

Consultant identifies projects that can provide economic boost for county

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By STEVE WELKER Editor

DOBSON — AngelouEconomics recommends that Surry County adopt several strategies as it recovers from the loss of manufacturing jobs, pursues new employers, strengthens existing businesses and develops a new economy for the 21 st century.

The company also urged Surry County leaders to move ahead swiftly on three projects that can produce an immediate economic boost.

Before presenting her company's comprehensive economic development strategy to nearly 200 residents who gathered at Surry Community College on Wednesday night, AngelouEconomics Vice President Amy Holloway reminded people about three earlier reports leading up to the final CEDS report. In one, the company recommended that Surry County concentrate on developing several industries: transportation equipment, hospitality and tourism, design, value-added agriculture and biotechnology.

Holloway said the economic-development strategies are intended to increase the region's opportunities to attract and grow those target industries as well as other businesses.

In AngelouEconomics' report, the strategies are listed under five main headings: workforce and education, entrepreneurship, quality of life, sites and infrastructure and marketing.

However, Holloway listed some as being most urgent or important for the county's growth and development. They are:

- Invest in strengthening the core of the communities, including educational facilities.
- Concentrate on internal marketing and communications for two years to make people in Surry County aware of the county's assets and to build on existing opportunities before pursuing a program of external marketing.
- Put equal emphasis on attracting and on retaining quality workers; both are important.
- Concentrate on entrepreneurship and small-business growth for economic development in the future.
- Take advantage of the tradition of design in northwest North Carolina; use it to differentiate the area from anywhere else in the United States.
- Encourage local leaders to strongly commit to economic development, even though it's difficult to invest the dollars when budgets are tight.
- Reduce the economic disparity throughout the region. "You must invest in resources to help

individuals at all levels of the economy," Holloway said, especially displaced workers and people who need retraining.

In support of those key strategies, Holloway and her colleagues urged Surry County to work on three priority projects that can trigger economic growth and can be accomplished in as little as one year.

The first is establishing a Yadkin Valley Fine Crafts Center. AngelouEconomics sees crafts and design as huge opportunities for Surry County and, indeed, the entire region. Holloway pointed out that people who are used to working with their hands in textile mills may be more easily trained for professional crafts than for high-tech industries. Even better, there is no national competition for crafts jobs as there is for high-tech and bio-technology businesses, which opens up a unique field of opportunity.

AngelouEconomics sees a public-private-education partnership developing the crafts center that will combine teaching facilities for a professional crafts program run by Surry Community College, studios and galleries and meeting space.

The second priority is to identify and support a single economic-development agency to represent Surry County. AngelouEconomics believes the Surry County Economic Development Partnership should be that agency, because it exists and has a workable structure. However, the consultant also says the Dobson-based partnership is seriously underfunded.

The third priority is to develop the new Surry County Workforce Development Center. Already in the planning stages, the center will occupy part of an existing building just off U.S. 601 in Mount Airy.

Here are other highlights from Holloway's presentation on Wednesday:

- Make K-12 education as strong as possible. "Kids graduating 10 to 12 years from now need to be equipped with resources ... that will help them create their own jobs." She said the county's citizens should reevaluate the school bond issue and the reasons it failed, "but do not give up on raising funds for local schools. Your schools are not going to improve without investment."
- Surry Community College should create a degree program in professional crafts, such as one offered at Haywood Community College in Asheville. Also, the college should consider establishing other artisan programs, such as culinary arts and making musical instruments. Craftmanship is a "core skill in the community," Holloway said. She also noted that no other community college in America offers a luthiers (instrument-making) program. Looking at the area's unique musical heritage, Holloway said, "It's a perfect fit."
- Surry County should have an executive retreat or conference center. Not only would it support one of the target industries (hospitality and tourism), such a center would attract the kinds of people who would vacation in Surry County and later think to themselves, "This would be a wonderful place to do business."
- Educate the local population about entrepreneurialism and small business. Even in the elementary schools, students should be taught some principles of business. The high schools should offer courses in business planning and management. Surry Community College's Small Business Development Center should be expanded to support adults who want to start their own businesses.
- Improve access to capital for small-business development. Start a small-business loan program. Seek out and encourage investors and venturecapital "angels" to support entrepreneurial companies.

- Create a regional Virtual Market to sell northwest North Carolina products nationwide and internationally via the Internet.
- Create targeted small-business incubators. Using existing, unoccupied manufacturing plants, establish centers for similar businesses to work in close proximity to each other, sharing resources and stimulating each other's development.
- Start a Surry County Entrepreneurs Association.
- Expand and enhance the area's recreational opportunities. Holloway said this will do a lot to help attract and retain younger adults who will provide energy and imagination for new business activities. She mentioned hiking and biking trails, improving the Elkin Recreation Center, perhaps even creating a regional sports authority.
- Drive development into the downtown districts, even offering incentives for new businesses to occupy downtown spaces. Lively, active, attractive downtown shopping areas are a hallmark of successful, growing communities, Holloway said.
- Brand local handmade crafts with the "Yadkin Valley" label. It reinforces the connection with the Yadkin Valley wine industry. The combination supports the growing crafts industry and encourages tourism, much like the Sea Grove Potters have established a national reputation.
- Complete known, needed infrastructure improvements. Extend the Surry County/Mount Airy Airport's runway, support the Elkin-Jonesville wastewater treatment project, acquire the remaining 50 percent of the land in the Elkin Corporate Park, etc.
- Stress internal marketing and communications for two years and then roll out a targeted national marketing campaign.
- Think regionally. Don't market Surry County alone. For hospitality and tourism, put together and market three- to five-day vacation packages to sites here and in neighboring counties. For business and industrial development, stress the assets across the region.

The detailed CEDS reports for Surry and seven other area counties and the Northwest North Carolina regional strategy still must be reviewed and endorsed by the 45-member CEDS committee before the reports go to the Economic Development Administration in the U.S. Department of Commerce for final approval.



Ben Silvester/Mid-South News Service Vice President Amy Holloway of AngelouEconomics applauds the Surry County citizens who attended a presentation Wednesday at Surry Community College when the Austin, Texas-based consultant unveiled its recommendations for improving the area's economy.