

Partners for a Prosperous Athens – April 24, 2006, Cedar Shoals High School Workforce Citizen Committee

The Partners for a Prosperous Athens Workforce Citizen Committee met for the second time on April 24, 2006 at Cedar Shoals. Chairman Clay Gilbert welcomed everyone to the meeting and went over some introductory information for the group. Topics touched on by Clay included the following:

- The PPA program is intended to be a grass roots process driven by the people participating in the citizen committees.
- The general scope of work for the Workforce Committee is to determine the ways that workforce issues affect persistent poverty, identify what needs to be understood in order for the committee to develop effective change strategies and then develop the change strategies.
- We are still in the problem defining process. Don't rush to solutions and keep an open mind.
- Have respect for other's opinions and ideas.

At the conclusion of Clay's comments the committee members were asked to introduce themselves and tell the group why they had chosen the Workforce Committee. There is a broad mix of backgrounds and interests in the group. Those people who have chosen the Workforce Committee include:

- The unemployed and those that are concerned about people they know who are unemployed.
- Service providers.
- Business owners/managers or human resources/personnel managers and employees.
- Law/criminal justice profession— students, professionals and employees.
- Chamber of Commerce members.
- Athens residents seeking to help end poverty in their town.
- Representatives of Athens' religious/faith community.

The members of the Workforce Committee identified multiple reasons why they joined the committee. These reasons fall into three main categories relating to the interests of employers, workers or those seeking work, and service providers. Representative comments include:

Employer Interests

- Hard to attract quality applicants.
- Applicants want to work but don't have the necessary skills.
- Lack of motivation in potential employees.
- Want to create jobs and partner with area vocational programs to connect with potential employees.
- Need applicants with more skills.
- How can the workforce be better trained?

Worker Interests

- Want to help adolescents.
- Lots of friends out of work and want to help.

- Looking for work, trying to make contact with resources.
- Focus on seniors—training and jobs.
- Came to speak for those in need who didn't come.
- Tired of seeing unemployed, hopeless and discouraged people winding up in the criminal justice system.

Service Provider Interests

- Seeking to partner with employers in the community to find jobs for disabled people.
- How do we better help parents?
- Focus on meeting daily needs of families so they can succeed.

Once the introductions were complete the facilitators led a brief discussion of the workforce data profile prepared by the Data Committee. This data profile is to serve as a starting point and the committee members were asked to review it and be thinking of other information they would need. Some questions and insights of the members relative to the workforce data profile include:

- Is it possible that there are people who are unemployed and not counted because they have dropped out of the system?
- Where is UGA's employment and wage data? If not on the profile we want a copy.
- Average weekly wage numbers included in the data profile are not truly representative of what people are making because a very high or very low number can skew the average in one direction or another.
- ACC has one of the highest dropout rates in the nation. Shouldn't education numbers be a part of the workforce data?
- Does the data include part time workers?
- How do the incomes of UGA students impact the per capita and household income statistics?
- Data is meant to provide an overview. Don't get bogged down looking for perfect data. Understand the big picture presented by the data and get to work.

After the data profile discussion the facilitators led the committee members in a discussion of how the Workforce Committee can be most effective. Comments from the members include:

- Develop a workforce intermediary. A collaborative between employers, job seekers and those that help job seekers. This effort would connect employers with potential employees.
- Coordinate with the Education Citizen Committee to make sure there is not a duplication of efforts.
- Get information from other communities that have conducted projects similar to Partners for a Prosperous Athens.
- Examine issues related to both the unemployed and the under employed and develop strategies that help both groups.
- Need a workforce enforcement group to investigate when discrimination is happening.
- Provide professional learning opportunities for managers relative to discrimination so they can lead and support their staff in stopping job related discrimination.

- Need to reach out the unemployed and underemployed for their input to make sure what the committee does is useful to them.
- Get agendas and supporting information out to committee members for them to review prior to the May meeting. Improve communication between meetings.
- Examine the core problems.
- Need to address the fact that there are not enough decent paying jobs.
- Why are there not skilled employees and decent paying jobs?
- Encourage businesses to pay a living wage and develop an accreditation process for businesses that pay a living wage.
- To truly understand the issues we have to speak to the people living in poverty.
- Develop a Workforce Committee mission statement.

The meeting concluded with a presentation of the issues identified at the March 27, 2006 meeting and a discussion of how the committee should proceed. The general consensus of the committee was that the full committee should split up in to smaller groups to work on 4 to 5 issues more intensively. It was suggested that some of the work groups should focus on solutions to employer issues and the others should focus on solutions to worker issues. Some committee members had concerns about defining the work program just in terms of employers or workers because important issues might be missed. The committee decided that the Chair, workforce steering committee members and facilitators would draft a proposal for work groups and their work program based on the comments from the meeting. That proposal would be sent out to the members two weeks prior to the May 22nd meeting so they can review and be prepared to make some decisions at the May meeting. Some other findings of the committee include:

- This process is not a sprint. The committee needs to slow down and use the time available to them. The causes of persistent poverty will not be solved overnight or in just two meetings.
- Communication with committee members and between meetings must be improved. It cannot be only electronic communication because some committee members will miss out.
- Must define the committee's mission or will not be able to define solutions.
- There should be a pragmatic business approach to this effort. Be practical and come up with specific issues to develop solutions for.
- Need to hear the voices of those living in poverty. We need to get out in their communities.
- Need to talk with employers.
- Need to focus on areas where we can have the most impact.
- Do not duplicate what others are already doing.