

Metro-York narrows its focus, forges ahead

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A grass-roots effort to help regionalize and bring better educational and workforce opportunities to York County is making progress.

Metro-York has tightened its focus this year to four initiatives that are half of the recommendations the group released in late 2007 for how to improve York County.

Community members, or "champions," have put together plans for tackling the group's stay-in-school initiative, International Baccalaureate charter school proposal, the creation of the county office of workforce development and the regional police department concept.

"Generally speaking, we came to the conclusion that the four we have up and running required a lot of time," said Eric Menzer, chairman of **YorkCounts** and senior vice president at **Wagman Construction Inc.** "We made a strategic decision for now to pursue those four that have active champions, if not until the end, at least to the point where they can stand on their own."

Metro-York is a program of YorkCounts, a nonprofit with a goal of improving the county's quality of life by helping to build alliances, create community partnerships, spotlight issues and facilitate conversations.

The group is tackling issues that impact the ability of employers to attract quality workers and help local governments operate more effectively and efficiently.

The ideas that have been put on hold include engaging in meaningful regional planning, reforming local taxation, studying ideas to modernize York County's government structure and establishing a Metro-York schools consortium, said Dan Fink, communications director at YorkCounts.

One concentration point for Metro-York at the moment is workforce development. The office of workforce development was created within the **York County Economic Development Corp.** in March 2008 with the goal of helping businesses, educators and community leaders collaborate more effectively to address the county's workforce-development and training needs.

Sean London headed the department as the vice president of workforce development for the Economic Development Corp. until he left the office near the end of January. Menzer described London's departure as a stumble in Metro-York's workforce development efforts. The recession also has made the effort a frustrating one, he said.

"We had a great start on that and then a stumble," Menzer said. "It's challenging enough to reach out to hard-to-reach (groups) in good times. It's really hard to reach out to them when the jobs are few and far between."

Darrell Auterson, president and chief executive officer of the Economic Development Corp., said he is pleased with the progress that has been made in that department. London's assistant, Ellie Lamison, has stepped in to fill London's role in his absence, Auterson said. It is likely she will be promoted to take on the position permanently, he said.

Lamison has been helping to form alliances with local organizations that serve and cater to underserved and disadvantaged populations, he said.

The goal of the alliances is to develop ways to reach those underemployed and unemployed individuals, Fink said. As a result of the recession, the project also includes connecting dislocated workers to training and job opportunities, he said.

While some Metro-York initiatives have stalled and others have been slow to progress, Menzer said he is not discouraged.

"If it sounds easy, it's not worth doing," he said. "We're trying to attack the toughest problems. We're trying to get at those core root issues, which we believe in the long run is the only way to ensure economic prosperity and quality of life."

In June, the [York County Community Foundation](#) and the Women's Giving Circle of the York County Community Foundation contributed \$60,000 and \$15,000, respectively, to YorkCounts to support the creation of a regional charter school in York. The funds will allow the group to hire a company to write the charter-school application and to begin searching for potential sites for the school. The project must be approved by the state Department of Education.

The purpose of the school is to address the issue of the concentration of poverty in the city and how it affects the York City School District. Fifty one percent of the school's students would come from the city, while 49 percent of the students would come from the county.

"That clearly has legs and has steam behind it," Menzer said. "Having said that, I think we should also be very, very clear that we have no illusions that starting one IB charter school fulfills the desire to attack the concentration of poverty in the city school district. We do believe that it is a very important first step."

Metro-York also has been moving forward with its stay-in-school initiative. The United Way of York County took the lead in assembling a group to study school programs aimed at keeping kids in school to determine which ones are the most successful. The group is expected to report its findings in August or September, Fink said.

The next big project for Metro-York will be to launch a fundraising campaign to support the program that the stay-in-school group creates from its findings, Menzer said. The initial recommendation included investing \$3 million a year over a 10-year period to support kids who are at risk for dropping out.

Another front the group has progressed on is within the realm of public safety. Representatives from nine municipalities, including York city and surrounding townships and boroughs, began meeting in April to discuss public safety.

The group is expected to commission a study in the fall to provide options for a higher level of public safety within their municipalities. Those options could include consolidating services into a regional police department.

"While to the average person that sounds like the most underwhelming accomplishment, anyone who has worked in this initiative knows that getting representatives from these municipalities together is a big deal," Menzer said. "It took a lot longer than we thought it would. We had a realty check as to just how pain staking this work can be."