

**MINUTES OF THE BLACK BELT COMMISSION
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING
October 14, 2011**

University of Alabama - Tuscaloosa, AL

The Black Belt Commission Executive Committee met Friday, October 14, 2011 at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, AL. The following were in attendance:

Ron Sparks, Director, Alabama Rural Development Office
Senator Hank Sanders, Co-Chair
William Scott, Congresswoman Sewell's Selma Office
Ms. Stacey Adams, Dept. of Public Health, Strategic Alliance Health Program
Laurie Stewart, Sight Savers (For Chad Nichols)
Bea Forniss, Chair, Infrastructure Committee
David Hale, Chair, Communications Committee
Donald Mills, Chair, Small Business Committee
Shirley Worthington, Chair, Transportation Commission
Dr. Carol Zippert, Chair, Cultural and Youth
Bob Lake, West Alabama Regional Commission
Ginger Rue, Project Manager
Candy Capel, Project Manager
Thomas Moore, Project Manager
Ross Gunnells, Alabama Rural Development Office
Emily Law, BBC Executive Director

Mike Hardin, Dean of College of Commerce and Business Administration, welcomed everyone to the college and the School of Commerce and Business. He talked about the founding principle of the school being to educate a workforce for the State of Alabama and private enterprise employees. He said there have been 40 new buildings on the campus in the past ten years.

Ron Sparks, Director of Alabama Rural Development Office, gave opening remarks in which he thanked the University for hosting the meeting today. He reported on several topics.

- He still wanted the Commission to meet with the Governor and he was working to make this happen.
- He also reported we were almost ready to initiate the hunting and fishing project – Conservation and Black Belt and...
- The widest yard sale project saying he wanted to get everyone involved.
- Reported he continues to work on telemedicine project.
- Broke ground last week on broadband initiative.
- Been really involved in medical issues. We have been able to bring people together talking about how to advance these areas.
- HIV –issue needs to be discussed and talked about. There is increase in numbers of people with HIV. Discussed the that's available for HIV pregnant women.

- Loss of 550 babies a year in Alabama due to infant mortality. How to turn this around?

Senator Sanders stated he was giving thought to moving out of the Co-Chair role which created a lot of discussion.

Ron introduced Mr. Brian Hilson, President and CEO of the Birmingham Business Alliance who talked about the business community as it relates to the Black Belt Region. Ron went to several of the Governor’s listening sessions around the state and sat in on one with the Birmingham Business Alliance and thought it would be a good idea for the alliance to see what the BBC is about and possibly work in partnership with the BBC.

Mr. Hilson stated he had worked in economic development approximately 32 years. When you see people obtain jobs in the state of Alabama, that makes it worthwhile. It takes a lot of teamwork. Stated he had spent a lot of time in the Black Belt. Served on the state Economic Development Board. Typical aspiration for a young person in rural Alabama and especially the Black Belt is to own or work in a convenience store. It’s important for all of Alabama to do well and it is important throughout the state that the Black Belt region does well. The important question is “How do we do that?”

If you wake up one day and everyone has left, we will regret not having addressed these issues.

In the World of Economic Development, there is a perception of Alabama as a place to do business. A welcoming place with business advantages with a qualified workforce, education and schools that we are always striving to improve.

Sometimes in Economic Development, we want everything to be fair. We have a world class training program and companies are looking at companies that are prepared to provide a trained workforce.

The Black Belt presents some challenging issues and advantages: 1. Schooled workforce; 2. Can do attitude. . In partnering with the Black Belt, we need to show attention to improving infrastructure throughout the Black Belt. If the state can find a way to provide direct support to the Black Belt. It is not only needed but justified. Shared thoughts with Phyllis Belcher, Greene-Sumter Enterprise. Companies are still growing and looking for basically the same thing, excellent attitude and skilled leadership.

Partnership and commitment; they have more job opportunities could be the answer. When rates were low we had large manufacturers.

