

Town Meeting participants **PRIORITIZE** action steps

Participants in the 2010 “We the People” AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting® recently reconvened to review and prioritize the recommendations that came forth from the assembly. Approximately 300 people devoted a full Saturday in October at the Sportscenter to examine community challenges in economic development and education.

Six priority goals were identified during the town meeting:

1. **Educate for the real world**
2. **Create a business friendly environment**
3. **Promote green industries**
4. **Improve educational attainment**
5. **Attract and retain the best teachers**
6. **Make quality preschool available to all children**

“We the People” Town Meeting participants also developed community strategies to reach these goals and dozens of other ideas were generated that may have merit even though they were not ranked as high as the priorities.

Energize rather than duplicate

During the follow-up meeting, there was a general consensus that the focus should be on energizing existing organizations and fostering collaboration rather than establishing new groups.

The “We the People” Leadership Council is well-suited to track progress, encourage action and acknowledge successes – but it will take responsive community leaders, governmental bodies, public and private agencies, advocates and others to implement these recommendations.

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EDUCATION

GOAL: EDUCATE FOR THE REAL WORLD



Next Steps:

- **Promote, support efforts to establish a community-wide scholarship program.**

The Citizens Committee on Education has been researching options for funding scholarships to lift the minimum community education expectations to the associate degree level. A “round-up” of utility bills through a check-off system is being studied.

Implementation could be led by:

Citizens Committee on Education
Regional Alliance for Education
Owensboro Municipal Utilities
Kenergy

- **Advocate for an expansion of Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES) funds for all students.**

A state government program, KEES scholarships are awarded for postsecondary education based on grade point averages – that is, the better the grades, the greater the scholarship. An expanded KEES program would encourage students at every level to continue their education.

Implementation could be led by:

State legislators
Local colleges and universities

- **Promote local career opportunities.**

There are exciting, rewarding career opportunities in our community – from health care to biotechnology, robotics to the arts, food manufacturing to finance. We need to tailor curriculum to local employer needs and promote these opportunities.

Implementation could be led by:

Workforce development agencies
Business community
Education curriculum specialists

GOAL: IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Next steps:

- **Expand career days and career fairs at schools.**

Students will be more likely to continue their education upon learning from adults about their career experiences: opportunities for advancement, skills and education required, compensation, work atmosphere and more.

Implementation could be led by:

School guidance counselors
Prospective sponsors
Representatives of various professions

- **Promote Individual Learning Plans (ILP).**

By designing coursework with student’s unique interests and skills, they will be more likely to excel and continue their education.

Implementation could be led by:

School guidance councils
Site-based councils
Parent-Teacher Organizations
Family Resource Centers

GOAL: ATTRACT AND RETAIN THE BEST TEACHERS



Next Steps:

- **Make teacher recruitment a community challenge and priority.**

Community organizations can bring attention to the teaching profession by saluting outstanding teachers. We can encourage top students to go into teaching and offer scholarships as an incentive.

Implementation could be led by:

Citizens Committee on Education
Chamber of Commerce
Civic/service organizations
Foundations

GOAL: MAKE QUALITY PRESCHOOL AVAILABLE TO ALL CHILDREN

Next Steps:

- **Promote the importance of quality preschool to all parents.**

Regardless of their socio-economic status, all children need quality preschool. We can challenge our community to embrace the highest standards at preschool facilities.

Implementation could be led by:

Preschool providers (private, Head Start, etc.)
Advertising/communications specialists
Social service agencies
Pediatricians

- **Parents must be involved in education.**

We can also send the message that parents need to be involved, starting in early childhood education. Many may need coaching.



Implementation could be led by:

Citizens Committee on Education
Chamber of Commerce
Civic/service organizations
Foundations
Youth service agencies
Churches
Neighborhood Alliances

JOBS/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

GOAL: CREATE A BUSINESS FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT



Next Steps:

- **Re-establish a Business Roundtable.**

Create and sustain a mechanism that facilitates communication and collaboration among CEO's, plant managers, store managers, small business owners, economic development specialists, college presidents, business-economics instructors, planners, environmentalists and others.

Implementation could be led by:

Chamber of Commerce
Economic Development Corporation
Colleges and universities

- **Increase support for economic development.**

The Greater Owensboro Economic Development Commission (EDC) needs resources and staff comparable to competitor communities. Private support, in particular, falls below benchmark communities.

