

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE SEVEN FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS CONDUCTED IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 2009

Assessment of the Areas' Economic Conditions

The groups rated their area's economic condition on a scale that ran from 1 (being much better than the national economy) to 3 (about the same as the national economy) to 5 (much worse than the national economy). Individuals were allowed to use whole numbers or fractions.

Area of the State	Mean Rating	Modal Rating
Central Arkansas	2.1	2.0
Ft. Smith & environs	2.3	2.0
Monticello area	2.7	2.0
Northeast Arkansas	2.1	2.0
Northwest Arkansas	2.0	2.0
Pine Bluff area	4.0	4.5 to 4.9
Southwest Arkansas	2.7	2.5 to 2.9 and 3.0

- The vast majority of participants across the seven sessions rated their area as doing better than the nation.
- The average ratings from six of the seven sessions indicate that the areas are generally better or slightly better off than the nation as a whole.
- The participants stated that Arkansas was in better condition than the nation.
- A general comment was that Arkansas's economy does not go through the extreme booms and busts that other parts of the country experiences.
- However, there are clear differences within the state. The most dramatic difference is observed in the average ratings for the Pine Bluff area, which indicate that the area is worse to much worse than the nation. In fact, only one participant rated the economic condition as better than the nation and that rating was in the 2.5 to 2.9 range. The median rating in Pine Bluff was 4.0.
- The average ratings for the Monticello area and Northeast Arkansas mask considerable variation that was found within each region.
- In Monticello it was pointed out that the participants who had rated the area's economy with a 2 were generally located on the western side of this area and especially near Monticello. The average rating for this group was 2.0. Those who had rated the area's economy with a 3 or 4 were generally from the eastern side of this area and their average rating for that part of the area was 3.43.
- In the focus group session in Jonesboro the participants noted that conditions vary across the region. Around Jonesboro and Paragould the economic conditions are probably in the 1 to 2 range. In some of the outlying areas conditions probably rate about a 4.
- Participants in these three focus group sessions (that is, Jonesboro, Monticello, and Pine Bluff) stated that their assessment reflected the "Delta blues." They said that the Delta's economy had been depressed for some time and that with the recession the nation caught up.
- The participants at the session in Magnolia also reported more variation within their region. The division was not as clearly East or West or Delta and not Delta. However within the area some communities and counties have done better than others.

Themes Heard Across the Focus Group Sessions

- During the course of every one of the sessions, participants brought up the issue of **infrastructure** and how, if the needed improvements and additions are not made, the regions and state could be at a disadvantage for development.
 - In many instances the infrastructure that was most on people's minds was highways, whether Interstate or widening of state and US routes.
 - In other instances participants were concerned about fiber optic cable, broad band access, and the cutting edge infrastructure that will be needed for Arkansans to compete in the 21st century economy.
 - At some focus group sessions the participants were concerned with navigational improvements to waterways, port facilities, rail connections, and intermodal transportation hubs.
 - Using the widest sense possible for the term infrastructure, some participants talked about how the recreational and cultural "infrastructure" could make or break their regions for being able to attract the sorts of development that they want to see happen.
- Every focus group session also discussed certain aspects of the **workforce and labor**. In some instances were heard exactly the sort of thing that you expect to hear in a recession, that is, that it is a good time to be hiring because there are people out there with good skills and that the range of applications allow for truly good selections to be made.
 - We also heard repeatedly that employers struggle with two things in particular. First is the ability to recruit and retain highly skilled "blue collar" workers, especially who have the skills to succeed in advanced manufacturing, and young professionals. The second is that employers experience problems with applicants and workers failing drug tests. Prevalent drug use means that employers spend considerable time and energy trying to fill some positions.
 - Drugs also negatively affect families, the communities, and contribute to crime.
 - Some areas find it hard to attract needed workers because of the perceptions that these areas are suffering from high crime rates and racial tensions.
- In response to a question about recently completed **capital investments** and/or those that are about to happen, at every session participants reeled off a list that often surprised them.
 - Participants cited private sector, industrial, retail, business, health care, educational, higher educational, non-profit, transportation, and road and other local governmental infrastructure improvements and expansions.
 - Participants were often able to provide fairly accurate values for these investments.
 - The list of investments always exceeded the list of capital losses. In some cases the number of investments was close to three times as long as the losses.
 - It was not uncommon for someone in the group to remark that after hearing about the capital investments they might have wanted to give the area a better rating on its overall economic condition.