

Advancing White County: Preserving the past while strategically planning for a promising future for all citizens through mutual trust, respect, and cooperation.



To: *Advancing White County Steering Committee*
From: Kelly Lyon, Project Manager
Date: December 7, 2009
Re: November Meeting Minutes

I. Introductions

Judge Michael Lincoln provided opening remarks.

II. Project Update

Since the last project meeting, there have been many activities on which Kelly updated those present. The project website, www.advancingwhitecounty.org is now live. This website will be used as a tool to get more information about the project and look over past events, minutes, and presentations.

Assessment work is also drawing to a close. 25 one-on-one interviews were completed by the project team in September and October. Those interviewed represented a wide variety of leadership roles across sectors, and across the county. This, and the website, was funded by a grant from Entergy.

A business survey was conducted by Amy Whitehead. This informal survey went out to over 600 people, and 136 people responded, for a rate of return of 22.67%. It is believed that the rate of return is actually higher, however, because of duplications in survey delivery. The survey was delivered electronically in Bald Knob, Beebe, and Searcy. Hard copies went out in Bald Knob, Bradford, Pangburn, McRae, and Rose Bud.

Amy Whitehead went on a driving tour on October 26 through the county to get a better perspective on its assets, and have a “feel” for the area. The main observation centered on the boom of natural gas industry development—from drill sites, to mechanical service centers, traffic, storage facilities, and housing for the natural gas workers—the impact was noticeable.

III. Assessment Findings

The project team then offered highlights of the assessment findings, as it would have taken too long to review all of the data that was collected. The entire assessment report will be reviewed by the Executive Committee very soon, with a goal to have the report posted to the project website before the Christmas Holiday, if possible or by soon after the first of the year, at the latest. Once the report is posted to the website, any feedback from the general public will be accepted.

Demographic Base Analysis

- Median age of the county is 36;
- Population growth is expected to continue through 2030;
- Per capita income for the county is still lagging behind the state and nation, but median household income puts White County neck-in-neck with the state;
- The spike in unemployment in 2009 mirrors what is happening on the state and national level as the economic downturn persists;
- As population in the county has grown, labor force participation has followed a similar trend;
- The industries in White County projected to show the largest percentage increase between 2006-2016 are Food Services, Mining, and Administrative and Support Services;
- Sales tax collections have been on the rise
- K-12 statistics show that most schools in White County, on most of the indicators, are rating as good as or better than the state. However, educational attainment, particularly the percentage of population with at least a Bachelor's degree, is still low.

One-on-One Interviews

- This is the first county wide initiative and most are enthusiastic about the possibilities of economic development. Some feel that "key leaders" need to "own" and take part in Advancing White County;
- The business climate is good in some aspects and lacking in others. White County is open to new business, due to the lack of "burdensome regulations" and space in local communities, but it has lost businesses in the past due to land and buildings that were not "shovel ready." One resident expressed that on a scale from 1-10 White County is a 5, or "in the middle." White County has lost a fair amount of manufacturing business in recent years which has in turn produced less jobs;
- The natural gas industry has kept the county from feeling major economic ripples, but non-profits and other businesses are still feeling a significant change
- Education in White County is a high priority for most citizens. Most talk highly about the school districts in the county, and they are touted as some of the best in the state;
- The highest results in the business survey supported residents pride in education;
- The overall opinion is that the medical services in White County are good, but limited. Most residents still prefer to go out of town for "serious" or specialty medical needs;
- The Infrastructure of White County is in need of updates and changes due to recent growth in the county. Another concern is the water management and sewage system. Drainage of rains and other issues in water are major issues that all communities in the county face;
- The airport is a positive part of White County;
- Most interviewees are not yet making the connection between high-speed, affordable internet access and economic development. The interviews revealed that in parts of the county, both high speed internet access and cell phone coverage are spotty.

Business Survey

- 86.9% rated the region as a good, very good, or excellent location for their business to succeed, and 62.3% said they believe the quality of the region will improve over the next five years;
- An overwhelming number of the respondents, 95.3 %, have access to high-speed internet, and 94.6% use the internet more than once a week;
- Universities in the area were consistently cited as being valuable to respondents' business innovation;
- On questions related to the business and civic environment of White County, no indicator had an average rating that was below average;
- Many of the factors ranked neutral.

IV. Planning Committees

The project leadership has identified 5 focus areas for the planning committees: Education, Economic Development, Health Care, Infrastructure, and Technology. A committee of 6-8 people will be formed for each one of these areas, with a goal to have these committees staffed before the Christmas Holiday. The committees will meet approximately 3 times over the months of January and February. The purpose of these meetings will be to brainstorm, and then solidify, strategic actions and objectives to be incorporated into the final strategic planning document. The project team will meet with each committee at least once to help orient the committee. **If you would like to join a committee, please contact Amy Whitehead (501.852.2930, amyw@uca.edu) at your earliest convenience.**

V. Questions & Comments

A question was asked about how the implementation of this plan would be funded. The project team reiterated to the steering committee that the county must chart its own course and make a decision about how to carry out the plan— both in terms of finances and leadership—but that the counties who seem to have the most success do fund a position or an organization to implement the work outlined in the strategic plan. Whether it's funded or volunteer, there will need to be someone responsible for implementation. Many of these issues will be discussed throughout the next phase of the project. The current project team has only contracted with the county to facilitate the creation of the strategic plan. Judge Lincoln also responded that this project was being financed by an "unfunded mandate" fund overseen by the Quorum Court, and will help fulfill the Governor's call for all 75 counties to go through the strategic planning process.

A question was also asked about how committees would reach consensus on controversial topics. The project team recognized that controversial issues would arise on which a committee might not be able to find common ground. This plan is not trying to resolve all of those issues.

This plan is based on finding those issues that the county is ready to come together behind, and then setting objectives and timelines to reach those goals.

Please send comments or corrections to amyw@uca.edu or 501.852.2930 by December 15, 2009.