

WBGU-PBS & BGSU's College of Business Host Economic Development Summit In Advance Of Four Regional Public Forums To Be Held July 22, 23, 28 & 30

The economic headlines are relentless. Layoffs continue. Major corporations are declaring bankruptcy. Unemployment in our region is at an all-time high.

And after nearly two years of recession, the road ahead is still unclear. How will Northwest & West Central Ohio emerge from this crisis?

WBGU-PBS and BGSU's College of Business are looking for answers.

"Economic development is one of the biggest challenges we have ever faced in Northwest and West Central Ohio," said Patrick Fitzgerald, General Manager of WBGU-PBS and Director of Television Services at Bowling Green State University, in his opening remarks during the day long, regional Economic Development Summit held at the public television station on Tuesday, July 7.

Economic development directors, county commissioners and educators from 14 counties in Northwest and West Central Ohio participated.

"The goal of this Economic Development Summit is to bring together people from across the region who typically do not get together on a regular basis," he explained, "to discuss the many opportunities and challenges before us and build consensus in developing a plan of action.

This Economic Development Summit is part of a larger community engagement project coordinated by WBGU-PBS, in partnership with BGSU's College of Business Administration.

Michael Carroll, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Regional Development and an associate professor of economics at BGSU, provided an overview of economic development conditions the region is facing in 2009.

"We are in the 21st month of the worst recession since The Great Depression," Carroll reported, citing recently released employment statistics for Ohio. "The rural counties of Northwest and West Central Ohio are the hardest hit in Ohio.

“The acceleration of the unemployment trend in this region is something we have not seen before. The trends are fairly startling,” Carroll noted, explaining the unemployment data was collected over a five-year period ending in 2008, “so the really bad news is not factored in this data analysis.”

He reported other “Rust Belt” states like Michigan and Indiana are suffering, but noted some urban areas in California are close to reaching depression era levels of 22% unemployment.

“If we continue doing the same things we are doing, we will continue to decline in Northwest and West Central Ohio,” said Carroll. “We are going to have to make some structural changes. We will not have the same economy 5 or 10 years from now. The region needs to figure out what it wants to be 5 or 10 years from now.”

Eric Kurjan, president of Six Disciplines, a business strategy management and execution consulting firm serving businesses in Ohio and Indiana, facilitated the daylong event.

Participants were divided into small groups to discuss and build consensus on the:

- top needs or priorities for economic development in our region;
- key steps, individually, locally and regionally we can take to meet those needs; and
- next steps to be taken on a local and on a regional basis.

A computer software application, provided by Roger Minier, Executive Director of the Northwest Ohio Educational Technology Foundation, enabled the participants to quickly reach consensus in the large group sessions as their individual votes were compiled using wireless voting technology.

Participants determined the region’s major strengths to be transportation/location, educational facilities and work skills. The major weaknesses include the region’s “Rust Belt” image, lack of capital support for businesses, brain drain/quality of life for young graduates, lack of workforce training/higher education and lack of entrepreneurial spirit.

The small-groups then brainstormed action items for the top three voted on regional priorities: image – determining our unique competitive edge, regionally and locally; identifying capital support and educating businesses on those funding sources; and marketing the regional advantages of our location and transportation resources.

Initial action steps formulated by the summit participants include surveying regional and local strengths, developing a regional database of capital/funding sources and quantifiable business success case studies, and developing a regional geographic information system of resources by county.

During the past year, WBGU-PBS staff members have been engaged in conversations with advisory boards and community leaders regarding local and regional community needs. The primary issue rising to the top of the list was economic development.

In May, WBGU-PBS received a grant from the National Center for Media Engagement that provided seed money to facilitate community discussions about this important issue.

The next steps include garnering public comment through four regional public forums (see sidebar), to be held in Defiance, Lima, Findlay and Fostoria. These forums will be broadcast on WBGU-DT4 and be made available for online viewing at [wbgu.org/economic development](http://wbgu.org/economic%20development).

This community engagement project will culminate with a live, two-hour ***NW Ohio Journal Special “Economic Crossroads: Retooling for the Future,”*** to be broadcast from 8 – 10 p.m. on Thursday, August 6.

Information from the Economic Development Summit meeting held in early July and the four regional public forums will be presented. Viewers will have another opportunity to weigh in on the topic with their questions, comments and suggestions.

The goal of WBGU-PBS’ community engagement project is to prioritize a coordinated list of regional economic development needs and develop a plan of action for WBGU-PBS and partners, which can be implemented in the fall of 2009 and beyond.

For more information on this project, go to [wbgu.org/economic development](http://wbgu.org/economic-development) or call the project coordinator, Denise Kisabeth, at 419.372.7378.