

Building Communities: Charting a New Path toward Citizen Engagement

By: Gordon Mercer and Gibbs Knotts

From town halls in New England to county commission chambers in Western North Carolina, citizens come together and discuss important political issues. Democracy depends on citizen voices, and successful policy solutions require public support. Academic research even suggests that citizen involvement leads to economic growth, more responsive communities, improved educational systems, crime prevention and better health care systems. More than 400 community leaders, faculty, citizens, and students gathered last fall for an all-day summit titled “Renewing America: Restoring the American Community through Citizen Involvement and Community Engagement.” Organizing sponsors included the Western Carolina Public Policy Institute, the city of Asheville, the Asheville Citizen-Times, Macon County, Haywood County, and the Horowitz Foundation. Speakers included Western Carolina Chancellor John Bardo, Vickey Wade of the WCU Center for Regional Development, WCU political scientist Claudia Bryant, Asheville-Citizen-Times president and publisher Virgil Smith, Asheville Mayor Charles Worley, former Fayetteville City Council member Suzan Cheek, Concord City Manager Brian Hiatt, Director of Community Builders Bill Steiner, and the president of the National Association of Counties, Karen Miller. After listening to experts on the topic of citizen involvement, many of the participants remained for a discussion of future regional needs. Participants also were asked to complete a questionnaire providing ideas for a regional vision for Western North Carolina. A top priority mentioned by participants was the need to create forums to get citizens directly involved in the democratic process. These forums are needed at both the community and regional levels, and they should be initiated by political leaders, civic leaders and citizens alike. Economic development emerged as another important regional priority. Participants stressed the need to create higher paying jobs, but also emphasized a balanced approach to economic development that protected the region’s natural beauty. Preserving open spaces, establishing public greenways, appreciating the unique history of communities, and maintaining the identity of communities were cited as examples of balanced and sustainable growth policies. In addition to attracting new businesses, participants emphasized nurturing current businesses. Specific economic development priorities included tourism, manufacturing, commerce and high-technology jobs. Creating educational systems that will better prepare the region’s residents for future technologies was a top priority, as well. Summit attendees also highlighted environmental concerns. Participants emphasized monitoring air and water quality and stressed land use policies that prioritized beauty, history and the unique characteristics of the region. Leadership will be a key component of community building, and participants called for leaders to work across partisan and ideological divisions toward creative solutions. Participants also prioritized quality-of-life issues. Among the most important suggestions was

that communities maintain an atmosphere that allows and encourages diverse opinions. Other quality-of life-concerns included affordable housing, effective health care systems and adequate public transportation. Several participants stressed the need for smaller buses and more frequent bus routes. Theater programs, restaurants and outdoor activities also were listed as key to the region's quality of life. One participant observed that quality of life involves "balancing social, educational, economic, and environmental issues." We believe that an improved vision will be achieved through stronger political alliances in the region, counties that work across jurisdictional lines, and an increase in grassroots organizing. As an example, Bob Scott, a member of the Franklin town council, is now working with the Western Carolina University Public Policy Institute to organize "Renewing Franklin: Restoring the Community Through Citizen Participation and Civic Engagement." The community summit will be held at 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 13, at the Macon Bank Corporate headquarters.

We encourage other community leaders to follow the example being set by the town of Franklin, and to help build up their communities and create a new path toward citizen engagement.

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