

Development plan could be in action by August

By Donna Hilton

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More than 200 people attended the second meeting of the Clark County Strategic Planning Committee Thursday night and agreed to meet again in two weeks to hear proposals from facilitators.

The committee was formed to draft a Strategic Development Plan for Clark County. Dr. Alan Wright and Dr. Wesley Kluck, co-chairmen of the committee, told the crowd that four proposals were returned from the 10 requested from possible facilitators.

A facilitator is being sought to guide the group through the planning process, Wright said. Members of the community, through large meetings and smaller subcommittee meetings, will draft the plan of action.

Of the 10 firms contacted for facilitator proposals, all were large national firms. "We wanted an outside person, who had no political or other ties to Clark County," Wright said.

A group of 12 people, all familiar with reviewing such proposals, evaluated the four that were received. Of the four, two were not deemed to be appropriate for Clark County. "They seemed to want to fit us into their mold," Kluck said. "We wanted a person who would take what we have and come up with the best plan for us."

Information from the two remaining firms was presented at the meeting, and representatives of the firms will be at the next community meeting, set for July 11. The representatives will present their proposals, and those in attendance will vote to decide which firm to choose.

The two firms are CH2MHILL, headquartered in Spartanburg, S.C., and Tamerica Management Co., based in Mandeville, La. Both firms have experience in developing economic development plans for other cities and counties.

Kluck and Wright said they will spend the next two weeks researching the two firms, checking references and other work not listed as references. After hearing the proposals, Kluck and Wright will share their opinions of the two firms and those attending the community meeting will vote to choose a firm.

If the group can agree on a facilitator, work on the plan should begin in early August, Kluck said. Funds to pay the facilitator have been given by Southern Bancorp, the Ross Foundation, the Olds Foundation and the Cabe Foundation. Cost is not a concern in deciding which firm to choose, the two said.

Kluck presented statistics gathered from responses to a survey done last month at the first Strategic Planning meeting. Of the many choices for the greatest need for Clark County, the top five answers were: Cleaning and fixing up, improving government, attracting tourism, a "buy local" attitude and better use of the resources available at the two universities in Arkadelphia.

A survey also asked which of six focus areas the audience felt were most important to Clark County. Economic development ranked first at nearly 59 percent while education followed at 33 percent. The other focus areas are health care, housing, tourism and leadership. Subcommittees will be appointed to study each of those areas. The subcommittee members will be chosen from persons attending the community meetings who express interest in serving.

After their presentation, Kluck and Wright opened the floor for questions and comments. While some had questions about the process of hiring a facilitator and drafting the strategic plan, others expressed their opinions of the project. "Until Arkadelphia changes its attitude, nothing will change," one woman said. She referred to the signs on the Interstate 30 exits that say "No Truck Services," that discourage truck drivers from coming into town. "Until we change that, who wants to come in?"

She went on to say that the community is too dependent on Henderson State and Ouachita Baptist universities. "We're not just a two-college town. Just because we have two universities, that doesn't make us the greatest thing ever."

She also spoke of the need for more jobs. The whole community cannot be based on just the two universities, she said. "Only so many people can work there. We have to have enough jobs for people that will keep the kids here."

Wright agreed, saying the community loses hundreds of potential residents each year at college graduation. "There's a brain drain every spring as 500 of the best and brightest leave town and find work elsewhere," he said.

The next meeting of the Strategic Planning Committee will be at 6 p.m., July 11, at Ouachita Baptist University.