If you have people who are not employed, then pull the two together. Bring workforce there on temporary basis. People will and can acquire skills. We not only need shovel ready projects, we need “shovel ready workforce.” Situation that could be put together be set and a certified workforce.. That commitment would be more attractive. If you can find a way like that in whatever county that is closest to interstate system, then you move on to another one. Example: Thomasville – Canadian Company, Lakeside Steel, Golden Dragon. It helped that the Canadian Company had paved the way.

Birmingham Business Alliance – We have a seven-county responsibility, which includes Jefferson, Blount, Shelby, Walker, Chilton, Sinclair and Bibb.

Traditional economic development focuses on industrial factories here we think we have the greatest opportunity. Workforce programs would make the products that we sell better.

Mr. Hilson stated that the BBA was created by the merger of Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Metropolitan Development Board to focus on the economic growth of the entire seven-county Birmingham region. This serves as a much stronger and well-rounded entity to promote dynamic growth and improve the quality of life in the region.

Mr. Hilson talked about Jefferson County's financial woes and the effect this has on the rest of Alabama as the largest city. Population 215,000 right now.

Bob Lake commented that three ? entering space program is from Hale County. Carol Zippert remarked about the TWA supplier and talked about the industrial park in Greene county.

Senator Sanders – factor broad to workforce. How they came lot of problems.

COMMITTEE REPORTS: Done in reverse order –

TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE – Shirley Worthington, Chair -

- Shirley stated that transportation is the #1 issue throughout the Black Belt and this committee has explored numerous options to tackle the transportation problem in the Black Belt.
- She reported that transit and transportation is essential in solving all the other problems in the Black Belt.
- She asked to set up meeting between she, Ron and Tyson to talk about the barriers and devise a plan.

SMALL BUSINESS COMMITTEE – Donald Mills, Chair, reported:

- Donald handed out the Small Business Committee Calendar of Events and Activities proposed for 2011-2012.
- November 8, 2011, at 10:00 a.m. there will be a committee conference call.
- January 20th, 2012, 10:30 a.m. Committee conference call.
- February 7th, 10:00 a.m. at UWA, Committee meeting.
- February 23, Small Business Tax Workshop (IRS and Alabama Revenue)
- March 13th, 10:00 a.m. Committee conference call. Also in March, (TBA) is planned a tentative Small Business Resource Summit.
- April 10th, 10:00 a.m. Small Business Meeting (UWA Campus)
- April 19th, 8:30 a.m. Procurement Conference for West Alabama. Jackson, AL.
- April (TBA) SBA Lender Conference Ross Bridge Birmingham, AL

- May 14th 10:00 a.m. Committee Conference Call
- May 17th 9:00 a.m. – 1:30 p.m. Youth Entrepreneurial Success (Y.E.S.) Workshop
- May 24th 8:30 -4:30 National Small Business Week Seminar (Women’s Business resources Focus)
- June 12th, 10:00 a.m. Committee Meeting (Location TBA)
- June 25th – 27th 5:30 p.m. – 8:30 CORE FOUR Small Business class (Thomasville or Jackson, AL Location TBA)
- July 10th – 10:00 a.m. Committee Conference Call
- August 14th, 10:30 a.m. Committee Meeting (TBA) Youth Entrepreneurial Awareness & Business Plan Competition
- September 13th – 11:00 a.m. Committee Conference call (? Date TBA) 8:30 – 4:30 Small Business Resource Fair (Selma Civic Center)
- October – CORE FOUR – Business Planning Course (Higher ED CTR UWA Demopolis, AL)
- November 13th, 10:00 a.m. Committee Meeting ***(Location TBA)
- December 6, 2012 (*Tentative date) Holiday Mixer – Small Business Networking

SKILLS TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT – Dr. James Mitchell, Chair, Candy Cappel, Project Manager, reported-

- There was no report for Workforce.

MANUFACTURING COMMITTEE – George Alford, Chair, Candy Capel reported-

INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE – Bea Forniss, Chair, reported:

- She had missed everyone.
- Talked about Delta Regional Authority and three individuals in the class. Candy Capel, (**Need names of other two**).
- Reported a meeting had been set for the committee and it turned out to be Columbus Day, so that was postponed.
- Scheduled CDBG Workshop November 9th.
- Encouraged every county in the Black Belt to apply for grant. If they are not funded in the first round, there is a possibility it could be funded with recaptured funds. Four projects will be funded.
- Reminded everyone that infrastructure is more than water and sewer.

