

Local Leaders Inspired to Improve Quality of Life for Area Residents

Written by Renee Whitener
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Building on the momentum of a recovering economy was the focus of Blue Ridge Electric Membership Corporation's Community Leaders Council (CLC) session this week featuring economist Dr. Harry Davis, CEO Doug Johnson, and Joe Furman,

director of Watauga County Planning and Inspections and Economic Development. Moderating the discussion was Alan Merck, director of Key Accounts and Economic Development for Blue Ridge Electric.

Blue Ridge Electric formed the CLC to help community leaders join together in a regional, shared vision and effort to improve the quality of life in each local community served by the cooperative. The group gives input, updates and direction on initiatives in education, economic development, health care and other areas to help set the course for improving northwest North Carolina for residents, families and businesses.

Highlights of the meeting include insights by Dr. Harry Davis, North Carolina Bankers Association Professor of Banking and Economist of Appalachian State University: the U.S. economy is showing some positive signs such as the current manufacturing index being at the highest level since 2011 and unemployment rates that are gradually decreasing. Key areas to be addressed for economic improvement efforts include: the labor participation rate, which is at a 30-year low. As a result, fewer workers are producing wealth and this is trend expected to continue. Davis said immigration reform would help address this by legalizing working individuals so that they contribute to the economy by paying social security and income taxes as

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well as purchasing homes and property.

Reducing the massive amount of often unnecessary regulations would also boost the economy, he said, adding that a "Regulation Czar" may be needed at the federal level to at least put a moratorium on any new regulations. More reasonable mortgage lending rules would also aid the economy by helping first-time home buyers.

Davis said other keys to economic improvement include addressing the debt burden of college education; helping contain health care costs by empowering health care providers other than physicians to offer more services so people avoid going to hospitals when possible; and furthering business and technical school partnerships so that people have the technical skills to fill currently available jobs. The energy sector is also providing major job opportunities and will continue to do so, Davis said.

Furman provided the group with an overview of the recent spring summit of the Watauga County Economic Development Commission that the county co-hosted with Appalachian State University. Furman noted the importance of ASU as the main economic driver for Watauga County while also emphasizing the need to explore partnerships and expand opportunities for creating new, local jobs. He said one such partnership could involve ASU alumni bringing business to Watauga County and tapping into the local workforce. Furman also noted that one positive indicator for local economic health is recent growth in single family housing.

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Blue Ridge CEO Doug Johnson told the group that while improvements are being realized locally, its leaders have a burden for making it even better. Housing is a key area for improvement, as well as how to keep young talent employed in local communities. "As leaders, we must be about creating and distributing a great life--so that everyone who wants to stay and have a great life here can do so," he said.

Blue Ridge Electric is member-owned electric cooperative serving some 74,000 members in northwest North Carolina. For more, visit www.BlueRidgeEMC.com .