

Early County News

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BLAKELY, GEORGIA

Small County, Big Plans

Advancing Early 2012 Plan Is A "Win-Win" For Everyone

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Howard Benson, CEO of National Community Development Services, was the guest speaker at Rotary last week. Benson gave Rotarians and their guests an overview of Early County 2055 activities over the past two years and discussed the goals included in the five-year strategic plan, Advancing Early 2012.

He noted that Charles and Barton Rice got the ball rolling in 2006 with the visioning and planning process funded by the Charles and Catherine Rice Foundation. Since that time, Benson suggested, "You have not only decided you don't like the dismal trend you've seen go on and on, you've now taken aggressive steps to do something about turning things around here in Early County."

He stated that many people haven't yet made the connection between the planning process, the EC2055 plan, the Rice foundation property acquisitions and the economic development initiative ready to be launched. "I challenge each of you to put aside any suspicion and negative attitudes," he said. "We need to come together around a solid strategy which has an excellent chance of succeeding."



Howard Benson, CEO of NCDS, gave an update on the 2012 project at last Thursday's Rotary. From left: County Comm. Chair Richard Ward, Howard Benson, Glynda Nix, Rotary President and Barton Rice, Executive Director, Early County 2055.

The EC 2055 plan called for the redevelopment of physical structures and adoption of progressive land use planning. Benson explained that the Rice Foundation has followed that plan's mandate acquiring buildings and properties to protect or "land bank" for future development. Some "eyesore" structures have been torn down and others, like the "Cineplex" on North Main and the Freezer Locker have been frequently used for meetings and the movie industry.

He explained that the foundation paid for the 2055 plan with intentions of funding a staff and office for two years. At that point it would be up to the community to take on the job of mounting an aggressive economic development strategy.

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— Howard Benson

The community has done that with a task force chaired by Tom Baxley developing Advancing Early 2012, a five-year initiative focused on creating jobs and payrolls and expanding the tax base. "And the foundation has pledged to continue its support of professional staff and overhead expenses," Benson stated.

The plan includes retail expansion, new housing options — including housing for workers who would be constructing the Longleaf Energy plant, removal and demolition of dilapidated structures, creating the East Gateway, conference space in the Alexander Building and objective analysis of redevelopment of the Blakely Theater.

A part of the plan includes contractual agreements with both the city and county with 2012 to provide economic development services. The job creation goal includes a minimum of 100 jobs, growing direct payroll by \$2.5 million and 30 short-term jobs through the production of two movies.

"Our company has been working with communities like yours for over 30 years," he stated. "The plan you have adopted and funded is what works." He stated there are three things now in place that will make the 2012 plan work — a solid strategy, the right leadership and the working capital.

"We need just a few important pledges to take us over the \$3 million goal needed to fully implement the plan," Benson noted. He noted the funds pledged to the 2012 initiative is no slush fund. "Every dollar is committed to a specific line item in the budget which is controlled by those who put up the money."

"This is the plan for Early County to invest in," he stated. "You can make a critical difference just by daring to believe a better Early County is possible."