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Warren County: News

Jobs top county priorities

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By Luci Weldon

Creating jobs for Warren County citizens was listed among the top priorities as the board of county commissioners set goals for the next few years during a planning retreat on March 16.

The commissioners began their daylong retreat by listing the county's strengths, which included tourism opportunities, good quality of living, caring people, countywide water, community college system, history and expertise of retirees.

Commissioners also listed challenges facing the county, such as the current recession/weak economy, unemployment, lack of economic development opportunities, lack of decent, affordable housing, not using interstate interchanges productively for economic development, and attracting and maintaining quality county employees.

Members of the public, including county employees, also were allowed to list county strengths and challenges.

Among the county's strengths, the local residents listed income potential through fishing tournaments and water sports, and proximity to major cities and airports. Members of the public agreed with the commissioners on challenges facing the county.

Commissioners next identified the strengths of county government, which included a common interest in making the county better; quality fire departments, law enforcement, county staff and county manager; and improving education. The public did not add anything else to the commissioners' list.

Among the challenges facing county government that commissioners listed were reducing dependence on property taxes for revenue/attracting industry and being more receptive to comments and criticism. Citizens added lack of citizens participation, especially at meetings; problems with public safety communications, such as radio system; and making government more accessible to younger residents.

When individual commissioners were asked to use this information to develop a listing of top county priorities for the next few years, many suggestions centered on jobs and economic development.

Commissioners concluded that many of the concerns about bringing good jobs to the county, increasing tourism and marketing the county could be accomplished by finding the right economic development director. While an interim director is in place, the position has been vacant since June 2010.

Commissioners reached consensus that an economic development plan should be prepared, incentive policies to attract businesses should be developed, county and Economic Development Commission (EDC) websites should be upgraded, and the county should collaborate with towns on revitalization of downtown areas.

The most lengthy discussion about economic development came on the subject of the EDC's board of directors. The county commissioners have presented proposed changes to the EDC's bylaws, which could result in the board disbanding temporarily. The matter is tabled for now, but could be included on the agenda for the commissioners' April 4 meeting.

Commissioners agreed that they wanted the EDC board to be a "broad umbrella group," but disagreed on whether changes should be made now or sometime later due to the potential development of a meat-processing facility in the county.

Commissioners concluded that they wanted to re-examine the composition of the EDC board to make it broader, but extended its goal accomplishment date from 2011 to 2012.

To increase tourism, the commissioners set the strategies of reviewing a previous discussion of a hotel occupancy tax, which would require approval by the N.C. General Assembly; funding staff to promote and market the county to increase tourism, and implement the county's tourism strategic plan developed in 2009.

Due to the current economic downturn, the commissioners also set a priority on diligently assessing the tax rate. During discussions, board members said that they did not want to raise taxes unless absolutely necessary, but agreed that this year's budget process will be especially difficult.

The impact of the economic downturn was also felt in the discussion of strategies for retaining quality county employees. Commissioners suggested an employee recognition system based on performance, but went no further since the recession impacts the amount of funding available for other incentives.

Among other goals and strategies, commissioners want to continue to support the school board to improve the quality of local education by providing funding, within available resources, for buildings and facilities; and to improve infrastructure by assessing water and sewer needs and pursuing available funding to meet them, such as grants; encourage non-profits and others to work with the county to improve the quality and affordability of housing; explore expanding law enforcement in the lake area; and upgrading emergency communications systems in 2012.

A report from the planning retreat will be compiled for the board of commissioners to review and consider for approval.

"This is a tool for us to try to keep focused, but it is subject to change," Commission Chairman Barry Richardson said.