurance, The Limited, American Electric Power, Cardinal Health and Big Lots.

The Greater Columbus region slightly outperforms the U.S. metro average on ten-year job and wage and salary growth. The region's household median income is below the average for U.S. metropolitan areas and its poverty rate is slightly above. It ranks 36 among 50 of the largest metro areas on the Progressive Policy Institute's New Economy Index.

The region's leading issues include persuading residents to think of Columbus as a region, not just a city; promoting a strategy to attract and retain workers in life sciences, advanced logistics and creative services; trying to obtain more capital through a federal transportation reauthorization bill; and rebuilding the downtown area to attract workers.

## The Business-Led Organizations

The Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce's main focus is economic development — attracting and retaining good businesses and good jobs — and member services. The Chamber is primarily led by companies and employers. It has 3,000 members, down from 4,500 five years ago, and 75 percent of its members are small companies. The Chamber has 38 Board members and 48 full-time staff members.

The Chamber's primary initiatives revolve around three industry clusters — life science, advanced logistics and creative services. The Chamber has also promoted Career Academies to help students prepare for careers in Columbus, and it has launched an incubator, the Business and Technology Center, to help start technology companies. The Chamber has been active in trying to keep open the Defense Supply Center Columbus, a procurement agency and coordinator of military supplies that provides

6,500 jobs but is threatened by closure. Other Chamber efforts are geared to workforce development and entrepreneurship.

The Columbus Partnership was formed within the last few years, is exclusively led by companies or employers, and is comprised of top business executives from a small number of large companies. Unlike the small-business-centered Chamber, more than 80 percent of the Partnership's 23 members are large companies. It has 23 Board members and three full-time staff members.

The Partnership tends to be "results-oriented" and focuses on specific issues rather than on general economic development, as the Chamber does. For example, the Partnership has sought to boost the region's regional identity, persuading residents to think about Columbus as a region, not a city. The Partnership has tried to secure more federal funding for a series of transit, environmental and transportation-related projects. It has also played a leading role in revitalizing downtown Columbus.

Another group, the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation, was created following the April 17, 2002 announcement of the Downtown Business Plan, a community-based effort to restore vitality to downtown Columbus. The Development Corporation is a group of senior business leaders that plan to implement the Downtown Business Plan.

### **The Regional Business-Civic Landscape**

In general, the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce focuses on attracting and keeping good businesses and good jobs, while the Columbus Partnership focuses on specific issues such as downtown development. The Chamber is a traditional membership-based group whose members are mostly small companies, while the Partnership is a newly-established group whose members are mostly from large companies.

The Partnership focuses on "big picture" strategy, assembling CEO-level leaders to incubate ideas and then spin off projects, while the Chamber carries out the operations aspect of projects. For example, the Chamber might organize conferences on economic development with other economic development officials from the area. The Partnership, as an example of its work, is trying to boost a struggling downtown mall into a viable entity. The Partnership is working with another group, the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation, on the downtown renovation project.

The Boards of the Columbus Partnership and the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce are intertwined. Yet, unlike their counterparts to the north, Cleveland Tomorrow and Greater Columbus Growth Association, the two Columbus-based business-civic organizations have resisted consolidation. There have been conversations about closer collaboration between the two groups, but nothing is imminent.

### **Business Leadership**

The Columbus region has traditionally lacked collaboration among local CEOs, but the Columbus Partnership has provided a new forum for them to work together. One of the

Partnership's key challenge is to persuade business leaders that more can be done through collaboration than by working separately. In general, business leadership in Columbus is not as well-networked as in other cities.

One reason cited for the traditional lack of cooperation is the independent entrepreneurial "free spirit" of the region's business leaders, which can make cooperation difficult. Another explanation is history. Twenty or 30 years ago, a small group of business leaders made many of Columbus' decisions. The city is larger today and warrants broader interest and input.

Today, Columbus has various boards and development corporations including 50 or more business leaders who are involved with improving the region. This means improvements take longer because there are more participants and committees involved, but people feel better when many are participating.

The influence of business leaders appears to have risen in the last five years, partly because so many more business leaders are involved. In Columbus, public officials are eager to know the position of business leaders on issues, and they take those views seriously. Part of this is due to politics — many elected officials in the region are Republicans who are interested in business. The City has a Democratic mayor, Michael Coleman, but the congressional delegation is mostly Republican.