MANUFACTURING – George Alford, Chair, Candy Capel, Project Manager, reported-

- It was reported that George Alford, John Clyde Riggs and Mayor Sheldon Day are all working on a huge manufacturing prospect for Wilcox County.

MARKETING & TOURISM –Pam Swanner, Chair, Thomas Moore, Project Manager, reported –

- **New Project: World’s “Widest Yard Sale”**
- Presented an idea Ron had to play off the “World’s Longest Yard Sale” with our own “World’s Widest Yard Sale”
- Attended this year’s “Longest Yard Sale” which stretches 675 miles, beginning in Gadsden and traveled as far as Signal Mountain.
- Widest Yard Sale would focus on Highway 80, through the Black Belt Region with pockets of vendors designated in other areas of the Black Belt. Highway 80 runs coast to coast from Macon and Savannah to Jackson, Mississippi.
- Hoping to pull people off the interstate with the sale, as well as interesting historical sites along the trail that would be of interest to travelers. This would allow towns, cities and communities to make money they would not normally make. In addition, people will be spending money on gas, food and lodging, campgrounds, etc.
- The “**Longest Yard Sale**” has drawn attention from USA Today, Oprah Winfrey and other sources. We should be able to eventually garner the same kind of attention once this gets off the ground. Project would not take an enormous amount of money.
- It gives organizations and individuals the opportunity to generate lots of money for whatever cause they might have.
- A weekend in 2012 will be secured when the committee meets.
- **Ron** stated that we have history for people to experience along the way. It should be great and will allow people along the route the opportunity to participate; landowners renting spaces. It will attract people from everywhere.

HEALTH COMMITTEE — Congresswoman Terri Sewell and Chad Nichols, Co-Chairs – Laurie Stewart, Sight Savers of America and William Scott representing Congresswoman Sewell’s office:

- **Laurie Stewart** reported on the following:
- **Kidcheck Program.** Over 8,000 kids have been screened in 8 school systems so far this school year. Plans are to expand into more systems in 2012.
- She reported the response to the wireless program has been great. It reduces the amount of work that would normally fall on the school nurses drastically.
- **A Night FORE Sight – Sight Savers America Annual Fundraiser** – night golfing event at the Highland golf Course in Birmingham.
- 6:00 p.m. golfing, 7:00 party with food, drink and silent auction.
- 8:00 p.m. winners announced
- Ends at 10:00 p.m.
- **William Scott** introduced Stacey Adams, Communities Coordinator for the Health Strategic Alliance.
- The Alabama Department of Public Health is the lead agency for the Alabama Strategic Alliance for Health Program. Funded by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- The Program promotes community interventions that change policies and environmental supports to improve obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.
- Interventions will help promote good nutrition, physical activity, reduce tobacco use and exposure, improve access to quality health care and help eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities.
- Funds are provided to three West Alabama counties to implement interventions. Dallas, Perry and Sumter. Vaughan Community Health Services, Inc. (Dallas County) Sowing Seeds of Hope (Perry) and the Health and Wellness Educational Center (Sumter County) provide local leadership and coordination.
- 75% of budget has to be spent in communities. Dallas County received \$50,000 in mini grants and other projects have begun in Pickens, Greene, Monroe and Butler counties as well as Hale, Bibb, Choctaw and Washington.
- Working on summary of what's been done by county.

