

Local News

Anti-poverty group getting organized

Clarke County

By Blake Aued | blake.aued@onlineathens.com | Story updated at 11:09 PM on Sunday, January 22, 2006

Members of a high-powered committee aiming to cut into Athens' 28 percent poverty rate say they're going into their endeavor with open minds.

Partners for a Prosperous Athens meets for the first time today at St. Mary's Hospital, and again Feb. 11 at UGA's Fanning Institute, where they will talk about the group's structure, organization, goals and timetables, vice chairman and business consultant Red Petrovs said.

The real work won't begin until the current committee members form subcommittees and begin researching the causes and symptoms of poverty in Clarke County, Petrovs said. The committee hopes to draw its ideas from the community, rather than dictate policy. Attempts to tackle poverty from the top down have failed in the past, he said.

"We're going to try to use a 'bubble up' approach," he said. "If the idea was to use a top-down approach, we'd have done that already."

Over the coming months, and possibly years, the committee might be faced with the prospect of slaughtering a few sacred cows as groups with opposing interests try to set aside ideological differences to find a solution for a rampant problem.

Committee members say repeatedly that everything is on the table.

For example, one issue that members expect to come up over the course of PPA's work is a so-called "living wage" or "family supportive wage."

"We hope they keep their eyes on the wages corporations and the university (of Georgia) are paying, and the health benefits," said Ray MacNair, a UGA social work professor and member of the Economic Justice Coalition, a group that advocates a living wage. MacNair is not a member of Partners for a Prosperous Athens.

Living wage supporters say the current federal minimum wage of \$5.15 isn't nearly enough to survive, and calculate a person must make \$10.50 an hour plus benefits to live in Athens.

Athens-Clarke Mayor Heidi Davison backed the idea when she announced the poverty initiative earlier this month, saying "Someone who's making \$5.15 an hour can't possibly work their way out of poverty."

But business groups generally oppose laws mandating, or even allowing, a living wage. Georgia chambers of commerce helped pass a law in 2004 that prevents cities and counties, specifically Atlanta, from setting a minimum wage higher than the national one.

The "everything" that is supposed to be on the table even includes a living wage, said Larry McKinney, president of the Athens Area Chamber of Commerce.

"Additional wages can be a good thing," McKinney said. "That's more available revenues for businesses."

The devil would be in the details, though - issues like whether the county would raise taxes to pay for a wage hike for its own employees, or whether the push for a living wage would focus on the private sector, he said.

The group also will likely consider other commonly debated theories to alleviate poverty, such as promoting affordable housing, Davison said.

But the committee isn't nearly far enough along to begin considering specifics.

Davison said she assumes the committee will at some point consider commonly discussed topics like a living wage and affordable housing, but not even the committee's affordable housing expert, Heather Benham of the Athens Land Trust, knows in what form they will be discussed.

"I don't even know yet" what specific ideas will be discussed, Benham said. "Hopefully I'll get to say whatever I want, and bring up whatever issues I think are important."

The land trust is a nonprofit group that lowers the cost of housing by fixing up old houses and selling the buildings while holding the land itself in trust.

Even Davison, who spent a year privately putting together the committee, said she's unsure what direction the initiative will take.

"We, as a group, the conveners, have not talked about any concepts or ideas that we specifically want to bring forward," she said.

That also means no idea is off limits, she said.

"I hope nobody would come in the room ... with the idea that anything is off limits, or throw up a barrier this early in the process," she said.

Monday's meeting is a chance for the group's five masterminds - Davison, McKinney, University of Georgia Director of Community Relations Pat Allen, Clarke County Schools Superintendent Lewis Holloway and Family Connection Director Tim Johnson - to publicly brief members of their organizations on the initiative.

The Feb. 11 meeting will be the first of the full 33-person steering committee.

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