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Advantage program part of Charles' fall economic update

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Commissioner President Reuben B. Collins II (D), left, and Kelly Robertson Slagle, director of the Charles County Economic Development Department, meet with Maryland Secretary of Labor Portia Wu during the economic development department's fall meeting on Tuesday.

DARRYL KINSEY JR./SOUTHERN MARYLAND NEWS

Over \$820,000 in grants have been disbursed by Charles County's Business Growth Advantage Program.

Kelly Robertson-Robertson-Slagle, director of the Charles County Department of Economic Development, gave the update during the department's fall meeting at the Waldorf Jaycees on Tuesday morning.

"It just feels good to be back in person to be able to do face to face networking. ... One of my colleagues said it almost feels like an economic development reunion," Robertson-Robertson-Slagle said.

The event was held in the Waldorf Jaycees for the first time since 2019.

The 2020 event was forced into a virtual-only event due to the COVID-19 pandemic and returned in person in 2021 at the Velocity Center in Indian Head. The 2022 event was held at the College of Southern Maryland La Plata campus.



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Robertson-Slagle updated attendees which included business leaders, county commissioners and mayors Brandon Paulin of Indian Head and Jeannine James of La Plata.

The Business Growth Advantage Program is an eight-week program with up to 15 participants that is designed to help business owners develop strategic business growth plans, teach the keys of operating a successful business and give step-by-step evaluation of business operations and market factors.

According to the economic development website, the program gives owners "the tools and strategies to achieve business goals."

Robertson-Slagle told attendees that eight cohorts with a total of 105 business owners have successfully completed the program since it began in 2022.

"I'm happy to report it continues to be one of economic development's most successful initiatives," Robertson-Slagle said.

Economic development is also continuing to implement changes brought about by a disparity study completed in 2021.

A new small local business enterprise programs division has been established that will perform work connected with legislation addressing the need for more equity in county programs and procurement strategies.

Commissioner President Reuben B. Collins II (D) announced during his opening remarks that the county has maintained its AAA bond rating with Fitch Ratings, S&P Global Ratings and Moody's Investors Service.

Collins said the rating "reflects the fact that we are responsibly managing our resources."

According to Fitch Ratings, a AAA rating is the highest credit quality which denotes the lowest expectation of default risk. AAA ratings are given "only in cases of exceptionally strong capacity for payment of financial commitments," the guide stated.



According to a release by Charles government, the county has held a AAA bond rating for the past seven years.

Maryland Department of Labor Secretary Portia Wu was also in attendance and was one of the opening speakers on Tuesday's program.

Wu told attendees that Maryland was examining the relationship between education and the workforce and said that the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, the state's education reform program, was an opportunity for the state to adjust how they can bring young people along in the economy.

Wu also announced that the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland was the first recipient of the New Start Grant Program.

The grant serves Marylanders transitioning back to the community from incarceration by connecting them to meaningful entrepreneurship development training. About 32 individuals will be supported under the grant that was signed into law by the Maryland New Start Act of 2022.

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