

The Greater Savannah International Alliance: Plan and Objectives for 2012

November 2, 2011

Chartered in 2010, the Greater Savannah International Alliance (GSIA) is an advisory forum to assist the Mayor and City Council in capitalizing on Savannah's resources and opportunities as an international city. The April 2010 task force report recommending the creation of GSIA spells out its mission: to advance Savannah's position in the global community and benefit the region by fostering international initiatives in commerce, culture, tourism and education.¹

As part of our initial effort, the Alliance has begun a dialogue with companies, business associations, educational institutions and community organizations. Our goal has been to understand how Savannah's leading enterprises already are engaged internationally as well as to solicit their views on the future. In addition to helping focus the development of the Alliance's own strategy, the meetings have served to:

- Open the door to relationships throughout the community that will help inform the Alliance's advice to the Council;
- Identify where GSIA can add value via recommendations regarding specific initiatives that meet immediate needs.

Our discussions—some 17 meetings with business, association, education, and community leaders—have produced a variety of insights.² We are continuing our

¹ "The GSIA will provide a forum for identifying and addressing locally relevant international opportunities, act as a community resource and advise the Mayor and City Council, and undertake and/or participate in Activities and initiatives. GSIA will focus on achieving the following goals:

1. Greater Savannah is recognized worldwide as a desirable city and region for international commerce, culture, education, and tourism.
2. International firms, workers, visitors, and residents feel welcome and able to access the resources of the region.
3. Greater Savannah's international initiatives and partnerships in commerce, culture, tourism, education, and international assistance are strengthened through concerted action and support of GSIA.
4. Within greater Savannah there is an awareness and appreciation of our international roles, resources and activities, and recognition of the contributions and achievements of our international community.

"Report to the Savannah City Council of the Savannah International Task Force, April 14, 2010."

² Between July-October 2011, Alliance representatives met with the Savannah Chamber of Commerce, Visit Savannah, the Savannah Economic Development Authority, the Savannah Airport

conversations, including with other institutions, and intend to maintain the dialogue as part of the Alliance's mission.³ Not surprisingly, international issues impinged in a variety of ways on the organizations with which we met. In most, the international component in their business activities figures prominently.

- In some companies and organizations, the international market is integral to business strategy; the growth plans of the Georgia Ports Authority, the Savannah Economic Development Authority's (SEDA) recently launched World Trade Center initiative, JCB's global ties in construction equipment manufacturing and sales, and Gulfstream Corporation's focus on international opportunities all are cases in point.
- In other institutions, the global trends that are reshaping greater Savannah have understandably affected their missions as well. Whether in the form of new immigrants, expatriate families transferred here by business, or foreign students enrolling in local universities, Savannah's changing population is creating needs that must be met within our community.

Notwithstanding the diversity of issues and views expressed in our meetings, several key themes recurred.⁴ Some, such as the challenges facing the public school system, call for not only the engagement of GSIA but also that of many other organizations across the community. Others, such as the widely perceived need for greater international outreach, fit squarely within the Alliance's role.

Based on our discussions, we believe the Alliance's strategic focus in 2012 should address three broad areas:

- The improvement of education to enhance our community, workforce and economic competitiveness, including in the international market;
- The widely expressed desire for more information sharing that can identify and provide access to expertise and resources on international affairs;

Authority, Gulfstream Corp., JCB, Inc., Colonial Chemicals, Inc., Mitsubishi Power Systems, the Georgia Ports Authority, Armstrong Atlantic State University, Savannah State University, Savannah Technical College, Georgia Southern University, Savannah College of Art and Design, the Savannah Film Festival, the Savannah Chatham County Public School System, Savannah Country Day School, and the American Red Cross.

³ Among others, we intend to meet with Georgia Tech and South University and with small businesses.

