

Region poised for an exciting future

By David Sullens
Publisher

If anyone attending last week's "State of the Region" meeting sponsored by North Carolina's Northeast Commission in Williamston left without a lot of enthusiasm and excitement about the future of our part of the state, they just simply were not paying attention.

Opening the meeting, Dr. Willie Gilchrist, chancellor of Elizabeth City State University, said of the region, "We are better than we think we are." And then he proved that point with a whole bucket full of facts:

- The region grew at a rate of 1.2 percent between 2000 and 2008 with a population of 336,470 in 2000 and 364,401 in 2008;
- The percentage of those 25 years of age and older with a bachelors degree or higher increased from 11 to 15 percent between 1990 and 2000;
- The percentage of those in the region with a high school diploma during that same period rose from 62 to 72 percent;
- Per capita income in the region grew by more than the statewide average of 19.2 percent;
- While statewide per capita income grew 4.9 percent between 2000 and 2007, in the region, growth at the county level ranged from 18 to 23 percent;
- Both the region's labor force and its employment rate are growing; and
- Between 2000 and 2007, bank deposits in the region grew from \$3.3 billion to \$4.9 billion.

But what I, as a newcomer to the region, found most exciting about the meeting were the things going on in the region that have such tremendous promise for the future.

Bill Williams, director of aviation for the North Carolina Department of Commerce, said the next major manufacturing opportunity in the nation will be building composite aircraft "with all kinds of advanced avionics." And, he said, North Carolina and the Northeast are well positioned for that.

"North Carolina," he said, "could be the world leader in the field the way Seattle and Wichita are now."

Simon Cobb, chief operating officer for NCCAR in Northampton County, briefed the group on the creation of that facility and the opportunities it offers.

"The automotive landscape is changing," Cobb said, "and this facility will help determine the future of the cars we drive."

Norris Tolson, chairman of the Biotechnology Center, said the next generation of advancement in agriculture "will come from a microscope, from a laboratory." He said agriculture in the future "will produce crops that will power our cars, provide additional nutrition and attack disease or ward it off in our bodies."

And as that materializes, he said the region "is doing it right. You've brought the right people together."

Currently, he said, North Carolina imports 6 billion gallons of liquid fuel annually. "We can develop homegrown fuel to replace much of that," he said. "We can do that by developing crops we haven't even heard of today. The opportunity is unparalleled by anything else in North Carolina."

Aerospace, automotive, biotechnology and biopharmacology...

Those are all things of science fiction, only none of them are fiction anymore. They are real and the region you and I call home is positioned at the leading edge of those and more.

That's pretty exciting stuff.

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