

Borrowing from someone else's playbook

Political, economic and business leaders discussed ways to revitalize the Rochester-area economy during the Eyes on the Future seminar Tuesday.

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Close to 1,000 people packed the Student Life Center at St. John Fisher College on Tuesday morning to hear what business, political and economic leaders from as far away as Texas and Florida had to say about the challenges and opportunities facing upstate New York.

"Today is like developing a playbook," said moderator Brian Taffe, an anchor and reporter for Capital News 9, and host and moderator of "Capital Tonight." "We'll do it by cheating, by looking into someone else's playbook."

On Tuesday morning, the Greater Rochester Enterprise and The Small Business Council of Rochester hosted Eyes on the Future, an economic summit aimed at promoting economic development, job growth and entrepreneurship in the nine-county Rochester area. The panel discussion, moderated by Taffe, included directors of economic development agencies from four of the nation's fastest-growing regions, national corporate site selectors, the mayor of Sugar Land, Texas, and several economic officials from the Rochester area.

"Frankly, the challenges you face ... are just about identical from place to place," said Larry Pelton, president of the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County in Florida. "All are correctable deficiencies," he said.

Panelists pointed to high state taxes, high energy costs and a stagnant population, which threatens to deflate the future job market, among the challenges facing upstate New York as the region moves from a manufacturing-based job market to an entrepreneurial-based market.

When prompted by Taffe, County Executive Maggie

Fast Facts

An interview with leaders from Greater Rochester Enterprise and The Small Business Council of Rochester is available on Eyes on the Future Web site, www.eyesonthefuture.biz.

Brooks pointed out that Monroe County's budget is made up of 79 percent unfunded mandates, which leaves her with control over just 21 percent of the spending plan.

Despite these challenges, the message coming out of Tuesday's economic summit was to focus positively on Rochester's assets and to come up with and follow through on a game plan for the future.

"The stars are in alignment for the future of Monroe County," said Thomas Ioele, past president and co-founder of Employee Relations Associates, a full-service human resource/talent management organization.

Companies looking to relocate don't just look at taxes, he said, they look at the supply, quality and cost of the labor market. Economic leaders need to do smart recruiting, focusing on an array of industries, and putting forth an "effort twice as good as the competition," said Ioele.

"Focus on the assets ...," he said. "Quality of life needs to market Rochester, not just as a good place to do business, but also as a cool place to live."

Ioele said there needs to be a critical mass of businesses to put the area on the radar for business retention and expansion.

Other assets identified by panelists included the large number of higher education institutes in the region, the spirit of philanthropy and entrepreneurship which began with business leaders like George Eastman, as well as

things like affordable housing.

Ron Weisinger, executive director of the Northern Nevada Development Authority in Carson City, Nevada, suggested promoting Rochester's winter weather as an asset. Another resource unique to the area is water, he said.

"Where I come from, water is like platinum," he said. "We'd give our eye teeth for water. That's one of your assets and will be even more important in the future."

"Market your assets aggressively," said Gene DePrez, Americas & Co-Global Leader, PLI-Global Location strategies. DePrez provides strategic and management advisory services to clients involving business location and incentives, global competitiveness and economic development. "Don't get so caught up on the negatives that you don't see the positives here you have to build on."

Calling himself the "salesman of upstate New York," Dennis Mullen, president of Greater Rochester Enterprise, said he can't market the area by himself. He said improving the upstate economy requires leadership from politicians, universities and from the area's business people. He also asked the audience for help.

"You are the eyes and ears in the recruitment and retention of business," he said.

Mullen said he believes there are opportunities for growth in the world of biomedical devices, the food and beverage industry, fuel, energy like bio-fuels and ethanol.

David Wallace, mayor of Sugar Land, Texas, encouraged those in the audience to take the Unshackle Upstate report to heart and to heed some of the recommendations in it. Wallace said understanding and recognizing the issues is the most important things. He also encouraged citizens to use their power of vote and to speak loudly and often to

politicians about reducing taxes in New York.

Another way to be competitive in the global market, said Wallace, is using outsourcing.

"We are in the top one percent of the nation in the services we outsource," he said.

Wallace said his city uses the private sector for things like trash service and tax collection to continue to reduce taxes and stimulate the economy.

Pelton said political and business leaders need to find out what makes the successful companies in the area tick and work with them to improve the business climate.

Ken Schoetz, chief operating officer of the upstate development corporation, said efforts by Gov. Eliot Spitzer and Unshackle Upstate are working to equal out the upstate vs. downstate equation. In New York state, he said there's a tendency for lawmakers to think about the projects in their nearby geographic area and to put projects that require more resources to accomplish at the "bottom of the pile."

"My job is to make sure Upstate issues are at the top of that pile," he said. "I'm here because the Governor recognized that this region needed focus."

Most importantly, Pelton said, Rochester needs to have a vision.

"Don't leave here and go back to your offices and forget ... about the future, the vision," he said. "You have to give your time, your talent and your tithe as business people. You've got to have a vision. You've got the resources. Don't regret not optimizing that 20 years from now."

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