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Crossroads Coalition Hosts Legislative Luncheon at MSCC; DRA Co-Chair Touts ADTEC, Encourages Unified Effort

With the 88th Arkansas General Assembly Fiscal Session scheduled to convene soon, the Crossroads Coalition recently hosted an East Arkansas Legislative Luncheon at Mid-South Community College to spotlight regional opportunities and needs.

The Crossroads Coalition, which represents nine counties in Eastern Arkansas, is a comprehensive organization of partnering organizations and individuals who are seeking to enhance broad-based development in the region. Its meeting at MSCC focused on issues impacting Eastern Arkansas and new and ongoing opportunities to promote economic growth and progress in the region.

Speakers for the event included Delta Regional Authority Federal Co-Chairman Chris Masingill, District 53 State Representative Keith Ingram, Kurt Naumann of the Arkansas Economic



Development Commission, Dr. Glen Fenter of Mid-South Community College (representing the Arkansas Delta Training and Education Consortium), and Heather Maxwell, Crossroads Coalition Executive Director.

Masingill, who has presided over the DRA since July 2010, brought a positive message that included praise for the ADTEC consortium's continuing training/economic development efforts as well as a challenge to keep the momentum going.

"We have some unbelievable things happening up and down the Mississippi Delta Region," Masingill pointed out. "We are standing up and putting the Delta first in a lot of our communities. But if there is one single factor that is an impediment to community and economic development in our part of the world, it is education."

"If there is a single great success story from our entire region that the world wants to copy, however, it's ADTEC. I was just in Louisiana, and one of the things I was talking about at New Orleans Inc., which is one of the largest, most successful economic improvement organizations in the country, was ADTEC. What we're doing here with this model is successful, and it is the No. 1 component in economic development."

ADTEC, a collaborative and comprehensive approach to economic development in the Arkansas Delta, includes Mid-South Community College, Arkansas Northeastern College, Arkansas State University-Newport, East Arkansas Community College, and Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas. The five two-year colleges in Eastern Arkansas are taking a systematic approach to educating and training the current and future workforce for existing and future industries.

Masingill said companies interested in locating a new facility always ask about the skill level of the workforce and the education/training opportunities available.

"When a company comes to your town, regardless of how big or how small, the first question out of their mouth is 'What is the educational attainment or the trainability of your workforce?' It's not about 'How much money are you going to give us?' although that's obviously important and always part of the conversation, but the first question is education attainment."

He encouraged everyone in the room to continue to emphasize the importance of ADTEC at every opportunity.

"We're never going to have enough resources to do everything that we need," Masingill said. "We have to fight tooth and nail for everything we get. The key for us is making sure we're a collective group going after key, core, common issues that we can all agree on."



“When it comes to economic development and funding for ADTEC, that should be an easy issue that we can all advocate for because it works. I’m committed to ADTEC, and I will stay committed to ADTEC as long as I have this job.”

Speaking on behalf of the consortium, Dr. Fenter explained that the ADTEC effort is in dire need of continued state funding to sustain the great work that has been accomplished in just a few short years.

“This regional partnership of creating innovative plans, strategies, and synergies is something that is being recognized as the best model across the country,” he said. “But there is not a single section of the Arkansas higher education funding model that is designed to direct resources toward this critical workforce and economic development effort.”

“Governor (Mike) Beebe has been a vocal supporter of ADTEC, but we need a unified and universal financial commitment from the state to continue to positively impact lives in the Arkansas Delta. For every dollar the state has invested in the consortium’s efforts, ADTEC has returned five dollars to the region, so it certainly qualifies as one of Arkansas’ major success stories.”

Dr. Fenter said the nationally-recognized and award-winning workforce development model represents a major incentive for employer investment in Eastern Arkansas.

“For our state to truly reach its potential, we need all regions to be successful, not just the central and northwest sections. ADTEC is a proven winner, but without a stable and consistent source of funding, it cannot continue to function at the optimum level necessary to train workers and make Eastern Arkansas an attractive location for industrial investment and development.”

The current higher education funding model, Dr. Fenter pointed out, is designed to maintain the status quo, which does not work for the Delta region.

“In Eastern Arkansas, we have to start educating more folks who are going to change the next generation’s expectations,” he said. “That’s economic development. We have a powerful educational component now, and we have to sustain it. If we can’t, we will go back to square one.”

State Rep. Ingram discussed the Local Sales and Use Tax Economic Development Project Funding Act (828) that he sponsored.

“I think it’s a good tool that any community can use, and it can be customized to meet particular needs,” Ingram said.

Before the act passed, “We were getting beat for jobs; industry wasn’t locating here,” he pointed out. “We have a great location, great access, but at the end of the day, industries that are looking want to know how they are going to be incentivized. If you’re not offering great incentives, you don’t have a shot. This makes us more competitive.”

Kurt Naumann of AEDC’s Strategic Planning and Legislative Affairs department, talked about the Regional Economic Development Partnership Act (895). The legislation, which became law last summer, will provide for funding for economic development to enhance Arkansas’ competitiveness.

Money is not yet available for release, but the legislature is expected to address that situation when it convenes in February. When the money has been allocated, “regions,” defined as a minimum of two counties, will be able to apply for financial assistance provided they match the grant 2-1.

“The biggest impediment right now is funding,” Naumann said. “We are hoping for money after legislative session.”

Heather Maxwell of the Crossroads Coalition said the organization has met all the criteria to be recognized, officially, as a regional economic development partnership. Representing nearly 250,000 people, the Coalition continues to “work really hard at leveraging our resources,” Maxwell said.

“We have great plans for 2012. One of our top priorities is making real economic development training available on the local level and connecting resources to take care of existing businesses. We need to protect what we have that’s good and work to create

more solutions down the road. We're doing everything we can to cultivate home-grown success for Eastern Arkansas."

The work of the coalition is focused in the four primary areas of economic development, education & workforce development, community development and leadership development.

LeRoy Dangeau, 2011 Crossroads chairman, closed the program with words of encouragement.

"Let's bark a little bit," he said. "We have a powerful partnership, and we need to speak with one voice about what we need in Eastern Arkansas. It's the right time, and we're at the right point to make some great things happen."