

Two-State Partnership Works for Common Good

By W. R. (Rick) Toole & Danny Black

In today's divided nation, it is rare and refreshing to see individuals and entities with divergent interests come together for the common good. It is even more special when newfound cooperation among traditional rivals endures a quarter century of trial and testing to become the new way of addressing old problems.

The SRS Community Reuse Organization (SRSCRO) is a case in point. Over the past 25-years, the SRSCRO has helped cement our two-state region's reputation as a nurturing home to industry, a place where workers can find the right training for good jobs and traditional border rivals are able to speak with a single voice.

The SRSCRO has been a vocal proponent for safe, long-term solutions to troubling issues like permanent storage of radioactive waste and an outspoken advocate for maximizing the capabilities of the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site.

It has become a model of collaboration and cooperation – one that defied early expectations and is today a great example of how working together across state lines can achieve exciting results that benefit everyone.

It has been our privilege to be part of this group from the beginning. Since 1993, both of us have had the opportunity to serve on a diversified Board of Directors composed of distinguished leaders drawn from many facets of life and leadership in a two-state region of South Carolina and Georgia.

From bankers to educators, economic developers, elected officials and other professionals, these directors have worked tirelessly in an unprecedented partnership to maximize the resources and influence of a two-state coalition in support of economic growth and new missions for the Savannah River Site.

In one sense, 25 years is a long time. In another, it seems like only yesterday. Many of us never forgot the pain and uncertainty of the post-Cold War downturn in jobs for our region's largest employer. We have watched and celebrated as environmental cleanup progressed at SRS. We have applauded as new missions have come, and cheered as even more are envisioned. Nevertheless, we have also been vexed and disappointed as promised missions have stopped or not materialized at all. Thank goodness, SRS is not among sites marked for permanent closure in

the DOE system. We are grateful that it will continue as an enduring contributor to our national defense and energy needs for many years to come.

From its infancy, the SRSCRO has been a key player in a broad community effort to promote and protect the Savannah River Site. Originally known as the Savannah River Regional Diversification Initiative (SRRDI), the two-state partnership overcame a strained and somewhat awkward beginning to become an influential voice on local, state and national issues.

The 22 original board members – 11 from Georgia, 11 from South Carolina – were appointed by members of Congress, local governments and economic development entities from both sides of the river. Congressmen Butler Derrick and Don Johnson and Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney were instrumental in bringing the group together and giving us our original marching orders. We are grateful that congressional support has continued through the years.

While the mission could be simply expressed, it would be much harder to achieve. Simply put, we were to work together to develop and implement a regional economic development plan building on technology-based facilities at the Savannah River Site. Our efforts would focus on diversifying the region's economy by supporting new business ventures that would create new private sector jobs in the region.

At first, we didn't know each other very well. As two separate states, we were used to competing, more than cooperating. Our first steps toward forging a coalition were halting and uncertain. We were separated by a river – and decades of economic rivalry. Considering the greater good of a five-county, two-state region rather than our local self-interests did not come naturally.

In 25-years of cooperative effort, our record today speaks for itself. Over the years, we have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with entrepreneurs and corporate CEOs as plans for new facilities and new jobs were announced across a five-county region. And we have joined forces to achieve much more, including:

- Transforming unneeded federal surplus equipment from SRS into valuable economic development dollars. In the past five years alone, the SRSCRO is approaching \$4 million in community investments in such things as Career Connection Forums, regional industrial park expenditures, Regional Workforce Studies, and support for local economic recruitment efforts.
- Identifying critical skills needed in the region and development of a coordinated plan, involving multiple colleges, for nuclear education and training programs. More than 800

students have taken advantage of educational opportunities facilitated by the SRSCRO with many finding good-paying jobs right here in the region.

- Facilitating focused training for a generation of local job seekers who want to stay in the area. We have worked closely with our education partners – Aiken Technical College, Augusta Technical College, USCAiken, USCSalkahatchie and Augusta University – to help prepare the workforce for local employers.
- Being a vocal proponent for solutions to national energy challenges such as permanent storage options for radioactive waste. White papers, studies and reports sponsored by SRSCRO have helped shape the debate on a host of critical issues. Our board has been outspoken at numerous hearings and events, including hosting a national press conference at the National Press Club.
- Serving as a unified, regional voice in support of the Savannah River Site. Fragmented conversations among many groups have been blended into one cohesive message to elected officials on the local, state and federal level.

From its founding as SRRDI in 1993, the SRSCRO has flourished. Under its current leadership of David Jameson, president and CEO of the Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce and future leadership of Robbie Bennett, Executive Director of the Development Authority of Columbia County, we are confident this effective regional coalition will continue to enforce the concept that a rising tide lifts all boats. By harnessing the double-barrel resources, leadership and legislative power of Georgia and South Carolina, we enter our second quarter-century committed more than ever to the compelling call of the SRSCRO motto: “Two States. One Future.”

To learn more about the 25th year Anniversary, please visit our website and view our annual report at <https://www.srscro.org/annual-reports/>

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