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EVENT RECAP

# STATE OF ST. LOUIS



BY JACOB KIRN | JKIRN@BIZJOURNALS.COM

**S**t. Louis leaders will have to cooperate in unprecedented ways to tackle big problems over time, five experts said. And a reversal of fortunes for the region will also depend on whether its business interests take risks by investing in its hollowed-out central core, they said.

The panel, part of the *Business Journal's* State of St. Louis event, included Kelvin Adams, superintendent of Saint Louis Public Schools; Sarah Coffin, associate professor at Saint Louis University; Jason Hall, CEO of Greater St. Louis Inc.; Tully Roach, president and CEO of Bi-State Development; and Esther Shin, president of Urban Strategies Inc., a nonprofit involved in community planning.

Right now, St. Louis' challenges – including crime and racial inequality – are well documented, the panelists agreed. And Cen-

tene CEO Michael Neidorff highlighted them further last summer, after announcing the Clayton company would develop an East Coast headquarters rather than expanding further here.

But since the events collectively known as Ferguson and more recent struggles, there's a better understanding that the region must acknowledge its shortcomings in order to move forward, said Coffin, a program director for urban planning and development. "If we're going to get better, we have to listen to those voices and



**"I'm not sure there's anywhere else you've got a community so perfectly positioned to be at the epicenter of the breakout"**

**JASON HALL**, CEO, Greater St. Louis Inc.

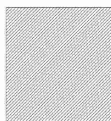
critiques," Roach said.

And as the country emerges from the pandemic, St. Louis is well-positioned to succeed if it tackles issues related to race head-on, Hall said, citing a new jobs plan and his recently merged economic development organization as positives.

"We're at a crossroads. Stepping out of St. Louis, you've got big issues facing the country: geographic inequality, racial inequality present in the community. I'm not sure there's anywhere else you've got a community so perfectly positioned to be at the epicenter of the breakout," he said.

Cooperation will be key, Adams said. He said the community came together to solve issues around the pandemic, and that it can use that example "to think differently about leveraging resources to work together" moving forward.

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"We are just on the cusp of these conversations," he said, citing talks with the current mayor Lyda Krewson and candidates for that office on how to improve education in the city.

Roach said focusing on transit could help break down the "segmentation" St. Louis is partly known for.

Another part of recovery must involve new behavior from businesses, Shin said, adding that the question remains whether significant investments being made in the community are actually reaching the community's "most vulnerable."

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**"It's going to take some bravery on the part of individual organizations and companies that really see opportunity and are willing to take a risk and think that St. Louis is worth it"**

**ESTHER SHIN**, president of nonprofit Urban Strategies Inc.

is worth it," she said. "Without courage, we're going to continue to sink into the reputational challenges that we have." The Greater St. Louis jobs plan called on St. Louis firms to open operations in the core.

Shin also wondered whether St. Louis can tap into the migration out of dense populations such as areas of California, which currently benefits places like Austin, Texas.

Hall highlighted areas of potential opportunity moving forward, including the \$1.7 billion National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency headquarters in St. Louis Place, and significant startup activity, including in the bioscience and geotechnology sectors.

"We need to look deep at the startup community, look at the success they've enjoyed and replicate that over other areas of opportunity," he said.

**MEET THE PANELISTS**



**Taulby Roach**

Taulby Roach is president and CEO of Bi-State Development, which operates MetroLink, MetroBus and Call-A-Ride. Bi-State Development has more than 2,500 employees and an operational budget of \$369 million, according to its website. Roach has more than three decades of experience in transportation, infrastructure and economic development.



**Jason Hall**

Jason Hall is CEO of Greater St. Louis Inc. — launched in January after the merger of five regional economic development organizations: the St. Louis Regional Chamber, AllianceSTL, Civic Progress, Downtown STL Inc. and Arch to Park. Hall was named CEO of the organization in late October after the merger was first disclosed. Hall previously was CEO of Arch to Park.



**Esther Shin**

Esther Shin is president of nonprofit Urban Strategies Inc., which works to revitalize neighborhoods. The national nonprofit has a presence in 24 cities and more than 40 neighborhoods across the country, with St. Louis serving as its base. Shin previously served as executive vice president at Urban Strategies. She has worked with the organization since



**Sarah Coffin**

Sarah Coffin is an associate professor in the college for public health and social justice at Saint Louis University. She also serves as program director for the urban planning and development department at the university. Coffin's research interests include community development, sustainable built environment and urban manufacturing.



**Kelvin Adams**

Kelvin Adams has served as superintendent of the St. Louis Public School District since 2008. SLPS is one of the region's largest school districts with 2020-21 enrollment of more than 21,000 and a 2021 operating budget of \$367 million. Prior to his role at SLPS, Adams served as chief of staff for the Recovery School District in New Orleans.