

Go Forward Pine Bluff

Economic Development Pillar

April Meeting

Meeting Notes

A presentation was delivered by Janel Cotter from ASU at Mountain Home. She shared their Ready to Work program which provides training to a diverse audience on a broad range of employability skills. The program was developed by ASU at Mountain Home along with participation from local business and industry. The diverse audience includes high school and college school students as well as the unemployed. It is offered as a for credit class in some programs of study, embedded in other programs, and as a stand-alone certificate program in other venues. Employers state employees who complete the program have lower turn-over rates and assimilate into the workplace quicker than those not having received the training. Currently, SEARK does not have a comparable program while UAPB embeds loosely related training under the title of Social Development. The Department of Workforce Services offers some employability training but none of these programs is as comprehensive in its curriculum or business and industry involvement as the Mountain Home program.

The Pillar agreed that both Pine Bluff and Jefferson County as a whole could benefit from a similar program. The Pillar also agreed they don't have the expertise to develop curriculum. Lou Ann Nesbitt volunteered to take point on the development of the curriculum utilizing the expertise of Dr. Gunter who provides the Alliance with part time services, has a background in career and technical education, and is currently a committee member at large. A committee was formed and tasked with the responsibility of developing an implementation plan and budget for a similar program tailored to the needs of local business and industry in Jefferson County. The committee is tentatively scheduled to meet at MK Distributors on May 4th to begin developing an implementation plan and budget for Jefferson County's own employability training program.

A general discussion followed discussing how a program like this could be marketed, who the audience might be, and how instructors might be selected and trained. We also brainstormed who, within the State, might be viable partners to include:

1. Department of Workforce Services
2. SEARK
3. UAPB
4. Jefferson County Alliance
5. Local business and industry
6. Arkansas River Coop
7. Juvenile and Drug Court Systems
8. Work release programs

During and after lunch a more general discussion developed regarding how the group should proceed, specifically, just how many recommendations we felt we could fully develop in the time Go Forward Pine Bluff

has remaining. The general consensus was three or four major fully developed initiatives was the scope with which we could produce effective, actionable recommendations. With that having been stated the following are the initiatives we have so far:

1. Recommend that the 3/8 cent economic development tax be renewed for ten years.
2. Develop an employability training program to meet the needs of local employers
3. Engage with, support, and inform the Arkansas River Educational Services Coop and its advisory council which is designed to bring together educators and business and industry to better inform the development and delivery of occupational training in the Jefferson County region. The region in the past has not been engaged in this process. Other regions in Arkansas are much more active and are reaping the benefits of having a fully engaged workforce development system. The Chair will be attending a conference sponsored by the Coop on May 5th and the Arkansas River Educational Coop in Pine Bluff.

We are continuing looking at other economic/workforce development ideas as possible recommendations to include:

1. Supporting the development of the innovation hub concept as presented by Warick Sabin. The Pillar is scheduled to tour the North Little Rock facility on May 16th.
2. Pursuing a targeted workforce development effort specifically designed to support the newly announced industrial gas-to-liquids (GTL) processing facility.
3. Improving the coverage and quality of broadband in Jefferson County.