Implementation could be led by:

EDC Board of Directors
Fundraising task force
Fundraising consultant

- **Streamline information and services.**

A website that combines or provides links to the Chamber of Commerce, EDC, Green River Area Development District, Owensboro Metropolitan Planning Commission, Downtown Development Corporation and more would be a practical resource for business prospects, developers, homebuilders and property owners navigating the permitting process.

Implementation could be led by:
Information Technology task force

GOAL: PROMOTE GREEN INDUSTRIES

Next Steps:

- **Ensure that Owensboro-Daviess County is a well-planned community.**

A business-friendly environment does not minimize the need for progressive planning and zoning. Effective communication can overcome adversarial tension, leading to appropriate land uses, safer vehicular patterns, bike and walking paths, more efficient investments of public facilities and services, a more attractive and distinctive community.

Implementation could be led by:
Owensboro Metropolitan Planning Commission
PRIDE
Citizens for Good Government

- **Establish a Smart Growth Committee.**

A blue ribbon committee of knowledgeable members to track and assess incentives for business and industry, environmental concerns and more. Recommended in the Neal Peirce Report of 1991, this committee could also track the "Green Cities – Green Counties" initiative of local governments.

Implementation could be led by:
Environmental Impact Council
Chamber of Commerce
Economic Development Corporation
Sierra Club
DC Sweep

- **Develop a green building demonstration project.**

Lift interest in green technology to demonstrate cutting-edge advances for homebuilders, developers and property owners. The project could involve partnerships with educational institutions, environmental groups and more. It could be a school, public building, an industry – a project that will be the first of many.

Implementation could be led by:
Ursuline Sisters of Mt. St. Joseph
Environmental Impact Council
Daviess County Public Schools
Events Center – architects, advisory committee
Owensboro Municipal Utilities
Kenergy

- **Expand recycling.**

Owensboro-Daviess County currently recycles three percent of its potential. Many citizens think it is time for curbside service. (Expanded recycling was the top priority of the 2007 "We the People" Town Meeting.)

Implementation could be led by:
Environmental Impact Council
Local recycling businesses
Sierra Club



- **Organize or support a green technology conference.**

To build community awareness, highlight emerging technologies and case studies. Colleges and universities would be natural partners. (Brescia University has already held such an event.)

Implementation could be led by:
Environmental Impact Council
Foundations
Civic/service organizations
Churches



Downtown Owensboro's Proposed

EVENTS/CONVENTION CENTER

Surely to be one of our community's most important public buildings

You are invited to observe the presentation and engage in dialogue with the project architects.

Tuesday, February 22, 2011 • 5:30 p.m.

RiverPark Center • Jody Berry Cabaret Theatre

You may be interested in...

- The appearance of the center (exterior, interior): size, scale, materials, etc.
- The kinds of events the design will be able to accommodate
- The center's relationship to downtown and the riverfront
- The center's relationship with the proposed hotel (and future hotels)
- The center's relationship with the Bluegrass Music Center concept
- Maintaining public access to the river
- The center's architectural compatibility with what is and what could be around it
- Cost estimates for the building, equipment, furnishings, consultants, etc.
- Cost controls
- Timeline
- Other options that were considered
- Other questions or concerns you may have

All are welcome!

A special invitation to:

- Participants in the 2007 "We the People" AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting (who challenged our community to "transform" our downtown)
- Participants in the 2010 "We the People" Town Meeting
- We are Downtown
- Region of Opportunity Team
- PRIDE
- Preservation Alliance
- Tourism officials and business owners
- Others

This public meeting is hosted by:
City of Owensboro



Will Owensboro seize urban opportunities?

In his Feb. 6, 2011 article posted on Citiwire.net, Edward McMahon, senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute, paints a grim picture for commercial strips, malls and big box stores that have characterized community development for more than 50 years.

“The era of strip development is coming to an end. Evolving consumer behavior, changing demographics, high priced gasoline, internet shopping – are all pointing to a new paradigm for commercial development.”

