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## Northern Kentucky counties' cooperation can teach us a lot

Tom Eblen  
Herald-Leader columnist

Like a lot of people in Lexington, I've never spent much time in Northern Kentucky. It has always been a place I see from the car windows while driving up Interstate 75 to Cincinnati.

But when Kentucky leaders talk about success in economic development, Northern Kentucky is always one of the first places they mention.

Boone, Kenton and Campbell counties have always been in the shadow of Cincinnati, a city of nearly 334,000 people across the Ohio River.

But those three counties and their riverfront towns have increasingly become important economic players in the Cincinnati metropolitan area of 2.1 million people, especially as Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport in Boone County has grown and attracted major corporate facilities around it.

I went to Northern Kentucky recently to meet with some of the region's leaders in government, business and education. Over and over, they told me the same thing: They owe much of their success to good regional planning and cooperation.

"The idea is that we as counties do not compete with one another," said Boone County Judge-Executive Gary Moore, current chairman of the Tri-County Economic Development Corp.

Instead, they work together so Northern Kentucky and the Greater Cincinnati region can compete more effectively with other major metropolitan areas.

The cooperation is so deep that any major economic development news is announced by whichever of the three judge-executives is then Tri-ED chairman — not the one whose county the news happens to be in.

"We've had governors comment and be amazed that that happens," Moore said. "It's tough when you're in the world of politics to step aside and let someone else preside over that major economic announcement, but that's how much we believe in the regional partnership."

The three counties have different strengths and needs.

For example, Boone dominates economically, with the airport, 12 interchanges of three interstate highways, and a huge retail trade area. The population has doubled since 1990, making Boone the state's fourth-largest county with the highest per-capita income.

Except for Northern Kentucky University, Campbell County is largely a hilly residential area "where everybody works somewhere else" and local government has less tax revenue to work with, said Steve Pendery, the Campbell judge-executive.

But both counties realize their fortunes are interdependent, so they work closely with each other and Kenton County. The three speak with one regional voice, whether they're dealing with corporate executives or legislators.

Tri-ED is one of several regional organizations that work closely to address the region's needs without overlapping or duplicating efforts. Others include the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, Northern Kentucky Area Development District and Vision 2015, a regional planning effort that has set goals for everything from job creation to education excellence to urban redevelopment.

Northern Kentucky University plays a big role in economic development, especially by training students to work in companies identified as regional growth engines, said John Beehler, dean of NKU's College of Business.

One example of that is the new College of Informatics, which trains students to apply new information technology and theory to other fields, said Doug Perry, the college's dean.

Northern Kentucky leaders say their experience has shown them that, as the economy becomes more global, cooperation will become more important for ever-larger regions.

Pendery said recent efforts to jointly market Lexington, Louisville and Northern Kentucky to companies in other parts of the nation are examples of something the so-called Golden Triangle cities should be doing more of.

"We have a lot of common interests that we ought to work together on," he said.

Reach Tom Eblen at (859) 231-1415 or 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 1415, or at [teblen@herald-leader.com](mailto:teblen@herald-leader.com). Read and comment on his blog, *The Bluegrass & Beyond*, at [Kentucky.com](http://Kentucky.com).

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