

The Kansas City Metropolitan Region



The Region

Greater Kansas City's 1.8 million residents are split by the Missouri-Kansas state line, with 60 percent in Missouri and 40 percent in Kansas. This bi-state region is one of the fastest growing major job markets in the Midwest, drawing from both sides of the state line for its job growth.

Differences between the states are the basis for most hot-button regional issues, said Peter Levi, President and CEO of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce. Missouri and Kansas' different tax structures and systems of education, for example, make it hard to build a sense of a united region. Regional infrastructure issues such as transportation and education funding do not break down easily by state lines. This bi-state context can have its advantages and disadvantages. "We are cursed with two state capitals, but benefit from four senators," said Terry Dunne, outgoing Chairman of the Greater Kansas City Chamber.

The region's transition to the new economy ranks in the middle of the pack among the 50 largest metro areas, according to the Progressive Policy Institute's New Economy Index. It ranks better than average on measures of digital connectivity and Internet backbone capacity, but lags most large metropolitan areas in its concentration of high-tech and knowledge jobs.

The region's leading issues are cross-state disparities in education funding, equitable suburban-urban growth, regional cooperation, race relations and the lack of a major university-based research facility.

The Business-Led Organizations

There are two major regional business-led civic organizations that span the bi-state region of Greater Kansas City. The Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce is the region's oldest and largest business-based organization. Roughly two-thirds of the Chamber's 8,000 members are from Missouri, while one-third is from Kansas. Membership is open to all businesses in the bi-state area, and now includes many of the region's largest employers, institutions of higher education, labor organizations and even school superintendents. In the last few years the Greater Kansas City Chamber has gone through a subtle, but seismic shift in its role in the region. "We used to think of the Chamber as serving the business community," said Chamber Board member Jeff Comment. "Now we think of the Chamber as serving the general community through the business community." In recent years the Chamber has led an effort to create a bi-state tax structure to pay for regional infrastructure projects. The Chamber has also worked on bi-state regional cooperation, transportation and workforce initiatives.

The Civic Council of Greater Kansas City is a 90-member, invitation-only group of CEOs. The Council views itself as a research-based catalyst for change in the metro region. The CEOs represent the region's largest and most influential private-sector employers, and use their influence to affect the long-term quality of life in the region. "We have always been there for the good of the community and not the good of the individual company," said Jewel Scott, the Civic Council's Executive Director. The Council's regional priorities usually have a 10- to 20-year horizon. Its current priorities are early learning, K-12 and higher education, urban core redevelopment, life sciences and regionalism.

There are roughly 30 other local county, municipal and ethnic chambers of commerce in the Greater Kansas City region. Most of these chambers do not focus on regional issues, but are becoming more influential because of their wealthy, largely suburban membership. Many businesses in the region are also members of the Kansas City Area Development Council, the region's umbrella economic development organization, and the Kansas City Downtown Council. The Downtown Council has experienced a rebirth in membership and credibility with the recent adoption of a series of downtown plans. The plans have generated new funds and interest from business, political and community leaders in the once-fledgling organization.

The Regional Business-Civic Landscape

The Greater Kansas City Chamber and Civic Council's mission and priorities have more closely coincided in the past few years. They have overlapping Boards, share many of the same priorities, and work together on complimentary initiatives. The Civic Council, for example, led the research and brokered the partnership that launched the region's new life sciences effort, the Kansas City Area Life Sciences Institute. During the Institute's first two years, the Civic Council staffed much of its efforts. Now the Civic Council has convened an internal task force to re-evaluate its role. "We had a certain role in founding the Life Sciences Institute," Ms. Scott said. "We need to figure out what our role is going to be now and what pieces we will be directly supporting and which pieces others can now take." The Chamber of Commerce will be taking one of those pieces. In its 2004 strategic plan, the Chamber committed to cultivating the growth of life sciences across the region and educating the public about its importance.

This example demonstrates the roles the region's two largest business-led civic organizations play. The Civic Council takes a long-term view of its participation in regional civic affairs. It is a catalyst, researcher and convener. It identifies long-term goals for the region and puts the resources and people in place to get them started.

The Greater Kansas City Chamber, on the other hand, takes on issues that more immediately affect the region or Chamber members. For example, the Chamber might use its political action committee to lobby for or against a regional transportation initiative, or it might promote tort reform or education reform through its forum of school superintendents.

In some areas, the two organizations clearly divide their roles. In K-12 education, for example, the Civic Council leads efforts in Missouri while the Chamber leads in Kansas. The Civic Council leads in both states on higher education. The Chamber has led lobbying efforts to create a bi-state tax to pay for regional infrastructure projects such as a cultural district and sports complex.

The Chamber and Civic Council's relationship was not always healthy. The Civic Council was born in 1964 out of dissatisfaction with the Chamber of Commerce. In the 1990s, leaders from the two organizations created a "bridge committee" to identify and work on cooperative issues, and today the relationship is much improved. Part of this is due to a change in leadership. The other part is the overlapping Boards between the two organizations. Many business leaders serve on both. "This intermingling creates a system of checks and balances," said Ms. Scott. "If one gets out of line, the other will wave a warning flag."

The Chamber and Civic Council are joined in the regional business civic landscape by the Kansas City Area Development Council and Kansas City Downtown Council. The Kansas City Area Development Council is the region's umbrella economic development organization, a private, non profit group with about 200 members. It shares offices with the Chamber, but has its own staff. The Development Council's primary role is business attraction. It has partnered with the Civic Council to create the Life Sciences Institute and to position the region as a location for research and growth in the life sciences industry.

The Kansas City Downtown Council is the city's downtown revitalization organization. The Downtown Council has a 62-member Board of Directors representing a membership of over 160 organizations, a major increase from just a few years ago. The downtown received a boost with the issuance in May 2001 of a Civic Council-sponsored downtown plan. The plan called for the development of a downtown performing arts center as the anchor of a 20-year phased redevelopment plan starting in a blighted section of the city's core and moving out. The plan would enliven the district by attracting new business, people, and housing. The report has been credited with creating unity in the downtown business community, persuading Mayor Kay Barnes to embrace a Downtown Corridor Redevelopment Strategy, and renewing interest in the Downtown Council. The Downtown Council manages the Downtown Improvement District and works on issues such as downtown housing, library development and tourism.

Business Leadership

Business leaders in greater Kansas City are active in regional civic issues. A number of factors contribute to this. First is the region's relatively small number of business leaders. The region is small enough for business and civic leaders to know each other and collaborate well.

On the other hand, the region is large enough to include executives from large, resource-rich multinational corporations. Two of the largest, Hallmark and Sprint, have leaders "who passionately believe in these things," said Scott.

Finally, an influx of dynamic business leaders has helped boost civic activity in recent years. “There’s a new group of executives that is younger and has more energy,” said former Chamber and Civic Council Board member Terry Dunne. “This is a lot healthier for the region.”

The bi-state nature of the region strengthens the role of business leadership in Greater Kansas City. Business operates on a regional level, and its interests transcend the bi-state region. Elected and other officials are often constrained by political and municipal boundaries. Business leaders recognize that they need to collaborate to get things done. “They are the regional consciousness for Greater Kansas City,” said Peter Levi, President and CEO of the Greater Kansas City Chamber.