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Regional Issues, Assets Addressed at Northeast Oklahoma Economic Summit

Participants in the regional economic summit, "Giving Voice to our Region: Leaders Crossing Borders to Build the Economy and our Communities," are giving high marks to the effort to empower northeast Oklahoma.

The summit was held Nov. 3-4 in Tahlequah at Northeastern State University. It included speakers from private and government sectors, workshops aimed at identifying problems and advantages, a networking breakfast Nov. 3 and a Legislative breakfast Nov. 4 featuring a teleconference with Congressmen Dan Boren and John Sullivan.

Sponsored by NSU, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the Sequoyah-Adair-Cherokee County Empowerment Zone, the summit was the first of its kind in the state. Nearly 350 regional leaders gathered to study possibilities to marshal the economic and political capital of several northeast Oklahoma counties struggling with fiscal issues and poverty.

The seven counties targeted in the summit were Adair, Cherokee, Delaware, Mayes, Muskogee, Sequoyah and Wagoner. Tourism, natural resources, active civic organizations, a diverse workforce, a lower cost of living and access to higher education were identified as top assets for the region.

Anna Knight, Commerce group leader with the Cherokee Nation, said the Nation saw the summit as a significant event and was pleased to offer sponsorship. She said the summit's participants viewed regional collaboration as critical to sustainable development.

"Rural areas face many challenges that metropolitan areas do not in regards to growth," she said. "The seven counties that were the focus of the summit all share common resources and common issues—working together to overcome common challenges just makes sense. Additionally, if we want to level the playing field we must voice our needs as one and support each other."

Bill Langley, Chairman of SACC-EZ, said he was "extremely pleased" with the summit's outcomes.

"From a short-term perspective, I witnessed the right group of people coming together for the purpose of having the right types of conversations to address common goals and objects for the future of our region," he said.

"From a long-term perspective, I feel like we now have a clear and concise roadmap of where this region wants to go and how to get there," he added. "Obviously there are more details, plans and strategies that have to be discussed and developed but this summit provided an excellent start to put those strategies in place."

One issue scrutinized at the summit was the need for cooperation with northwest Arkansas. Langley believes collaboration beyond the Oklahoma-Arkansas border is



Bill Langley, chair of the Sequoyah-Adair-Cherokee Counties Empowerment Zone (SACC-EZ), welcomes participants to the first Regional Summit at Northeastern State University on Tuesday, Nov. 3. "Giving Voice to Our Region" drew almost 350 business and community leaders and government officials to discuss assets and challenges in a seven-county region of northeastern Oklahoma. SACC-EZ and NSU joined the Cherokee Nation in sponsoring the two-day event.



Darin Gray, publisher of the Northwest Arkansas Business Journal, conducts a workshop during the first Regional Summit at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah on Wednesday, Nov. 4. Gray's session addressed collaboration across the border between northeast Oklahoma and northwest Arkansas. "Giving Voice to Our Region" drew almost 350 business and community leaders and government officials to discuss assets and challenges in a seven-county region of northeast Oklahoma.



Dr. Don Betz, president of Northeastern State University, welcomes nearly 350 participants to the first Regional Summit at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah on Tuesday, Nov. 3. Joining Betz are Bill Langley, chair of the Sequoyah-Adair-Cherokee Counties Empowerment Zone, Meredith Frailey, secretary of Cherokee Nation Tribal Council, and Jay

critical to an economic reawakening in the region.

"I personally attended this (northwest Arkansas) session and was very excited about the insight that was provided as well as the open and honest discussions that took place," he said. "I am convinced more than ever that the right time to connect with northwest Arkansas is now."

Langley said the impetus generated by the summit must continue.

"The next step is to keep this momentum and enthusiasm moving forward for the betterment of all our constituents," he said.

For continued information and updates on "Giving Voice to Our Region" visit <http://regionalsummit.nsuok.edu>.

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Hannah, BancFirst executive vice president of financial services and emcee of the two-day event.



Julie Deerinwater, Cherokee Nation Head Start, conducts a workgroup session on healthy living during the first Regional Summit at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah on Tuesday, Nov. 3. Nearly 350 business and community leaders and government officials met to discuss assets and challenges in a seven-county region of northeast Oklahoma during the two-day event, "Giving Voice to Our Region."