⁴ In each meeting, we posed three questions, allowing our interlocutors to take the discussion in whatever directions were important to them. (1) What policies, programs or initiatives at the city or other levels of government have been helpful to you in achieving your international goals? (2) Which ones, if any, have inhibited your efforts? (3) What ideas from your experience elsewhere should we consider for Savannah's effort to advance its international objectives?

- The need for a communications and outreach program addressing both greater Savannah's foreign residents and our international visitors.

Education, Information Sharing and Outreach: Background and Analysis

Education. All the people with whom we talked emphasized the need to continue to improve education in greater Savannah. The goal represented the leading issue in virtually every meeting. The priority was striking not only because the subject was unsolicited but also because the concern topped the list of subjects raised no matter our conversational counterparts.

To be sure, when it comes to the role of international affairs in the curricula, our local secondary school and university administrators and academicians recognize the importance of integrating a global perspective in the overall educational experience. New initiatives as well as longstanding programs at all institutions demonstrate the priority.

- At the Savannah College of Art and Design, the multi-continent opportunities to study here and abroad obviously reflect a new, creative model. In addition to offering a diverse international learning and living experience, the SCAD curriculum and presence in Europe and Asia are attracting a growing foreign student population, now nearly ten percent of the college's total enrollment, diversifying the institution and our local community.
- At Savannah State, Armstrong Atlantic State, and Georgia Southern universities, the faculties are actively pursuing new initiatives to enhance the quality and quantity of their international course offerings and student experiences. Discussions at these institutions highlighted their significant commitments to programs that meet new substantive needs; their growing counterpart relationships with foreign universities offering student exchanges and study abroad options; and the expanding foreign student population in our region.
- Savannah Technical College is actively pursuing similar initiatives. In addition to developing a sister college relationship in China at its Hinesville campus, the College has expanded programs that serve its foreign students, as well as provide English language, adult literacy and educational help in the wider community. Most important, The College is partnering aggressively with business in workforce development, including with international companies, to provide prospective employees with relevant technical skills.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, our interlocutors underscored the fact that, in their view, the creation of a work force that meets the needs of major manufacturing and service employers remains the region's leading challenge. As

they described it, new entrants into the work force must have basic skills, a clear work ethic and competitive learning capabilities. In manufacturing, chemicals and logistics, business executives described their experience in virtually identical terms: companies are struggling to fill jobs because candidates are often ill prepared to meet their employment needs.⁵

For greater Savannah, these challenges have obvious economic as well as social consequences. As detailed to us in our conversations:

- Issues in both the workforce and education are affecting day-to-day business operations as well as expansion; their consequences range from the lack of qualified local candidates to fill available positions to the reluctance of prospective employees elsewhere to transfer here because of the public school system's perceived reputation and the cost of private alternatives.
- Attracting firms to invest in the region also is a challenge. According to several managers with economic development experience, some companies have decided against locating facilities in the area because of workforce deficiencies. Noting the local zero-sum competition for scarce, high-demand skills, one executive questioned the wisdom of even soliciting new firms because of greater Savannah's inadequate labor pool.

Business executives with whom we spoke praised programs targeting these issues at secondary as well as college and university levels. Several noted the efforts by the public schools to both diversify and expand secondary vocational education. Others complimented highly the cooperative technical training programs at Savannah Technical College as well as the business programs at Georgia Southern University and Georgia Tech that include specialized curricula in international trade and logistics management addressing specific local needs.

Overall, our discussions highlighted the critical importance of greater Savannah's educational challenges and opportunities and their impact on our growth and prosperity, including the region's international competitiveness. Our discussions with public school administrators also made clear that our educators are working hard to deliver the skills our students need as they advance to higher education or enter the work force. We are not alone in focusing on the quality of our schools or

⁵ While not contradicting the views expressed in our meetings with large firms, conversations with small businesses produced different perspectives on education and workforce issues. In describing the role of education in providing workers to local companies, one small business owner noted that his employees have expressed their frustration at a secondary school experience that was oriented toward college preparation rather than offering them the chance to begin their vocational training in high school. Another small business owner suggested that large companies may not recognize the need for long-term close supervision of technical employees whose skills often require as many as five years to reach fully-qualified levels.

in spotlighting the relationship between education and our workforce.⁶ Secondary school rankings and student performance in Georgia, however, underscore the importance of meeting these challenges as part of the effort to advance the region's economic future. Indeed, as one local business executive put it to us, "the biggest issue for Savannah is creating an educated, disciplined workforce."

