Joint ‘task force’ closer to forming committees

City council, county commission, PDA discuss in small groups

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Americus — A joint meeting of local leaders from the Sumter County Board of Commissioners, the City of Americus, the Americus-Sumter County Payroll Development Authority (PDA) and Archway was held Tuesday in an effort to get members of the community involved in a strategy to boost economic development. Individuals from 30 organizations in the community were invited to the Griffin Bell room of the Rees Park Economic Development Center to participate as a “task force” of sorts in a strategic session to share knowledge and insight pertaining to four areas of the local economy.

The joint committee is in the beginning stages of a process of evaluation to find ways to capitalize on assets that are already in place in the community. The four areas are higher education, health care, tourism and the Cordele Intermodal Center. The approach of seeking internal solutions has been, in part, prompted by the Archway Partnership that has provided the platform by which local leaders have come together on these issues. Archway is a University of Georgia based program that provides higher education resources to assist communities in reaching their goals. Sumter County was selected as the sixth of eight Archway communities in 2008. The Archway Partnership with Sumter County officially began in January 2009, with Barbara Grogan coming on board as the community’s Archway Professional.

It can also be said the recession is in part the cause for new internal explorations for community-wide prosperity. In an introduction to Tuesday’s meeting, Board of Commissioners chairman, Brent Williams, told the large crowd in attendance that the community needs to market its own assets and expecting money from the state or federal resources is not an option. “Please do not hesitate to speak up,” Williams told the crowd. “We can’t do it alone.”

PDA chairman, Paul Hall, told those in attendance that “you are here because you are recognized as being passionate about this community.”

UGA Archway representative Matt Bishop addressed the room, proclaiming “Archway is you.” Bishop explained that economic development is a broad concept that can be accomplished by “aligning institutional goals.”

The meeting format changed with the attendees separating into smaller groups in accordance with
the four identified economic sectors. Everyone was encouraged to discuss their ideas and concerns openly in the group.

Barbara Grogan said Wednesday that one recurring theme that resonated in the smaller discussions was the need for a marketing and communication strategy between organizations in the community.

Wednesday, Brent Williams said that he felt that meeting was productive, saying that he thinks that there were “people who left with good information they otherwise would not have had — there were many knowledgeable people there and very good questions being asked.”

Williams commented on the participation of additional individuals from the community, saying that “when we talk about selling our community, we need to get everyone involved.”

Wednesday, David Garriga, the PDA’s executive director, expressed his opinion that the meeting went well. “We are trying to develop a vision and improve the community in a way we have not done before.”

Garriga said he participated in the smaller facilitated discussion dedicated to the inland port or Intermodal Center. “The discussion centered on how Sumter County could best benefit from the inland port,” Garriga said. “We are getting as much new information as we can.”