

Angelou has uphill climb in pitching design to W-S

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WINSTON-SALEM -- It's not often that outside economic development consultants, paid to parachute into a community, evaluate it closely, make viable recommendations and then meet with resistance to their findings -- before a final report is delivered.

But such has been the case in Winston-Salem with the Texas-based consultant Angelos Angelou, hired earlier this year to study the eight-county Sixth Congressional District, including Forsyth and rural counties north, south and west.

His final report, due out Nov. 14, is already of dubious regional value since it omits Guilford County. Angelou concedes as much, saying that's a political reality about which he had no control.

But that's not why he's meeting with resistance. It's not why he made a special presentation to the Winston-Salem Alliance early this week. Or why he called us later to tell us about the meeting.

Rather, Angelou believes the Twin City can best distinguish itself nationally and occupy an uncluttered economic development space by promoting itself as a center of design -- software design, graphic design, textile and furniture design, pharmaceutical design and, above all else, given the presence of the N.C. School of the Arts, set, animation and visual design.

Angelou says that Winston-Salem isn't necessarily further ahead than other cities with similar existing attributes, but no city yet has sought to brand and market itself, intensely, as a design center. Thus, he believes a golden opportunity is waiting.

"Design has not really been embraced by anyone else," he says.

How this conclusion translates into federal funding for the Sixth District -- the real purpose for the study, and the real measuring stick for Angelou's usefulness -- must await next week's presentation.

In the meantime, Angelou obviously realizes some pre-announcement lobbying is in order. Why? Because he has tested the waters with his design idea, and it's met with everything from skepticism to derision.

For the past dozen years, Winston-Salem has focused with laser precision on building its future, and national brand, around biotechnology, life sciences, its medical complex and the planned 180-acre Piedmont Triad Research Park downtown.

Dr. Richard Dean, who heads Wake Forest's medical center and is the driving force behind the biotech initiative, left little doubt this week where he believes Winston-Salem must continue to rivet its attention. His keynote address at the Winston-Salem chamber's annual meeting Tuesday focused solely on the promise of the research park.

Angelou says he believes biotechnology has a prominent role to play in Winston-Salem economic future. But he argues that the competition from places like Silicon Valley, Research Triangle and his hometown of Austin, Texas, among many others, is too great to make a dramatic impact.

"There are way too many players in that space," he says. "It's hard to get your message heard."

There were indications that his presentation to Winston-Salem Alliance members at least cleared up some misconceptions. ("You mean we should build our economy around interior decorating?") Mayor Allen Joines, who attended the meeting, says he felt there was "good substance" to Angelou's ideas.

"I think the report will give us a pretty clear direction for future initiatives," Joines adds, "and some pretty clear recommendations on mid-term and long-term goals."

Still, the biotech train has left the station in Winston-Salem, and with Wake Forest's backing, it has some genuine weight behind it. Angelou will need to be at his persuasive best next week to convince Twin City leaders that design should actually be pulling this train.