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Chamber sets ambitious goals for Columbia area

THE GREATER COLUMBIA Chamber of Commerce is to be congratulated for the broad vision of its new five-year effort to improve the business environment and quality of life in the area. It has carved out an ambitious and worthy task, one that will be made no easier by the problems that have kept the community from reaching its potential.

Chamber chairman Justin Strickland correctly describes the goal as community development, not just economic development. This is a much broader set of issues being addressed, a recognition of the concept that has been increasingly accepted among South Carolina leaders in recent years: Jobs and prosperity don't occur in a vacuum. To improve South Carolina's economy, progress must be made on some of the state's toughest issues, such as education shortfalls, poverty and inadequate social services.

Atlanta-based National Community Development Services has been retained to get the effort, "Navigating From Good to Great," rolling. A \$3 million capital campaign will be held to fund it. The economic side of the effort will have measurable annual goals to reach, such as more jobs, higher hourly wages and increased capital investment. Chamber leaders vow that this effort will have real-world effects.

The list of key issues coming out of its 2006 discussions shows the breadth of what the chamber hopes to do: economic development, transportation, homelessness, riverfront development, environment and quality of life, support for hydrogen research, intergovernmental cooperation and work force development.

The chamber is to be congratulated for the scope of its vision. It still faces the challenges that have bedeviled other regional efforts.

One of the toughest objectives is to get the various groups that try to improve the area's quality of life to actually cooperate. Look at the disarray in the effort to set up sustainable funding for the bus system, for instance. This lack of cooperation also shows up when governments try to work with civic groups, such as on homelessness. Everyone agrees on the need to address it, but long efforts to work together collapsed when Columbia's government decided to go its own way.

A second, more fundamental, challenge also looms. The tasks picked for the chamber's effort can't be completed with a few splashy meetings or the luring of one big out-of-state factory. They involve fundamental change in our society. To reach these goals, the community needs to create more jobs for high-tech workers, but it also needs to pay more to those who serve fast food or pick up garbage. To address homelessness or transportation issues is to grapple with such larger societal problems as mental health care and poverty. In its plan, the chamber really is attempting to improve community life in a broad way.

Ideally, such an effort would be led by elected officials, not just a private organization. But we've seen those leaders fall short and fail to cooperate too often. In taking on this challenge, the chamber is showing admirable leadership. We hope everyone will applaud its efforts — and help it reach its goals.