

County economic development team talks Bryans Road and more

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While it didn't quite start off as they normally do, the county's first quarterly economic development roundtable talk of the year provided a status update on some ongoing initiatives while setting the stage for potential change to come on the western side.

After beginning his portion of the remarks with some discussion on the subject of the latest developments regarding the ongoing situation with the adult nightlife spot X4B, Commissioners' President Reuben B. Collins II (D) lauded the economic development team for the important work he said they are doing to stimulate growth here in Charles County.

“If we’re not expanding our overall economy, then we’re really not doing our jobs in representing this community,” Collins said. “What we’ve seen in the last year is one of the things that we prioritized, and that was requesting that economic development share with us actual measurables that we can look at to determine how our actual economy is actually expanding.”

“The actual development of economic policy is essentially establishing a culture,” he continued. “What I mean by that is any community that has a robust economy and robust economic activity has established a culture for business development, and so on the fundamental level ... they are establishing that culture that will help to nurture business development on all fronts within our community. As we continue to grow as a community, we will continue to see the benefits of the work that’s being done to actually build the type of culture you and I want, that continues to expand our overall economy and create opportunities for development.”

The county’s economic development director, Darréll Brown, gave a status update on the county’s five-year strategic plan for economic development. At the fall meeting, Brown recalled for the crowd, they’d been presented with an updated version of the plan. It was first written in 2016, Brown said, and since then, of the 18 recommendations made, they’ve made active progress toward meeting nine of the goals, like broadband access throughout the county.

Seven of the recommendations have been met, Brown said, and they haven’t quite been able to get two of them off the ground.

A report card on economic indicators for the county shows that some of the challenges facing local investment have also been met between 2015 and 2019, he said.

Of the 22 factors included in the report card, Brown pointed out that when assessed in 2015, 10 of the indicators returned neutral results, while there were six positive and negative indicators apiece.

When re-evaluated in 2019, the report indicated 11 positive signs, five challenge areas and six neutral points. The county’s median household income and average wages went from being a challenge spot to positive assets in that time, Brown pointed out. Broadband internet access, which had scored neutral at the time, moved up to a positive in that time as well.

“We’ve moved the bar on that, and we’re making the county more attractive to investors,” Brown said. “That shows progress, that we are advancing and moving forward. And these are the things site selectors look at ... to make certain determinations as to whether or not

the county is ready for investments. ... What we're doing, as Commissioner Collins mentioned earlier, is creating that environment where businesses want to invest and thereby creating jobs."

Taylor Yewell, the redevelopment manager, also spoke, saying that they've recently been tasked with assessing the "economic dynamics of Bryans Road." It won't be a strategic plan so much, Yewell said, but will lay the groundwork for such a plan for the area. The economic development team, he said, will assess an area of land to include the Maryland Airport, Bryans Road's village center and land previously zoned for residential use. They'll be evaluating that swath of land for items including its current economic and socioeconomic dynamics, the local business community, housing style and market, land use and more, Yewell said.

"We want to understand the supply and demand characteristics that are going to influence future development in and outside of Bryans Road, so we're going to put an emphasis on retail development," he added, noting the struggles the shopping center has faced in trying to fill the vacancy left by Safeway. That would be one such issue that could be helped by their study.

"What that will lead up to is some findings and identification of next steps, and I think one of those next steps will wind up being some sort of sub-area plan for Bryans Road," Yewell said. "This is a fairly major project. We expect to have it substantially complete by the second week of February We hope this analysis and assessment answers a lot of questions a lot of people have about Bryans Road."

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