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SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE SEPTEMBER 17, 2009 PINE BLUFF AREA 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
					1	1	1	2	3	1	5	
					7.1%	7.1%	7.1%	14.3%	21.4%	7.1%	35.7%	

- The average rating for the area's economic condition was 4.04.
- We are located in the Delta. Regional efforts and solutions are needed.

Capital Investments and Losses

- The group identified nineteen capital investments were and only seven capital losses.
- The investments included new retail and commercial development, the purchase of International paper by Evergreen, creation of an industrial park for bio-technology and nano-technology firms, expansion of city water and sewer lines, improvements to and construction of new schools, the Lake Saracen development, construction of higher education facilities, and transportation improvements.
- The losses focused on industries that have closed or left, such as Allied Tube, and layoffs.
- Losses also included closing of groceries, stores in the mall, and Main Street businesses.
- The Washington Group will finish their work at the Pine Bluff Arsenal in 2010. This will mean the loss of 1200 jobs plus the indirect effects of the loss of those jobs.

Situation with Labor and the Workforce

- We are looking at a loss of population. There is a fear that Pine Bluff's population might fall below 50,000 in the next Census, meaning that the city would lose its MSA status.
- This area has the highest unemployment rate in the state and it is still better than the national rate. Much of the area's unemployment is in the blue collar sector.
- The available labor pool has a low skill level and younger work ethic needs to be improved.
- Too many workers fail on the drug tests, both applicants for new jobs and those already employed. The use of drugs also affects families, the community, and the area's crime rate.
- Education (K through 12) appears to be struggling, both public and private schools. The issue is how poorly prepared the students are upon graduation.
- There are two major higher educational institutions here and yet the area's labor skills are low. Way too many of our graduates leave this area for jobs elsewhere; too many of our high school graduates have to go into remediation when they reach college; and too many of the students from this area who go on to college end up not finishing.
- Our previous effort to enact a tax for economic development did not pass, even with half of the revenues earmarked for workforce training.

Future Directions for Development in the Area

- We want Pine Bluff to offer recreational and entertainment amenities so that this is a destination for people as it once was.
- There are opportunities for UAPB to grow and expand, e.g., a Ph.D. program in fisheries.

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- With our low property values, we could market ourselves as a bedroom community for Little Rock; advertise how much more house and land you get for your.
- Lake Saracen has the potential for more residential and commercial development.
- With highway improvements, Pine Bluff could be a transportation hub along that route, especially give our port, rail, and air infrastructure.
- The Pine Bluff 2020 Initiative is developing ideas about the area's growth.
- In downtown Pine Bluff, it would be nice to see residential lofts over the retail shops.
- If bio-/nano-technology firms developed, they could take the place of the Washington Group.
- We want to see population growth in this area. With more population we would also see more retail and more business.
- Our future must include opportunities for youth, recreational opportunities, and jobs.
- Agriculture will have to be a strong element in our future. We can be the food basket for our country and the world and employed in the distribution of those products.

Area Assets that Could Help with Future Development

- We have a world renowned Aquaculture and Fisheries Center.
- The small business development center and a business incubator are located in Pine Bluff.
- The UAPB band is or could be part of a marketing effort to get us attention. The fact that they played at the President's inauguration got us a lot of attention.
- Our airport, railroads, highways, and river port provide great transportation.
- We are close to Little Rock.
- Jefferson Regional Medical Center.
- There is a large convention center located in downtown; the Arts and Sciences Center is here; we have a Symphony Orchestra.
- We have affordable housing.
- We have a brand; we are "Harbor City, the anchor of Southeast Arkansas" and UAPB is the "Flagship of the Delta."

Factors in the Area that Could Impede Development

- We failed to enact a tax dedicated to economic development and workforce training.
- There are negative public perceptions of this area. Banks and the hospital report that when they try to hire from outside the area they have a very hard time getting people to work here.
- We have a shrinking tax base.
- Site selectors look at us on the Internet and perceive that we have a high crime rate, low educational attainment, lack sufficient shopping opportunities, low income levels, and a high remediation rate.... they come to take a look at us and our poor appearance puts them off.
- We have seven jails or prisons in this area. Too many of the prisoners choose to stay here in Pine Bluff upon their release.
- What are we missing? Lots more money committed to marketing; more coordination of development efforts; a growing tax base; tax that is dedicated to economic development and workforce training; and mass transportation that connects us to Little Rock.
- We must work together regionally. We cannot allow ourselves to get hung up on boundaries. We can commit to the development of the region and ensure that we all benefit equitably.