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Economic Diversification Summit focuses on getting local projects started

By FRED PACE Jun 16, 2018



Lori Wolfe/The Herald-Dispatch The Regional Economic Diversification Summit was held Friday, June 15, 2018, at the Big Sandy Superstore Arena in Huntington.

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HUNTINGTON - Leaders at the city, state and federal levels gathered Friday in Huntington for a Regional Economic Diversification Summit to identify strategies for leveraging resources for implementing key city and regional economic development plans and projects.

"We are here to work with local and regional leadership to address the needs of Huntington," said Doug Lynott, the U.S. Economic Development Administration's director of economic development integration. "The EDA continues to support projects in here because of the quality of the residents and its leaders. The level of collaboration and partnership here is exemplary."

The summit actually began Thursday evening with a tour of targeted projects throughout the city.

The first topic Friday was Huntington's Innovation Project (HIP) revitalization plan. It describes the vision and mission the city has for the future, which is now firmly in place in City Hall, according to Huntington Mayor Steve Williams.

"Huntington is a community that is uplifting its citizens and businesses to a new level of excellence and growth, overcoming the challenges of manufacturing and coal-sector decline, to create a 21st century place marked by innovation, creativity and collaboration," Williams said. "We are now putting HIP into action."

Williams said these economic diversification goals build upon West Virginia Region 2 Planning & Development Council's comprehensive economic development strategy and the HIP plan, which supports the city's America's Best Community prize initiative. Huntington was named the grand prize winner of the ABC prize and was awarded \$3 million to take action on a revitalization plan.

"During the process of the competition, our community began to flesh out ideas, form alliances and coalesce projects by taking them to the streets," the mayor said.

Williams said the revitalization plans target the city's most distressed neighborhoods and adopt innovative tactics that combine long-term and sustainable transformation with short-term steps, which will ensure momentum toward the overall vision.

The first project discussed was the Huntington Brownfields Innovation Zone, "H-BIZ."

This project in the Highlawn neighborhood bounded by the Ohio River, Marshall University and downtown Huntington has 100 acres of challenging brownfields.

"Huntington has great opportunity," said Kristeen Gaffney, chief of Brownfields & Land Revitalization for the U.S. EPA Region 3. "When it comes to brownfields, the cornerstone of our program is community involvement. It builds hope and momentum. Former industrial sites can be transformed into community assets."

The next project discussed was the River-to-Rail Revitalization in Huntington's West End through the Appalachian Heartland Highway heritage tourism initiative, creation and revitalization of the Old Central City Arts & Culture District, and expansion of skilled jobs through WestEdge Factory and manufacturing projects.

"We are a U.S. Economic Development Authority grantee, and more than \$2 million worth of renovations are now underway," said Brandon Dennison, executive director of the Coalfield Development Corp. based in Wayne. "We have been laser-focused on our WestEdge Factory but are now trying to collaborate citywide, but especially on the West End to fit into the bigger vision."

The third project discussed was the Fairfield rebirth initiative that is planned to boost a struggling neighborhood with affordable housing, complete street transformation of Hal Greer Boulevard and expansion of the health- and wellness-based economy.

"My question was what is different now than plans made years ago?" said Sandra Clements, co-chair of the Fairfield Alliance and a longtime resident of Huntington's Fairfield neighborhood. "We have had plans in the past that never came to fruition, so in my neighborhood it's sometimes hard to get your hopes up."

The plan, known as the Fairfield Innovation Corridor, aims to improve the main strip of Hal Greer Boulevard; turn the Northcott Court public housing units into a mixed-use commercial, retail and residential area; and create opportunities for job growth and healthy living.

"I think this plan can be sustainable because now we have two larger partners in Marshall University and Cabell Huntington Hospital who are committed to what happens in Fairfield," Clements said. "I think having those two anchors involved will help to revitalize the community."

Also, unlike the other plans that she had seen come and go, Clements said this one was more thought out and was created not just from the input of business leaders and government officials, but from the community as well.

"This is the first time that I've been involved in the process itself where everybody who came out to the meetings has moved the process along, and I do feel like this is going to come to some completion," she said. "It's all very exciting."

Williams said these projects will affect the region for the next 50 years.

"Huntington is ready to move forward, and we will make no little plans," he said. "This is a call to action. We encourage our local, state and federal partners, our communities and our region to be a part of this bold initiative."

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