Retail space has grown five to six times faster than retail sales. Consequently, strip centers across the country are littered with more than a billion square feet of vacant space. As many as 400 big box stores sit vacant. This has not been as apparent in Owensboro, yet there are some notable examples: Goody's, Service Merchandise and vacancies in Towne Square Mall.

McMahon says that retailers are moving back to urban areas. Even Wal-Mart, the dominant retailer that has always appeared indifferent to the urban core, is looking at new layouts, designs and parking schemes to fit into urban environments – including a model in which Wal-Mart occupies 80,000 square feet on the first floor of a five-story mixed use facility with 300 apartments and space for other small retail shops.

“Most analysts agree that urban neighborhoods are the new frontier for retail: the one place left with more spending power than stores to spend it in,” McMahon said. In Owensboro, however, we seem to be diluting the compactness of our city and the spending power that accompanies it.

While we salute and celebrate major employers who choose to do business here – wherever they locate – imagine the downtown retailers and restaurants that could be supported if U.S. Bank Home Mortgage, Southern Star Central Gas Pipeline, Atmos Energy and others could have found a way to build or expand downtown. Moreover, in Owensboro, we are even seeing public buildings move from downtown: Owensboro Municipal Utilities, Social Security and state office buildings. And we missed out on a transforming urban redevelopment opportunity when Owensboro Medical Health System announced it was moving the hospital to a rural site.

Once a source of excitement, strip centers and malls increasingly bring forth complaints about traffic congestion, sign clutter, homog-

enous franchises, and an environment designed more for cars than people. Shopping centers are not cool and popular places to hang out, particularly among the GenY generation.

That is not to say that downtown Owensboro has reached that level of appeal or that it will once the riverfront park is complete and there is a new hotel and convention center. Downtown will need a concentration of retail, food and drink gathering places, live music and the arts, street life, walkability and spontaneity – mixing workers, visitors and residents.

McMahon sees other challenges for commercial strip developers. National unemployment may linger at high levels. Retailers will put an end to unlimited credit. Consumers will be more frugal. “What's more, strip centers without anchors (like grocery stores) and Class B malls are virtually unfinanceable.”

Where will retail fit into the new world of e-commerce, social media and mobile phones? Netflix and streaming video have essentially led to the demise of video and music stores. E-readers may mean the end or downsizing of bookstores.

McMahon envisions hybrid shopping centers and malls that look more like traditional main streets. Given the significant amount of vacant and underdeveloped land contiguous to Owensboro's downtown along the river, does this create unique opportunities for a mixed use urban village?

And even as we develop downtown, it is not in our community's interest to see failing strip centers and vacant big box stores. But perhaps we don't have to look like every other suburb. Perhaps we can set higher standards of planning and design: underground utilities, attractive lighting, tree-lined streets, landscaped medians, subdued signs, safe pedestrian and bicycle access, interesting and attractive architecture.

And even as we look at ways to enhance the quality of suburban development that is inevitable, should we provide incentives for suburban development? Downtown redevelopment is expensive (e.g., a \$30 million events center), but so is suburban development (e.g. plans to widen Southtown Boulevard and Highway 54 are estimated at \$44 million), and it leads to the need for expanded police and fire protection, drainage, schools, parks and more.

The new health care reform law:

What will it mean to Owensboro-Daviess County? A cost-benefit analysis.



The federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Health Care Reform) was signed into law on March 23, 2010. Health Care Reform is a continuing source of heated debate and attempts to repeal or delay its implementation.

There appears to be widespread agreement that our current health care delivery system is unsustainable. Yet, efforts to address the problems reveal striking philosophical disagreements over how to go about addressing the problems: the role of government in health care; the right of everyone to affordable care; impact on government debts and deficits; the authority of doctors, drug and insurance companies; the need to curb skyrocketing costs; and much more.

If Health Care Reform remains in place, what will the law mean to residents of Owensboro-Daviess County? What are the costs? What are the benefits?

Costs & Obligations

What will the Health Care Reform law impose on various constituencies?

