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Greater Fayetteville Futures II: Hundreds join civic initiative

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By Andrew Barksdale

By this time next year, organizers hope to announce progress on all 30 initiatives that were unveiled Saturday to help make the Fayetteville area a safer, cleaner, smarter and healthier place to live and work.

The Greater Fayetteville Futures II initiatives touch on almost every aspect of life and call upon a veritable army of volunteers — call them citizen soldiers in this military town — to work on 30 project teams during the next year.

Organizers started with a big kickoff Saturday. An estimated 500 people — or twice as many as expected — came to the Crown Center complex to learn more about the initiatives and sign up for project teams.

The audience saw a video of successes this past decade to unify economic development efforts, improve the area's image and tap more military contracting jobs. Those efforts began about eight years ago as the first Greater Fayetteville Futures plan.

Driving the latest plan is base realignment and closure. That process, already under way, is expected to bring thousands of additional soldiers, their family members and civilian Department of Defense workers to Fort Bragg by 2011.

Col. Dave Fox, garrison commander of Fort Bragg, welcomed the initiatives to help the thousands of military families who live around Fort Bragg. He said when the post was first developed early last century, it was far from any town. It had to be self-sustaining.

"We have to work together," he said. "We can no longer go at this alone."

Cumberland County Commissioner Jimmy Keefe told the audience he had another definition for BRAC.

"To me, BRAC means 'Be Ready as A Community,' and that's what we need to be doing," Keefe said.

Audience members then got busy. They broke into smaller sessions spread out over the concrete floor of the Crown Expo Center.

Ten sessions, each based on the effort's broad goals for improving the community, took place simultaneously. There, two or three initiatives for each goal were explained. People attended two sessions of their choice. Trained facilitators guided both 40-minute sessions.

In the session on improving safety and security, Fayetteville Police Chief Tom Bergamine and Sheriff Moose Butler joined about 25 others. The goal's three initiatives are improving the emergency communications system, establishing a working group to address at-risk youth, and forming a judicial and law-enforcement team that will target specific crimes.

The facilitator started with Bergamine, who said community involvement would be needed to achieve those initiatives.

"Absolutely No. 1," the chief said. "It takes a community at the grassroots level."

The police chief, in response to rising crime rates, is scheduled to present a comprehensive, long-term crime-reduction strategy to the City Council on April 6.

Ronnie Mitchell, a defense lawyer attending the session, said the community lacks jail space and a single source for resources to help troubled teens before they turn to crime.

Butler said most of what was being discussed came down to money, which is in short supply.

"We can sit here with these suggestions and these ideas about new services, but when you go before the commissioners, it's all about dollars," he said.

Renee Wilson, a community watch coordinator for the Shenandoah neighborhood off Bingham Drive, offered another way. She said many kids who get into trouble just need a parent to talk to or something positive to do.

"A lot of the crime would be decreased because they will feel the love from their family," she said.

Wilson has a 16-year-old daughter. She brought her two smaller children — one is 11 and the other is a year old — with her to Saturday's meeting.

Other sessions Saturday espoused ways to improve the public schools and higher education in Cumberland County, and develop more greenways and construction that saves energy.

Another session, which got a boost in attendance from city and county employees, focused on expanding water, sewer and solid waste services; developing a affordable housing program; and improving the city's bus service.

Several people, including Jodi Hajosy, offered up suggestions for all three initiatives. She said gated neighborhoods and far-flung subdivisions are hardly her ideas for a good community.

"We live in Haymount," she said. "Our kids go to the public schools. We have a porch, and we're outside."

Wendy Michener, who is involved with several anti-war groups in town, said her definition of a better bus system is one in which children from white, middle-class families feel safe riding. Her comments, which were left unchallenged by the group, touched on a long-held stigma that the bus system is primarily for the working poor — a view city officials hope to change as they pour more money into it and broaden its service and appeal.

Lexi Hasapis, who owns three restaurants across the county, said many of her employees don't have cars. They work until 9 or 10 at night, even though the buses stop running at 7 p.m.

“We want to create jobs, and we need to get our employees to work,” she said.

Several other suggestions covering the 10 broad topics also were made during the sessions. Saturday's kickoff meeting ended on time just before noon, but for the volunteers involved, the work has just begun.

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