

Forum sparks ideas to boost economy

By Vic Kolenc / El Paso Times

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Beatriz Lucero, director of economic development for Workforce Solutions Upper Rio Grande, speaks to her brainstorming group during the Community Jobs Forum held Tuesday at the Norm Haley Employment Center in Downtown El Paso. Also taking part in the brainstorming session were Diana Nunez, executive assistant to Mayor John Cook, Tom Ingle of the city's Economic Development Department, Raymond Aduato of the El Paso Builders Association, Colleen Burns of the SBA and Cemelli de Aztlan of the Indigenous Culture Institute. (Ruben R. Ramirez / El Paso Times)

EL PASO -- About 75 El Pasoans, including business owners and community leaders, took part in an economic forum Tuesday to give their input on how President Barack Obama's administration could help this area's economy grow.

Ideas at the forum included making El Paso a center for solar and wind energy projects and letting business operators keep their federal payroll taxes for several months to reinvest into their companies.

The El Paso forum is one of many held across the United States in recent weeks as part of a White House initiative to get ideas on how to increase jobs in the United States. Comments from the forums, which will end Thursday, will be compiled by White House staff into a report for Obama.

"This was a good exercise," El Paso Mayor John Cook said after the forum. "We'll get the cream off the top and send it to Washington."

The idea is to get "new ideas and pass them on to the White House so we have national policy reflect local needs," Cook told forum participants before they broke into several groups to answer six questions from the White House.

The questions, in summary, asked what parts of the local economy worked and did not work; what the opportunities and obstacles are for local economic growth; and what issues and ideas the president should consider.

Teresa Gandara, owner of Pencil Cup Office Products, said the forum was "an exceptional gathering" of people from different business sectors. "I'm optimistic the White House will listen," she said.

Her idea is to let businesses keep their payroll taxes for several months so business operators can put that money back into their companies.

"Instead of giving money to the banks, let businesses keep their 941s (federal tax form 941 for payroll taxes)," Gandara said at the forum. "Banks aren't lending out the money."

Inadequate financing for small businesses was one of the obstacles to job creation listed by some of the forum groups. The need for more education to improve El Paso's work force and the need for new industries to keep El Paso's college graduates were recurring themes.

"The problems in El Paso are not a short-term issue. It takes 25 years to grow Ph.Ds. Our problem is brain drain," Paul Maxwell, executive director of the Bi-National Sustainability Lab in Santa Teresa, told his group. "The solution is helping us focus on long-term development of industries like alternative fuels and technology-based businesses."

Sergio Amato, manager of the El Paso office of ResourceMFG, a staffing company for manufacturing plants, told his group that El Paso could become a hub for the country's growing needs for bilingual workers. El Paso's demographics are the future, he said.

Julio Aleman, a social worker, said he'd like to see El Paso focus on tourism prospects.

"Why do people from Mexico have to go to Disneyland when Disneyland could come here?" he asked his group.

Mark Alvarado, neighborhood services coordinator for the city, told his group that El Paso could bring in more tourism if it did a better job of promoting its culture and arts. He also said this area needs "more innovative ways" to move people across the international bridges.

Ana Maria Piña Houde, CEO and founder of Anamarc Educational Institute, told the forum that Obama should do more to make this area "a gateway for our country, and not a threat."

Al Soto, who said he's an entrepreneur, told the forum: "I'd like to ask the president to come to El Paso for a weekend to prove to the U.S. that we are a safe city."

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