- Individuals will be required to have health insurance by 2014 or pay an annual penalty of \$695 or 2.5 percent of income (whichever is greater).
- Small employers (up to 25 employees) will not be required to provide insurance to their employees, but those that choose to do so will receive a tax credit of up to 35 percent of the premium cost (tax credit rises to 50 percent by 2014).
- Larger employers (50 or more employees) that do not offer health coverage will be assessed \$2,000 for each employee.
- Health insurance companies will be required to:
 - ◆ Cover people with pre-existing health conditions.
 - ◆ Spend 80 percent of premiums on medical services ...or give refunds if they don't.
 - ◆ Eliminate higher premiums based on health status or gender.
 - ◆ Cap out-of-pocket costs paid by those with insurance.
 - ◆ Stop cancellations of health coverage (unless there is fraud or misrepresentation).
 - ◆ Allow children to be covered through their parents health plan until age 26 (without being a student).
- State governments will be required to:
 - ◆ Expand Medicaid to people with incomes up to 133 percent of the poverty level (\$29,326 per year for a family of four).
Note: The federal government will absorb 100 percent of the state's expense through 2017, 94 percent in 2018, 93 percent in 2019 and 90 percent in 2020.
 - ◆ Establish health insurance exchanges to sell coverage to individuals and small businesses.

Benefits

Who will be helped under the Health Care Reform law?

- More than 14,000 uninsured residents of Owensboro-Daviess County* will receive health care through 1) an expanded Medicaid program or 2) government subsidies of private insurance plans through insurance agents, exchanges and income-based tax credits.
* More than 11,000 (80 percent) of these 14,000 Owensboro-Daviess Countians are employed. Many work in part-time jobs that don't provide health insurance.
- Nearly 21,000 Owensboro-Daviess County residents with pre-existing conditions will no longer be denied coverage. Insurance companies will be prohibited from cancelling coverage when their customers get sick or imposing caps on coverage.
- Women will not be charged more than men for the same health insurance coverage.
- Nearly 3,000 Owensboro-Daviess County Medicare beneficiaries will regain their lost prescription drug benefit (the "donut hole"). Their Medicare coverage will also be expanded to provide free coverage for preventive services without a copayment and drug discounts.
- Nearly 400 young adults (up to age 26) in Owensboro-Daviess County will now be able to stay on their parents' insurance policy.
- 1,400 Owensboro-Daviess Countians who are not yet eligible for Medicare will be eligible for an early retiree health insurance program.
- Nearly 5,000 Owensboro-Daviess County families with incomes up to \$88,000 (for a family of four) will receive tax credits to buy coverage through the new health care exchanges.
- Nearly 1,200 small businesses in Owensboro-Daviess County will qualify for tax credits for employer-paid health premiums.
- Nearly 5,900 more Owensboro-Daviess County residents will qualify for Medicaid.

Special problems of the uninsured

The uninsured are...

- three times more likely not to go to the doctor when they are sick
- twice as likely to skip a test or treatment recommended by a doctor
- twice as likely not to fill a prescription
- three times more likely to have a problem paying a medical bill
- more than twice as likely to be contacted by a collection agency about medical bills*

* More than 60 percent of bankruptcies are due to medical bills – the leading cause of bankruptcies in the U.S.

If Health Care Reform is repealed:

- Approximately 920,000 Kentuckians with pre-existing health conditions could be denied coverage
- Approximately 50,000 small businesses in Kentucky would not receive tax credits for providing coverage to employees
- Approximately 16,000 young Kentucky adults could not be covered on their parents' health plan until age 26
- The "donut hole" in Medicare prescription drug coverage would not be eliminated for more than 100,000 Kentuckians on Medicare
- Approximately 300,000 additional Kentuckians would not be eligible for Medicaid coverage

Alternatives proposed by opponents of the new Health Care Reform law:

- Authorize health insurance companies to sell coverage across state lines
- Reform medical malpractice insurance
- Expand high-risk pools to provide coverage to persons with pre-existing health conditions
- Encourage businesses to pool together to buy coverage
- Enhance health savings accounts

The new Health Care Reform law preserves the current public-private system of employer-based coverage, enhances public programs and private coverage that is already in place.

The changes will occur over ten years to give consumers, employers, health providers and insurers time for implementation.



Sources:

Kentucky Voices for Health (www.kyvoicesforhealth.org)

A nonpartisan coalition that believes the best health care solutions are found when everyone works together to build them.

Public Life Foundation of Owensboro

Estimates of local impact were calculated by PLFO staff as a percentage of the population. For example, assuming that Owensboro-Daviess County is relatively average, if 100,000 Kentuckians are served by Medicare, that would translate to approximately 22,600 in Owensboro-Daviess County (2.26%).

