

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE SEPTEMBER 10, 2009 NORTHEAST ARKANSAS FOCUS GROUP SESSION

### Assessment of the Area's Economic Conditions

To begin, how is this area's economic condition compared to the nation's economy?

Much Better			Better			About the same			Worse			Much Worse
1	1.1 - 1.49	1.5 - 1.99	2	2.1 - 2.49	2.5 - 2.99	3	3.1 - 3.49	3.5 - 3.99	4	4.1 - 4.49	4.5 - 4.99	5
<b>2</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>						
<b>16.7%</b>		<b>16.7%</b>	<b>33.3%</b>		<b>25%</b>	<b>8.3%</b>						

- The average rating for the area's economic condition was 2.06.
- What makes up Northeast Arkansas?
  - If you travel out from Jonesboro and Paragould about 30/40 miles things change and beyond 60 miles you no longer seem to be in the Northeast Arkansas area.
  - It seems as if the tide has turned and we are now engaging in more regional collaboration. People in the outlying areas are realizing that they benefit if Jonesboro grows and more jobs are created in Jonesboro.
- Conditions vary across the region. Around Jonesboro and Paragould the economic conditions are probably in the 1 to 2 range. In the outlying areas conditions are about a 4.
- The Delta was economically depressed before the national recession occurred.

### Capital Investments and Losses

- The group identified 12 investments and only 6 losses.
- The investments included Arkansas State University and various other schools, retail space, agricultural, ongoing road improvements, infrastructure, some housing, commercial and industrial, and the \$1 billion electric generating plant.
- The losses included manufacturing closures, retrenchments and layoffs, and some retail.
- About three years ago, Corning lost three of its four largest employers. The community was willing to think about trying something new, including a tax dedicated to economic development, a full-time chamber director, and commitment to a regional approach.

### Situation with Labor and the Workforce

- The toughest challenge is finding, hiring, and keeping skilled blue collar workers. This is not recent, however; it has been hard to find skilled labor for a number of years.
- Related to the hard task of finding skilled workers is trying to keep our workforce on top of the every changing and more complex technology. We do not simply need mechanics and engineers, we now need "mechanitronics" workers.
- Advanced manufacturing is focused on mega-tronics or workers' ability to problem-solve on a combination of mechanical and electrical systems. Since the technology keeps moving forward, these programs also have to keep adapting and adopting the newest technology.
- A part of this problem is that the counselors in schools do not appreciate or value these technical careers opportunities. They push students toward colleges and do not advise enough about other careers.

### **Future Directions for Development in the Area**

- In Mississippi County, we are making an effort to connect the disconnected. We are trying to draw together more of the community and work toward economic development.
- Health care will expand to serve an aging population.
- Wind energy will be a part of this area's future with an increase in the suppliers.
- Agriculture will continue to be an important component and we want to see growth in the industries that add value to the agricultural products that are produced in this area and state.
- The service industry will expand; there will be growth in the jobs for engineers and Star Tek is training people to work from their homes for jobs in the customer service sector.
- The future will see a growth in small and medium-sized firms. Part of our strategy has to be helping small businesses to form and grow. Entrepreneurship will play a role in our future. Nordex and such companies create opportunities for small firms to fill new niches. We are beginning to see more of a concerted entrepreneurship effort within larger firms.

### **Area Assets that Could Help with Future Development**

- In this area, we do not have the socio-political factions that are opposed to growth. People here want this area to be able to compete and to create good jobs.
- Our location within the US creates advantages for us.
- Jonesboro and this area is a place where it is very cost-competitive to do business in comparison to other areas in the country and even within the state, e.g., our utility costs are quite reasonable.
- We are willing to work together because we all see that we benefit from growth.

### **Factors in the Area that Could Impede Development**

- If we fail to put the needed infrastructure in place it will be hard to us to acquire the sorts of jobs that we want to see created.
- Whether Amendment 82 will pass or fail is a question.
- The state's usury laws put us at a disadvantage with banks in other states.
- Employee Free Choice (or card check) could disadvantage us if it goes through.