Information Sharing. With few exceptions, our counterparts all expressed an interest in greater access to information that could assist them in managing their international programs or in meeting other needs. Specific interests, of course, varied but in the majority of our meetings, discussions revealed a common desire to know more about the international resources in our area; to connect with others in order to share information; and to explore the opportunity for networking and collaboration.

The examples raised in these discussions speak for themselves.

- At the secondary, college and university levels, our interlocutors expressed interest in learning more about, and exploiting on-going and *ad hoc* international programs offered elsewhere in the area. Opportunities to invite foreign students to share their background and experience, to draw on visiting faculty from abroad, and to participate in programs offered by local civic groups such as the Savannah Council on World Affairs (SCWA) all represented suggestions that highlighted the desire to capitalize more fully on our region's resources.
- Business association and economic development executives saw improved information sharing as serving their priority goals. Association leaders, for example, highlighted the value of a database that identified local resources such as individuals with international expertise and relevant relationships to assist in outreach and marketing initiatives. Business leaders also suggested the creation of a list of priority countries that would help city as well as association executives coordinate their outreach and business development

⁶ The issue of the quality and skills of the American work force is a growing national issue and is provoking widespread debate. The CEO of a leading American global manufacturing company recently described the problem well: "We cannot find qualified hourly production people, or for that matter, many technical, engineering service technicians, and even welders, and it is hurting our manufacturing base in the United States. The education system in the United States basically has failed them, and we have to retrain every person we hire." Doug Oberhelman, Chief Executive Officer, Caterpillar Corp., quoted in *Crain's Chicago Business*, September 13, 2011. The role of schools versus employers in developing workforce skills, the willingness of companies to invest in technical training and to partner with the public sector and colleges to offer opportunities to learn, and the issue of reviving an apprenticeship model are among several fundamental questions now on the table in this national dialogue. See "Why Companies Aren't Getting the Employees They Need," by Professor Peter Cappelli, Director, Center for Human Resources, the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. *The Journal Report, The Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2011. Our discussions in Savannah clearly highlight the importance of our city and region participating in the debate.

programs. Port Authority officials similarly suggested an on-line resource to help link local businesses with information on export market opportunities.

- Finally, educators as well as business leaders saw improved sharing as a way to fill current unmet needs. Their suggestions ranged widely including greater access to information on internship programs, potential adjunct faculty with international expertise, translators and interpreters, and social service and counseling professionals qualified to deal with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Communications and Outreach. While less frequently raised in our discussions, the need for a more active outreach to Savannah's international community and visitors found strong support in many meetings. The value of enhancing the city's welcoming environment goes without saying, as does the importance of engaging new residents in a way that can help meet their needs for services, relationships and economic opportunities. GSIA's advocacy role also encompasses an educational objective: to help our community better understand the importance of greater Savannah's global ties, including opportunities for the region's social, cultural and educational enrichment as well as economic growth.

