

PICA's 2025 Fall Forum: Turning Cooperation into Growth



Photo credit: Octavia Geiger

Philadelphia's fiscal health depends on more than a balanced budget. Long-term stability is built on the strength of the region's economy — its jobs, businesses, and residents' ability to prosper. When growth is strong and broadly shared, the City's tax base expands, revenues become more resilient, and the City can budget with greater confidence. When growth is uneven, when opportunities are concentrated, or when collaboration falters, the City's finances feel the strain.

That link between economic development and fiscal stability was the focus of PICA's 2025 Fall Forum, *Turning Cooperation into Growth*. The event brought together public, private, and nonprofit leaders to explore how regional collaboration can drive inclusive, sustainable prosperity. As PICA Board Chair Kevin Vaughan noted in his opening remarks, Southeastern Pennsylvania's economy already ranks among the world's largest, with more than 2.7 million jobs

and over \$350 billion in annual output. Yet within that success story lie persistent challenges: high rates of poverty, barriers to mobility, and a patchwork of local efforts that don't always add up to a regional strategy.

PICA convened this conversation because fiscal stability and economic vitality are inseparable. A growing tax base supports essential services and helps the City weather economic downturns. Regional cooperation across city and county lines, and between the private sector and governments can make growth more efficient, resilient, and inclusive. The Fall Forum offered both a reminder and a roadmap for how collaboration can strengthen the foundation on which Philadelphia's fiscal future rests.

The event began with remarks from Kevin Vaughan and a presentation by Marek Gootman, Non-Resident Senior Fellow at Brookings Metro, whose recent [*Southeastern Pennsylvania Market Assessment*](#) provided a data-driven look at how the region's growth and competitive advantages compare to other markets in the US. Gootman emphasized the importance of understanding market dynamics: who is doing what, where gaps exist, and how public and private institutions can coordinate their investments to make the most of limited resources. His presentation was followed by a panel discussion featuring national leaders in economic development moderated by PICA Executive Director Marisa Waxman.

Southeastern Pennsylvania must address two gaps



WHAT

Shared Sector Priorities and Tactics
integrating both economic and workforce development



HOW

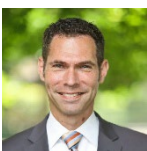
Region-Level Economic Development Capacity
commensurate with other leading U.S. metros

The region needs a race plan and coxswain to direct the boat, plus more rowers.



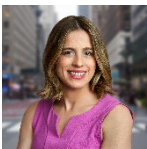
Slide from Marek Gootman's presentation: Cooperating to Compete

Panelists



Marek Gootman

Non-Resident Fellow, Brookings Metro



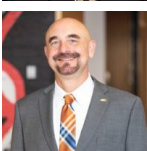
Kate Wittels

Partner, HR&A Advisors



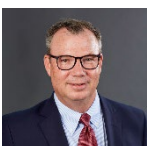
Kevin Johnson

President & CEO, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation



Mike Alexander

Chief Operating Officer, Atlanta Regional Commission



Kenny McDonald

*Founder, Little Dry Consulting
Former President & CEO, OneColumbus*

Across cities and sectors, the conversation revealed how cooperation turns abstract plans into tangible results. The panelists spoke candidly about what it takes to make regional economic development work: patience, flexibility, and leadership that crosses traditional boundaries. The following lessons emerged from their insights, each with clear implications for Philadelphia's fiscal and economic outlook.

Lesson 1: Growth follows cooperation. Regions that plan and invest together win together.

Several panelists described how growth accelerates when cities, counties, and institutions act in concert rather than competition. Mike Alexander pointed to Atlanta's regional partnerships—such as the Aerotropolis Alliance, which connects local governments, business leaders, and civic institutions around shared goals. Kenny McDonald noted that Columbus's recent economic gains stem from focusing regional efforts around a single, motivating question rather than a long list of strategies. And Kevin Johnson reflected on Detroit's success in rebuilding its

economic base by uniting the public, private, and philanthropic sectors around a shared purpose.

The lesson for Philadelphia is that cooperation is not optional for dynamic growth. Regional economies function as single markets, even when governance structures do not. The City's fiscal outlook depends on job and population growth across county lines. When municipalities and organizations coordinate their priorities, align infrastructure and workforce investments, and market the region as a whole, they create the conditions for sustainable expansion.

Lesson 2: Private leadership and flexible capital are essential to sustain long-term economic strategies.

Economic development requires funding that can move quickly, respond to new opportunities, and persist beyond the election cycle. Panelists emphasized that this kind of flexibility often comes from private-sector leadership and philanthropic partnerships. Marek Gootman described the need to take “chewable bites” out of big problems, resourcing them with adaptable dollars and clear accountability. Kenny McDonald echoed this idea, noting that when the private sector drives the effort, regional strategies can stay focused on market realities and outcomes. Kate Wittels noted that the most sustainable economic development efforts are driven by a desire for long-term returns from generational investment by homegrown investors, as has been the case in Detroit and Columbus.

For Philadelphia, this lesson carries clear fiscal implications. Private investment and flexible funds can help the region pursue strategic projects that generate new revenue and jobs—reducing overall reliance on taxpayer dollars to generate growth.

Lesson 3: Aligning education, workforce, and business development efforts can multiply impact across the region.

Workforce development was a recurring theme throughout the panel. Economic development succeeds when residents can access the jobs that growth creates. Panelists discussed how coordination between employers, training institutions, and government agencies can ensure that local talent benefits from local investment.

Kate Wittels pointed to New York's CUNY system, which links community colleges across the metro area and connects graduates directly to employers through

initiatives like the CEO Jobs Table—a partnership between city government and major companies to hire 100,000 CUNY graduates. Mike Alexander shared how Georgia’s unified community college system enables new programs to launch in as little as six months in response to industry demand.

Philadelphia has strong institutions, but their efforts are often fragmented. Strengthening coordination between the Community College of Philadelphia and neighboring county colleges, aligning curricula with employer needs, and streamlining access to apprenticeships and childcare regionwide could help bridge the gap between workforce potential and business demand.

Conclusion

PICA’s 2025 Fall Forum underscored a simple but powerful truth: fiscal stability and economic development go hand in hand. The City’s ability to meet its obligations, provide services, and invest in its future depends on an economy that is growing, inclusive, and regionally coordinated.

The lessons shared by leaders from other cities point to practical ways forward. Cooperation doesn’t require new bureaucracy. It requires commitment to shared goals, clear communication, and trust among partners. Private and philanthropic resources can complement public investment, giving regions the flexibility to act quickly and sustain efforts over time. And aligning education, workforce, and business strategies ensures that growth benefits residents while strengthening the City’s financial foundation.

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