The State Budget/Tax Reform Gridlock:

It's time to listen to the people



"We the People" Town Meeting 2010 photo courtesy Phil Casper

On Jan. 7, Kentucky Senate President David Williams set forth a plan to address tax reform (Senate Bill 1) through a panel of experts whose recommendations would face an up or down vote in the 2012 General Assembly. The proposal apparently is dead on arrival given the partisan gridlock that characterizes the legislature.

There may be legitimate concerns with the bill. Some legislators want an opportunity to help craft the recommendations alongside the experts. Others see it as an abdication of their responsibilities to non-elected citizens. Some claim that it's just more political positioning.

Nonetheless, without comprehensive reform, legislators will continue to move money around, borrow from one fund or another to balance the budget. We will continue to wrestle with an antiquated tax system.

Without additional revenue, legislators will have no choice but to cut more programs and services that are funded traditionally through state government: K-12 education, community colleges, technical schools, universities, nursing home care, health care for poor children, roads, bridges, prisons and more.

If we don't think the current course is wise, responsible or sustainable, and if we don't have confidence in the state legislature, why not try another approach: let's turn to the people – the collective judgment of informed citizens who have engaged in civil, deliberative conversation about the tough choices which now confront our state.

This is not to suggest another poll. Polls have value, but they are snapshots in time only. Respondents may or may not be well-informed. They are not given an opportunity to think about their responses. They cannot benefit from dialogue and deliberation with others.

In order to get the attention of the governor and the legislature, we need to engage the citizenry in a dramatic way. We need more than focus groups, stakeholder meetings or appointed panels. We need to assemble a critical mass of participants – perhaps an unprecedented number of participants. People from all walks of life and all regions of Kentucky.

These could be assemblies in every area development district, half a dozen cities across the state, or one mega-meeting if participants are recruited from every region. They could occur over several days or weeks, or they could be held simultaneously and linked by satellite or webcast.

For example, if the target were 4,000 participants for a statewide town meeting: In Daviess County, we would be expected to recruit 120 participants and our proportionate number by gender, age, race, education, income and residence. A similar outreach effort across the state could attract participants that reflect Kentucky's demographic profile.

To ensure that all participants are well-informed with balanced and reliable material that can be understood by all, representatives of

leading statewide organizations and those with special expertise in state government finance would need to sit across the table and hash out how the options are framed. They would need to sign-off on the language used in the discussion guides to be used during the assembly.

This committee could include representatives of the Kentucky Consensus Forecasting Group, Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, labor organizations, Bluegrass Institute, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and others. Facilitators and communications specialists could guide the process.

Discussion guides would set forth the nature of Kentucky's budget-tax reform challenges, strategic options, pros and cons connected with each option, and potential costs and consequences. Videos could supplement the information in the discussion guides.

Once well-informed with balanced material, hundreds of groups of eight-ten citizens would deliberate over these options. Each table would have a trained facilitator and recorder with a laptop computer to register key points made during the deliberations. This raw data would be sent to a team trained in how to analyze and tally the recurring themes. The leading options would be presented to the full group on large screens in the front of the room. Participants

would then vote on their preferred options with individual keypads, producing instant results.

This would be hard work. These are complex issues. It would involve tough choices and tradeoffs. But the people are up to it.

Moreover, the recommendations would be difficult for public officials to ignore. Whatever the outcomes, we would surely see less gridlock and more common ground on which to move our state ahead.

This form of participatory democracy has been pioneered by *AmericaSpeaks* of Washington, D.C. The Public Life Foundation (through a special grant from Founder John Hager) was the initiating sponsor of two local "21st Century Town Meetings" using this methodology. Last fall, Louisville was one of the sites in an *AmericaSpeaks* national discussion on the federal budget deficit: "Our Budget, Our Economy" – a national discussion among 3,500 Americans across 57 sites nationwide.

Let's trust in the collective wisdom of an informed citizenry. Let's give our lawmakers a better sense of the range of action which the public will support. Let's begin work now on "Kentucky Speaks," an unprecedented statewide town meeting on budget-tax reform, to be held this fall prior to the 2012 General Assembly.