

What I learned at the CCSP meeting

By Dan Marsh

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More interesting information comes to us from the meetings of the Clark County Strategic Planning Committee.

On Tuesday night, Ed Bee, president of Tamerica Management Co., told about 85 county residents about the "threats and opportunities" he sees in Clark County's immediate future.

Threats ranged from a decrease in the number of high school graduates in Southwest Arkansas, to illegal immigration affecting the poultry industry, to competition for trained engineers.

Tourism - long thought to be a strong suit of this area - is also threatened by the development of tourist attractions in other parts of the state.

He stressed that the office and service sector of the economy should become a priority for Clark County. This includes a number of areas, from payroll service companies to third-party insurance claims processors. He noted that more real estate needs to be made available so that, if necessary, buildings for those type companies can be constructed.

What I found interesting was that manufacturing WAS NOT included as a "target" for opportunity in Clark County. Bee said employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector "are dwindling." Most of this is due to the fact that so many manufacturers are going off-shore, where labor is cheap.

My question, if this is the case, is where does that put the the Clark County Industrial Council? This area has long been geared toward recruiting new industry. What are we to make of this new information?

Bee talked a lot about potential employers relying on the local pool of college students as a labor force. I think that is an excellent point and should be taken seriously. I know that in Sherman, Texas, students of Austin College can be found working everywhere, from Wal-Mart to Hastings to any of the newer retail stores west of town.

Sherman also has a call center in what used to be the K-Mart building. The company came in, bought the building and renovated it. Many of its employees are Austin College students. Sherman turned a negative (giant vacant building) and turned it into a positive (a job-producing call center), and utilized a good portion of its labor force in the process.

Arkadelphia, of course, has two universities. You see where I'm going? It can happen here, too.

What's interesting is that, according to Bee, the tendency of big companies to move their call centers to places like India may be tapering off. He said it is inconvenient for English-speaking customers to communicate with Indian service reps. And, he said, many Indians do not own PCs and find it hard to relate to the problems of American computer owners.

(This seems antithetical to Thomas L. Friedman's book *The World Is Flat*, which talks about off-shore call centers and how they're set up. A fascinating book - but has the world changed yet again since it was published?)

Bee also talked about bringing more retirees into Clark County. I think this area has a lot to offer seniors, not the least of which is a "four-seasons" lifestyle. The Gardens, which is being constructed between Walnut and South 26th streets, is a good step toward attracting retirees to our county.

Bee presented information showing that Clark County is deficient in at least one area with respect to attracting seniors. That is proximity to shopping centers. Nobody needs me to reiterate that we need more places to spend money around here, but I understand that plans are in the works to bring a movie theater to Arkadelphia. If that happens, and a couple of anchor retailers accompany that theater, we may be on track to closing the gap.

Bee closed the meeting by reminding those present that "not being satisfied with the status quo" means "risk and change," and we have to be prepared for that. One part of the strategic plan will inevitably involve changing the way we view ourselves. I know that some are comfortable with life in "Mayberry," but reinforcing the concept of "Mayberry" runs counter to the CCSP - in which a lot of people have invested a lot of time and energy.

At some point, we're going to have to make a choice.

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