Among the ideas we were encouraged to examine:

- *Signage and literature.* The airport will soon begin replacing its signage with new displays that include international symbols for services and other information, assisting visitors without English language skills. The Airport Authority has space for welcome posters and for brochures in multiple languages. Visit Savannah also has had favorable responses to its signage along I95 welcoming French Canadian visitors, suggesting that similar displays in other languages on main routes to the city could prove useful in highlighting our interest in international visitors.
- *College orientation.* Given greater Savannah's growing foreign student population, educators reacted enthusiastically to the participation by city and business representatives in freshman student orientation programs. Information for parents and students could include background on safety and public security protocols, emergency health care, and other social services. Realtors, hospitality association and other business representatives also could be given the opportunity to meet with interested parents as part of the orientation program.
- *New immigrant and expatriate business arrivals.* The American Red Cross provides a range of services to assist new residents, offering opportunities to partner with the city in disseminating valuable information. Disaster preparedness briefings, new citizenship programs and health education all represent highly successful initiatives under the auspices of community

service organizations that could reach even wider foreign resident audiences through added outreach and enhanced communication facilitated GSIA.

GSIA Initiatives

We believe the Alliance should address all three issue-areas highlighted in our discussions. As identified by business, education, and community leaders, they represent priorities for our city and region. They should be priorities for GSIA. To that end, GSIA will present to the Mayor and City Council and seek support for a program for 2012 that includes:

An international educational consortium. Schools at all levels in our areas are already engaged in an array of international programs, counterpart relationships abroad, and *ad hoc* initiatives that capitalize on visiting scholars, student exchanges, and other opportunities to enrich their students' educational experience. Because many programs are specific to one campus, the educators with whom we spoke highlighted the value of seeking ways to: share the knowledge derived from these efforts; open doors to wider participation on the part of other schools; draw on other international resources such as business or civic delegations that could participate in educational programming; and explore joint projects that combined resources across campuses. With modest city support, GSIA can facilitate a dialogue as well as open the door for wider educational cooperation by sponsoring a consortium composed of, and run by the region's schools, colleges, and universities to serve these goals. Savannah's citizens represent a wealth of human resources—from retired business executives and academics to civic and service organizations—that can provide managerial and substantive expertise to assist a consortium effort.

A GSIA website. The widely expressed need for access to information on international issues points to the value of the Web for GSIA. An Alliance web site obviously will develop over time, but we believe it should aspire to provide "one stop shopping" for those seeking data, references, expertise and other information on international affairs in greater Savannah. Charlotte North Carolina's International Cabinet offers one such example; its site connects users to city, business, community, educational and tourism resources as well as announcements of public events and civic programs. A stand-alone "international" web site that links to the Chamber of Commerce, SEDA, the Port Authority as well as Red Cross, church-sponsored, and college and university sites, as well as state and federal resources would serve multiple constituencies and purposes. A web site will help GSIA exchange data, engage our audiences, solicit information and volunteers and combined with other media, anchor our outreach and communications program. Supported by both city funding and corporate sponsorship, a GSIA site can provide a unique as well as valuable local resource.

An international communications program. Communicating greater Savannah's welcome to international visitors and foreign residents represents a priority for GSIA. To launch our effort, three initiatives are required: signage, printed literature,

and a local outreach program. At present, neither the city nor the private sector uses foreign language media to target non-English speaking audiences. We believe GSIA should sponsor the initial effort to do so, including welcoming posters in the airport in multiple languages and billboard signage with a similar multi-language messages on the main highways to the city. Multi-language brochures available at the area's tourism kiosks with basic information such as police, fire, and hospital contact numbers will serve to underscore the welcoming message as well as furnish important data on local services. Finally, GSIA proposes to work with college and university staff to identify how a city contribution to local foreign student orientation can assist in welcoming as well as informing new residents on campus. A similar outreach to community organizations that serve new immigrants such as the Red Cross can complement this orientation initiative.

Collaboration with greater Savannah governments and officials. The task force that created GSIA endorsed the notion of "Greater Savannah," setting forth goals that made clear that cities within a 50-100 mile radius should comprise the Alliance's constituency. To serve that objective, GSIA will initiate contact with city and county officials in the region in order to explain our role, solicit their participation, and gather information (about international businesses and organizations, educational ties abroad, sister city relationships, etc.) that can open the door to broader GSIA collaboration.