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## Big development projects highlighted at business development round table

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Charles County Economic Development Department Director Darréll Brown, right center, stands at the podium with redevelopment manager Taylor Yewell as they speak to the audience about ongoing projects during the department's quarterly business roundtable held Tuesday at the Waldorf West Library.

STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNATHON CLINKSCALES

The Charles County Economic Development Department held its quarterly business round table Tuesday at the Waldorf West Library to share ongoing projects, commercial investments and enhancements, execution strategies for attracting target retailers to the county, regional economic

development, contract opportunities with the county government as well as past and future business events and meetings.

More than 50 people in attendance got the inside scoop about what's happening in the county, asked questions and also networked with other members of the business community. Speakers included the department's director, Darrell Brown, Commissioners' President Reuben B. Collins II (D), department redevelopment manager Taylor Yewell, College of Southern Maryland's Michelle Goodwin and Bill Comey, CSM vice president of operations and planning, and Lucretia Freeman-Buster who is the economic development department's chief of business development.

"We use our quarterly business round table to talk about how we're executing on the five-year strategic plan," Brown said after unveiling the department's new backdrop that will be displayed at future trade shows and meetings. "The commissioners made that very clear in terms of their agenda and objectives, which I'm happy to say is very pro-economic development, very pro-community development and very pro-business development."

Within the last eight months, Collins said the county has hosted an international trade seminar to "encourage small businesses to export to Africa." In May, several members from the economic development department joined Collins for a meeting with the ambassador of Mozambique and have also begun separate discussions with the country of Ghana.

In addition, Collins said the department itself has provided updates about the county's development plan as it relates to strategically located opportunity zones, one of which includes the Town of Indian Head and two other locations in Waldorf.

"Waldorf Station, we believe, will be one of the most important economic development projects in this county's history," Collins said. "We also recognized the need to continue to create broadband access for all of our citizens as a priority. We created a broadband task force to develop strategic planning and to identify ways to expand access to all areas of the county. Improving speed and access to the internet will help those who want to work from home and improve successes for all of our businesses."

"Transportation improvements that we've made a priority includes Southern Maryland Rapid Transit," Collins added. "We've continued to establish strong relationships in Annapolis, particularly with our partners in Prince George's County. We're also happy to note that a very important meeting

relating to the Nice Bridge was held last week. The bottom line from that meeting is that it established a funding mechanism, which was somewhat in question, but this particular meeting was certainly in our favor.”

Apart from the Waldorf Station, Yewell noted other major commercial projects that are active include MedStar Shah Medical Group, UPS expansion, Lidl, an Army Reserve training facility, Maryland Airport, Origis Energy as well as the College of Southern Maryland’s Velocity Center in Indian Head and Center for Health Sciences at the Hughesville Regional Campus, which breaks ground on Aug. 27.

“They’re brick-and-mortar projects and they all generate some benefit to the county,” said Yewell, having emphasized that project completion and stabilization will result in a direct commercial investment estimated at \$350 million. “What that means for Charles County is about \$6 million in annually recurring tax revenues and about \$1.6 million in tax surplus. That’s a very significant impact for the county.”

When it comes to attracting major retailers to help induce regional economic development, Yewell said it’s not so easy anymore as times have changed. The recent closings of large department store chains and retailers, such as Sports Authority and Toys “R” Us, have created challenges which forced the county to take a more proactive approach.

One of the things that the economic development department did this year, according to Yewell, was hire a professional services firm called Buxton Consulting to receive assistance with the direct recruitment of national retail chains. Some of the county’s target retailers include Dave and Buster’s, Nordstrom Rack, Whole Foods Market, Trader Joe’s, Elevation Burger, Fleet Feet Sports and Mission BBQ.

“The important thing about retail is you maintain a presence and get to know them so they know who your are,” Yewell said. “The harder you pound on them, the better chance you have of attracting them to your county.”

Buster spoke briefly about what effective execution entails, past international trade events, programs available for local and minority businesses, deployed business loans, and the key things needed to achieve both agriculture business development and regional economic development.

Brown said economic growth can't be achieved without the participation and input from the community.

"Existing businesses are the backbone of any economy," Buster said. "We launched a business retention and expansion program back in March of last year. We are pretty much moving into the last phase [implementation] of the retention program. We visited and randomly selected 60 businesses in different industries [to take our questionnaire]. We got some very positive feedback."

"There were some issues that we couldn't resolve immediately, but we [put together a 21-member] task force to review the questionnaires. We also had our research review meeting late last month," Buster also noted. "So now, we will be having our task force review meeting to come up with maybe three or four high-priority projects that we can implement based on the findings from the surveys. That will take place on Sept. 12 and then we will move into [the implementation stage]. Things are moving along very, very well and I'm very excited about this program."

Collins said the board of commissioners recognize their role as enablers for the department to do its important work and is "absolutely committed" to economic development.

"The economic development department is in a position to make things happen," said Collins, stating that Charles County is on the cusp of being the wealthiest majority African American population in the nation, a bragging right which currently belongs to Prince George's County. "That's

good in a lot of ways but it also creates challenges for the future as we grow, in terms of infrastructure, and providing the amenities that are necessary for those citizens who live here and call Charles County home.”

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