

Not competitors, but allies' - Summit sought to unite Central Kentucky

[Central Kentucky News Journal](#)

Feb 5, 2003

If regionalism is the key, then the 19-county Heartland of Kentucky is ready to open the door to the future.

Planning for the future is what Monday's Summit on the Future of Kentucky's Heartland was all about.

The Summit, held at Camp Kentahten on Green River Lake, featured key officials at the local, state and federal levels who offered their advice on how the communities can cooperate and achieve more by working together.

Mayors, judge/executives, city council members, magistrates and other officials from the 19 communities were invited to the Summit.

Congressman Ed Whitfield, who is serving his fifth term in Washington, said communities must compete aggressively for business - or they won't be successful.

"We can sit back and wait for others to do something or we can step up and take a leading role."

John Chowning, director of the Kentucky Heartland Institute for Public Policy at Campbellsville University, is one of those who is willing to take that step.

Chowning said he and others like Team Taylor County Director Kevin Sheilley have identified five areas on which a Heartland task force must concentrate - transportation, tourism, economic development, education and agriculture.

What officials consider as Kentucky's "Heartland" consists of the following 19 counties: Taylor, Green, Adair, Marion, Washington, Nelson, Hardin, Clinton, Casey, Cumberland, LaRue, Russell, Metcalfe, Barren, Hart, Boyle, Monroe, Spencer and Mercer.

A Heartland Parkway, which would run from the Bluegrass Parkway in Washington County, through Marion and Taylor counties to the Louie B. Nunn Parkway in Adair County, is being studied. Officials want to see such a four-lane highway on the fast track.

Chowning said the project was a suggestion of Congressman Ron Lewis and would help to "connect" rural communities to the larger cities.

"Mobility - making connections - is essential for our society," James Codell, secretary of the state Cabinet for Transportation, told those gathered for the Summit.

The problem, he said, is that Kentucky's road fund has not kept pace with the rest of the nation. Kentucky has the 47th lowest gas tax in the U.S. and is one of only three states that haven't increased its tax in the last 15 years.

With \$50 billion in construction projects needed today, there is only \$2 billion available.

"We're not in a position to fund a Heartland Parkway in the near future," Codell said.

However, Bob Babbage, who has served terms as state auditor and secretary of state, said that "nothing is impossible."

Every third person in the Campbellsville area faced economic crisis just a few years ago when Fruit of the Loom left. Officials, however, didn't give up and have worked hard to improve the development of the area.

Ann Latta, secretary of the Cabinet for Tourism Development, encouraged the communities involved in the Heartland to join together.

Latta said the 19 counties combined for \$613.5 million in tourism dollars. She suggested that the task force gather as many partners as it can and catalog the area's assets.

"Packaging and promotion are important."

Sheila Kuczko, executive director of the Southern and Eastern Kentucky Tourism Association, said her organization was created in 1987 to promote, expand, develop and market the existing and potential tourism industry.

The association serves 42 counties which are divided into eight corridors teams and has established a regional tourism guide as well as two Web sites.

Economic development is an important part of developing a Heartland task force.

"We need to remember that commerce does not begin and end at the county line," said J.R. Wilhite, commissioner of the Cabinet for Economic Development.

The communities in the Heartland are "not competitors, but allies," he added.

Wilhite said the 19-county Heartland area has a population of 412,000 and provide \$10 billion of the state's gross domestic product. Of the 19 counties, he said, 18 have available sites, 10 have staffed economic development offices and nine have a link to the Cabinet's Web site.

When someone travels to a community, Wilhite said, it's important to remember that, to get there, they first traveled through another community.

Hilda Legg, administrator of the USDA's Rural Utility Service, said it's important for communities to accept responsibility for promoting themselves.

"You are the place it must all begin, because you are the place it will end," Legg said.

With 65 million rural Americans, she said, many good things are happening. But it takes what Legg calls "The Three Cs" - commitment, cooperation and communication.

It's important, she added, that rural Americans not settle for less than their urban counterparts.

Lewis said he would do all that he could to help with the Heartland project.

"It won't benefit us, but it will certainly benefit our kids and our grandkids."

Chowning said it's not important that everyone involved in the Heartland project agree on everything.

"We don't always have to agree to have unity ... just as long as we have the same big picture in common."

Representatives from four area colleges spoke on education, and agriculture was also identified as a key topic for the task force to develop.

Chowning asked officials from each of the counties to appoint a member to the task force. A meeting of the new task force is planned for later this month.

The Summit was sponsored by Team Taylor County, Kentucky Heartland Institute for Public Policy, Lebanon/Marion County Office of Economic Development, state Cabinet for Economic Development, Kentucky League of Cities and Kentucky Association of Counties.

The 19 counties in the "Heartland of Kentucky" are: Taylor, Green, Adair, Marion, Washington, Nelson, Hardin, Clinton, Casey, Cumberland, LaRue, Russell, Metcalfe, Barren, Hart, Boyle, Monroe, Spencer, and Mercer.