

First MSDC/Zimmer meeting generates ideas for Sweet Springs economic development

By Eric Crump. The Marshall Democrat-News: March 6, 2012.

"How do you create jobs?"

That was the first and most often repeated question during the first in a series of four public meetings on economic development in Saline County, and Troy Nash of Zimmer Real Estate, who posed the question, was there to listen to the responses Sweet Springs residents had.

"We're not out-of-town folks coming in here to tell you how to run your city," he said. "We're here to find out what your priorities are."

After holding three more public meetings in the county -- one in Slater and two in Marshall -- Nash will take what he learns about the people, culture and economy, then consult demographic and economic data before creating a master economic development plan for the county.

During the meeting, Nash posed questions and made observations during the two-hour meeting, but he turned the floor over frequently to members of the audience of about 25 people.

Several themes emerged from the audience about how the town could generate jobs and about the strengths and weaknesses that come into play in the process.

The consensus seemed to be that the town's main strengths are its location on Interstate 70 and its people, who Mayor Ray Kinney and others lauded as hard working, service-oriented and welcoming.

Liabilities were identified as a largely unskilled workforce, an inadequate supply of good housing and a lack of money to seed development.

Nash regularly urged audience members to think of new possibilities for job creation, and a few specific ideas were put forward, including attracting data center business and developing a truck stop.

There was, alternately, great enthusiasm for the prospect of growth and some concern about the effects growth might have on the community's character.

Chamber of Commerce President Tara Brewer reiterated a stance she expressed at a January economic development meeting sponsored by Pioneer Trails Regional Planning Commission.

She said she hopes more people come to Sweet Springs to do business, but she would rather not see an influx of new residents, which might upset the friendly, safe character of the community.

Nash said there are decisions the community needs to make about what it hopes to become, and as examples he suggested it might seek to attract more residents as a bedroom community or it might seek to attract more business and be a destination for commuting workers.

Dee Friel said the latter is currently the case -- she guessed as much as 85 percent of the local workforce commutes to other towns for their jobs.

And Ken Hughson noted that many people who work in Sweet Springs live in other communities in the area.

Another decision the community needs to make, Nash said, was whether to promote development with local resources or seek outside support.

Some communities prefer to avoid government funding because people feel the process is too slow and cumbersome.

On the other hand, "There are all sorts of programs we take advantage of that help leverage private investment," he said.

Friel and Tonya Winfrey said people might be interested in programs but most lack the knowledge of what's available or the application process.

The prescription for generating economic momentum -- voiced by several residents and by MSDC Executive Director Bill Riggins -- was to get everyone in town working together toward a shared vision and shared goals, and that was an idea Nash strongly encouraged.

"It's like a little red wagon," Albert Hartman said. "Sometimes you get to ride; sometimes you got to push."

Friel noted that while efforts are sometimes hampered by lack of communication between civic groups, the town does have the ability to come together to accomplish good things. She cited the annual Christmas event organized by a number of collaborating organizations.

Nash also emphasized the wisdom of building upon the town's strengths, particularly its advantages in transportation and agriculture.

Nash said rural communities that are surviving the forces of globalization are those that work together, understand and respect their own histories and "look for ways to win."

Carl Winston suggested that I-70 was not only an asset but a metaphor for the town's place in the world. When he talks to people from other places, all they know about Sweet Springs is a name on a sign as they zip by on the interstate highway.

"The world is passing us by," he said.

Nash urged community members to improve communication not only with each other, but with the rest of the world.

"That story needs to be told. How are you different?" he said. "Talk to each other. Where do we want to be in five years? Ten years? It can be done."

C.W. Johnson offered a glimpse of one possible future. After growing up in Saline County, he moved elsewhere, eventually landing in the southwest, but two years ago, he moved to Sweet Springs to find a better community to live in.

But his job is not a traditional one for the area. He is an information technology worker who works from home.

He suggested IT jobs could be the key to the future of Sweet Springs' economy.

Three public meetings remain, including:

--Slater, noon Monday, March 12, at The Grapevine Restaurant.

--Marshall, 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 13, at Martin Community Center.

--Marshall, 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 27, at Martin Community Center.

Following the meeting, Zimmer will put together a master economic development plan for the county.