

National Experts Say Improving Quality of Place is Key to Attracting Workers to SW Oklahoma

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Conference attendees at the recent Southwest Oklahoma Impact Coalition's (SOIC) 3rd annual conference were told by workforce experts that oftentimes rural areas are not even on the radar of site location consultants due to perceptions about the quantity and quality of the existing workforce.

Held at Quartz Mountain Resort and Conference Center, the conference's focus was on understanding and addressing the impending workforce crisis due to population losses and the large number of retiring Baby Boomers.

"This is a timely issue as significant numbers of businesses and companies are struggling to find the skilled workforce they need in order to grow and expand in southwest Oklahoma," said SWOSU President Dr. John Hays, SOIC board chair and president.

Conference speakers included Dr. Kenneth E. Poole, CEO, Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness and Executive Director, Council for Community and Economic Research based in Arlington, Virginia; and Tom Stellman, president and CEO of TIP Strategies in Austin, Texas. Both Poole and Stellman are known nationally for their work involving strategic planning for economic development agencies.

Other speakers at the event were Dr. Tom Boyd, O.U. philosophy professor emeritus; Oklahoma Lieutenant Governor Jari Askins; Natalie Shirley, Oklahoma Department of Commerce executive director and Oklahoma Secretary of Commerce and Tourism; Gary Ridley, executive director, Oklahoma Department of Transportation; and Neal McCaleb, former Oklahoma Secretary of Transportation.

Stellman stressed the importance of economic and community development entities focusing on the primary goal of improving the quality of their communities as a means to address worker shortages.

"Increasingly, young workers now find the place they want to live and then find a job – just the reverse of how job decisions were made in the past," Stellman said.

Between 2006 and 2011, the 20-county SOIC region is expected to grow more slowly than Oklahoma and the United States on average. It is predicted that that the region will lose about 5,000 young adults ages 20-24 to net out-migration as these age groups move to urban areas. The region is also expected to add about 8,200 people aged 60 and above over the next five years.

"Given the current demographic trends, southwest Oklahoma will definitely have a declining labor pool therefore creating an even greater sense of urgency for workforce development initiatives by both the public and private sector," Poole said.

Poole also indicated that education providers must understand the critical role of technical skills, life skills and soft skills in preparing their students to enter the workforce, regardless of vocation.

“Educators must teach toward a comprehensive skill set that will help ensure economic prosperity,” said Poole. “In addition to research and learning skills, workers of tomorrow must also have the innovation, civic and social skills that are not traditionally taught at the P-20 level.”

Lt. Governor Jari Askins commended SOIC for undertaking the difficult task of bringing policy makers from the large geographic area together to collaborate on the issues of workforce development and transportation infrastructure.

“Regional approaches to community and economic development must be the priority of both the public and private sector if rural areas are to reverse the trend of population losses,” she said. “The fact that our military installations are expected to grow significantly will have a tremendous benefit to southwest Oklahoma both in terms of population gain and talent recruitment.”

All conference presentations are available online at the Southwest Oklahoma Impact Coalition’s website: www.soiconline.org