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The Birmingham Economic Summit

It's the mother of all local economic summits. At least, that's the impression you get talking to City Councilor Steven Hoyt about the Birmingham Economic Summit: Pathways to Economic Synergy 2008 (Nov. 11-13).

What was supposed to be a small community meeting about Birmingham's economic development mushroomed into a huge regional event with more than 67 presenters -- including Alabama's top economic development guru Neal Wade and John Sibley Butler, Ph.D., a national guru of small business and entrepreneurial development. More than two dozen local organizations, businesses, institutions and other partners are involved.

If ever there was a time to work for economic development and revitalization in the Birmingham area, it's now, says Hoyt, Chairman of the Council's Economic Development Committee. Our problem? There's a disconnect among different sectors in the region -- the city and suburbs, the civic community, small business owners, economic development offices and corporations, government, and educational institutions. Everybody has a piece of the economic puzzle, but not everyone is laying their piece on the table for others to see how they fit in.

The conference is about changing that.

"It's a way for us to look at ourselves and improve the economic conditions of Birmingham by working together," Hoyt said. "Economic development is not a Black thing or a White thing. It's a human thing. It's about economics that builds a better Birmingham and helps abate the economic divide in this City."

Topics include: Neighborhood Shopping and Entertainment; Workforce Development; Travel and Tourism as Economic Development; the Importance of Developing Birmingham's Black Businesses; Exploring Transportation Options; Environmental Considerations in Development; Suburban Markets, and much more.

The best part about the summit is that it's FREE and open to the public. If you haven't registered yet, today may be your last chance, so click here to sign up. It's first come, first served. . . .

Nov. 17, 2008



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Growing Birmingham's Economic Base

Just a quick follow up from last week's Birmingham Economic Summit: Pathways to Economic Synergy 2008 (Nov. 11-13). It was well done, both informative and, to me, a bit of a wakeup call.

First, there was so much going on at once, it's impossible to give an overall picture of the event. Topics included Neighborhood Shopping and Entertainment, Workforce Development, the Importance of Developing Birmingham's Black Businesses, Exploring

Transportation Options, Environmental Considerations in Development, Suburban Markets, Community Revitalization, Doing Business Globally, and much more.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to hear Dr. John Sibley Butler, Ph.D., a national guru of small business and entrepreneurial development. However, I understand he admonished Birmingham to do a better job of encouraging, nurturing and growing home-grown talent. Otherwise, he said, those talented folks will take their ideas and the money they create elsewhere. That's particularly true of African American and minority owned businesses, he said.

Butler probably has some good ideas on how to do this, as he also heads the IC2 Institute (Institute for Innovation and Creativity), whose theme is advancing the theory and practice of entrepreneurial wealth creation, and the executive director of the Kelleher Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of Texas at Austin.

If you need money for your great idea, lawyers Greg Curran, head of the Birmingham Venture Club, and James Childs, who works with its Entrepreneurs Accelerator Program, are good places to start. Childs' emphasis was on the development of technology-based industries and the potential business ideas coming out of the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

The wakeup call for me came at the session on Travel and Tourism as Economic Development. I have long believed that Birmingham can be a great tourist destination, but right now, from what I can see, our efforts are too disorganized. While the Greater Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau does a great job of promoting the city, few local business owners -- such as Madison Carter, president of the Five Points West Merchants Association -- understand that they can directly benefit from the Bureau's efforts.

When conventions come to town, convention-goers spend money. How are businesses made aware of these events so they can get a piece of the action? Have their employees been trained to handle out-of-towners so that visitors have a pleasant experience and want to come back?

There is not a coordinated system to get visitors from local hotels to Birmingham's many points of interest, such as Vulcan Park, which is a welcome center for tourists. How can they see our great city if there is no reliable transportation system to get them there? If Birmingham is to become a destination city -- not just a place for conventions and reunions -- it needs a tourism infrastructure that allows for tourists to move around, safely and comfortably.

Alabama's tourism industry generates \$9.3 billion dollars, with the largest amounts spent right here in Jefferson County (largest metro), and also Baldwin County (beaches). Are we effectively spreading those dollars spent across the city and the region? How can we grow Birmingham's tourism industry so that it's even bigger?

There was a lot of good discussion around this topic, so much so that many of us suggested a follow-up summit to begin to answer these questions. Considering the nature of today's serious economic conditions and Birmingham's need for an industry that can generate money without polluting our environment, it seems to me that developing tourism as an economic engine is a no-brainer. I'm sure City Councilor Steven Hoyt, Chairman of the Council's Economic Development Committee, whose office helped spearhead the summit, will get on the case, with the Mayor and the other councilors. . . .