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Jobs for Whom?

In policy circles, you often hear rhetoric about the need for jobs “in our community.” What underlies that sentiment is a sense that uneven job growth across North Carolina has left some areas behind. And, dare I say, it contains an element of resistance to the notion of “regionalism,” the idea that our communities are part of larger, interdependent ecosystems. Political commitments and our own personal devotion to our respective communities foster some of this sentiment, as well.

I recently had the opportunity to review research on North Carolina’s regional economies and the economic interdependence of our rural and urban centers. Although we so often champion jobs for “our community,” newly created jobs are rarely taken by people who already reside in our communities. In rural counties, only 37% of new jobs are filled by current residents who previously commuted elsewhere; the majority of new job occupiers are new residents and in-commuters. The same pattern bears out to an even greater extent for urban locales, where only 28% of new jobs are filled by previous out-commuters. (These data are drawn from a 2002 report by Dr. Mitch Renkhow, professor of agricultural economics at NC State University, but I suspect that the patterns largely hold up for today’s economy.)
The chart above should spark some serious discussion about what industry recruitment ultimately yields for local residents.

In a 2009 memorandum, Don Kirkman, former Piedmont Triad CEO, wrote the following:

“There is an almost universal recognition that economies are regional, but there is little regional infrastructure in place to manage long-term regional economic transformation, and even fewer resources dedicated to regional solutions.”

Kirkman’s memo was part of a larger collection of information and data that highlighted the need to summon the necessary political will to dedicate sufficient resources and energies for regional solutions to our most pressing problems. That was six years ago. At the time, the nation was just beginning to emerge from the doldrums of the recession.

Now, in 2015, there appears to be a new commitment from many in local and state government to consider regional economies as a whole when discussing job growth. Regionalism is definitely gaining momentum as a topic of policy discussions. As we move forward, it will be important for us to be willing to challenge our assumptions about what we believe, versus what hard data tell us about regional employment patterns.
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