FAMILIES COMMITTEE – Ginger Rue, Project Manager, reported:

- She was actively working on finding a chair for the Families Committee.
- It was decided discussion regarding the creation of a Public Relations Committee, would be postponed.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE – Dr. Daniel Boyd, Chair, reported-

- Discussed a joint meeting with Small Business and Education to discuss this project of teaching interview skills to high school student. This might require a resolution to go before the Board of Education.
- Dr. Hale suggested this could be handled on Career Day in high schools. Should be directed at 9th and 10th grades, as there is most leeway in these grades.
- A motion was made by William Scott to adopt resolution that “encourages school systems to adopt interview skills in the school curriculum” and it was seconded by Bea Forniss.
- It was noted that “**and related skills**” be added to the resolution stating that “Interview skills be taught to high school kids.”
- Talked about a Farm to School Program as outgrowth of meeting between Education and Small Business committees, which links products from local farms directly to the schools in the area. Ron said he would talk to her about that program at a later time as it was one of the programs he started at Agriculture.

CULTURAL AND YOUTH – Carol Zippert, Chair, reported –

- The Cultural and Youth Committee continues its core project which is a collaborative with the Alabama State Council on the Arts (ASCA) and the Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF). The partnership sponsors the Black Belt Arts Initiative Project which is funded by ASCA through BBCF.
- Grant funds support community arts projects in the 12-county Black Belt Region. In fiscal year 2010-2011, we were funded \$245,700 for the Arts Initiative Project. A total of 64 community arts grants were awarded in the amount of \$175,000. The projects included visual arts, performing arts, cultural history, literary arts and traditional arts.

- The budget provided \$70,700 for administrative cost including one full-time staff person and support for community arts workshops, training and related gatherings.
- Fiscal year 2011-2012, The Black Belt Arts Initiative project has received notification of a grant in the amount of \$160,430 from ASCA to serve the same region. Projected that \$100,000 will be budgeted for community arts grants and the remainder for administrative and community support costs.
- The Black Belt Arts Initiative Project will be in its sixth year with the 2011-2012 ASCA grant.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE - Felecia Jones, Chair, Thomas Moore, Program Manager, reported-

- The **Assets for Independence Program** continues with Sumter County having the most accounts.
- The BBCF continues to partner and provide funds to community projects.

COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE – Dr. David Hale, Chair, Project Manager, reported –

Initiatives of the committee are:

1. This committee is working with Black Belt Treasures (Camden) which has implemented a new business operations suite of systems including point of sale, inventory and accounting.
2. This committee is working with Black Belt Treasures in Camden implementing a new e-commerce site for <http://www.blackbelttreasures.com/> and an ebay storefront is being developed. These sites exist for promotion of regional art and fine crafts, to provide regional artisans a means to promote and sell their products to a larger market and to provide arts education to area residents. Products range from Freedom Quilts to watermelon rind pickles.
3. The committee is working with A2D/Trillion to enable the Alabama Broadband initiative, eCommunityAlabama. Projects include an awareness campaign for broadband capability directed at service providers in telemedicine and workforce development.
4. The committee is continuing work on the Virtual Career Center and Business incubator. This project brings together eCommunityAlabama, West Alabama Chamber of Commerce, ADECA and several other organizations to bring services of the Alabama Career Center to individuals. This work integrates ongoing efforts with new technology to bring workforce development and business startup services to rural areas of the state.
5. This committee is continuing working on Project LEARN (Launching Entrepreneurship Across Rural Networks), which has enrolled nearly 800 participants. This program teaches business startup skills and requirements to displaced workers and vets through a US Department of Labor funded demonstration project.

AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE – John Zippert, Chair, Candy Cappel, Project Manager, reported –

- **The committee has continued to meet regarding the opening of the Farmers Market and Innovation Center.**
- **The Farmers Market and Innovation Center ties in to Ginger’s farm to school project.**
- **Walmart project was a huge success. Next year the project will be expanded. The idea is the closer to home produce is grown, the better it is.**

William Scott reported about the Farm Bill Listening Session with Congresswoman Sewell will be at the Co-op in Selma. There will also be sessions in Uniontown, Greene County and Pickens County.

REGIONAL COUNCIL REPORTS:

John Clyde Riggs, Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission – (Absent)

Tyson Howard, South Central Alabama Regional Commission –

Bob Lake, West Alabama Regional Planning – (Absent)

Senator Sanders gave closing remarks and the meeting adjourned for a delicious meal sponsored by Dr. Hale.