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Development experts discuss strategies for growing county workforce

By Paul Lagasse plagasse@somdnews.com 9 hrs ago



Ruthy Davis of the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland, second from left, and Charles County Public Schools superintendent Kimberly Hill laugh at a humorous anecdote told by College of Southern Maryland President Maureen Murphy during last week's annual economic development fall meeting, as moderator Daraius Irani of Towson University's Regional Economic Studies Institute, left, listens.

STAFF PHOTO BY PAUL LAGASSE

Representatives from Charles County's business, federal and academic sectors gathered at the Greater Waldorf Jaycees Community Center last week to share ideas for capitalizing on the county's workforce to bring new business development to the area as part of the economic development department's annual fall meeting.

In her keynote address, Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing & Regulation Secretary Kelly Schulz said that workforce development is the No. 1 issue she hears about from jurisdictions across the state, and that the state lacks a systematic strategy that extends from grade school through on-the-job training.

“What we have seen is that [the current system is] not living up to the demands of the industries that are out there,” Schulz said.

Schulz said that for growth industries like health care, which is a major employer in Charles County, on-the-job training programs that match high school juniors and seniors with prospective employers have been found to work well in pilot programs in Frederick and Washington counties.

“[Trainees] develop a loyalty and they retain their positions over time,” Schulz said.

Daraius Irani, a vice president and chief economist at Towson University’s Regional Economic Studies Institute, discussed ways that the skills and education of the county’s workforce could be used as an asset to attract companies in the federal contracting, health services, entrepreneurial and retail and research, engineering and computing fields to relocate here.

Irani was involved in preparing RESI’s recent study of Charles County’s workforce, which involved a literature analysis, a nine-month phone survey of commuters and a review of census data.

Nearly 38 percent of Charles County residents who commute outside the county for work have jobs in Washington, D.C., according to the study, while nearly 24 percent work in Prince George’s County.

By far the No. 1 reason cited for working outside of the county was salary and benefits, with nearly half of survey respondents giving that as their main reason.

The study recommends emphasizing residents’ qualifications, the county’s proximity to Washington and military installations, and the low costs of living and doing business as a way to attract federal contractors to relocate.

The county could also provide various incentives to companies that relocate here and employ county residents, Irani said.

Health services firms could likewise be enticed to come to the county through partnerships with the College of Southern Maryland and through the active recruitment of IT firms to build remote consultation services, Siers told the commissioners.

The meeting featured two panel discussions on topics related to workforce development. One, which Irani moderated, discussed the role of education and featured Ruthy Davis, a program director at the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland, Charles County Public Schools Superintendent Kimberly Hill and College of Southern Maryland President Maureen Murphy.

Davis pointed out that right now, there are five generations in today's workforce, and by next year millennials will outnumber baby boomers in the workforce for the first time.

Murphy noted that in such a dynamic and changing environment, the traditional model of moving from school into training and then into the workforce is outmoded.

"This model is totally last century," Murphy said. "We need to look at transferrable skills."

Instead of providing students with career counseling shortly before they graduate, Murphy said that CSM has instituted a program whereby students are paired with counselors when they enter the college.

"In most institutions, career counseling comes too late in the program," Murphy said. "My goal is no more undecideds."

Hill pointed out that peer education about career opportunities is another powerful tool to be employed as the average age of the workforce skews younger.

"Kids don't want to hear it from us," Hill said. "They want to hear it from each other."

The second panel, moderated by Charles County administrator Michael Mallinoff, covered workforce development strategies used by local companies. Participants included Stacey Cook, vice president of human resources at the University of Maryland Charles Regional Medical Center, Christopher Wilhelm of the Naval Surface Warfare Center Indian Head Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technology Division and Virescit Tactical Systems CEO Joshua Burnett.

Wilhelm said that one of Charles County's greatest assets for attracting businesses is the local culture.

"People actually hold doors open for other people, something I'm not used to in New York," Wilhelm said. "Once you come down here and get involved, this is an easy place to recruit to."

Cook said that businesses should pursue partnerships with local government agencies, nonprofits and business networks like the Charles County Chamber of Commerce as a way to improve outreach.

"It's important to let them know that you are there," Cook said. "If you take part in them, you will benefit from them."

Bennett said that his firm operates a little differently from many other businesses in that it begins by identifying a pool of talent and then offers full training regardless of credentials or educational experience.

"If you have an interest, come; we will train you to do cyber," Bennett said, adding that if the company could not place a trainee internally, it would place the trainee with a partner firm instead.

Bennett added that until employers “change the thought paradigm” about turning people away because of insufficient training or credentials, “you’re not going to be able to address the workforce gap.”

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