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State leaders seek new ways to create jobs

By Mary Sell • February 10, 2011

There is a lot "new" about bringing new jobs to Alabama. New committees, new policies, new leaders -- including a governor who says job creation is his No. 1 priority -- and new rules on ethics.

And officials say Alabama economic developers have to renew their commitment to work together now more than ever to overcome financial constraints and create jobs in the state.

About 250 economic developers were in Montgomery on Wednesday for the third and final day of the Economic Development Association of Alabama's winter conference.

Businesses have to re-invent themselves and their products to stay competitive and the state must do the same, said Bill Taylor, president of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama.

"You renew yourself every day or you die," he said.

The Economic Development Partnership of Alabama has been charged by Gov. Robert Bentley to lead efforts to grow and retain existing Alabama industries, while at the same time recruiting new ones.

About 70 percent of job growth in Alabama comes from existing businesses.

Last year Alabama recruited fewer than 100 new projects -- employers -- to the state, while a few years ago that number was nearly 600, according to Taylor's presentation.

Taylor said that he and Seth Hammett, the former speaker of the House that Bentley appointed to run the Alabama Development Office, will have to work together, but in defined roles that do not overlap.

Hammett spoke about the state's budget deficit and said his office, with nine people charged with courting economic development projects and 14 support staff members, has eight fewer employees than it did three years ago.

"We've got to find a new way to do business, to

move forward," he said.

Ron Sparks, the newly appointed director of the newly created Alabama Rural Development Office, said that there are economic opportunities in rural Alabama and people need to work together to set priorities for the area, and overcome its challenges -- like a lack of health care and broadband technology.

Thirty-three Alabama counties have double-digit unemployment, said Sparks, the state's former agriculture culture commissioner. Thirty-one of them are rural.

"If we work together, we will see success," he said.

Rep. Barry Mask, R-Wetumpka, chair of the Economic Development and Tourism Committee, formerly the Tourism and Travel Committee, said the committee is an ear in the Legislature for economic developers. It will work with the Alabama Development Office on policies related to economic development.

"We're good at this," he said about bringing jobs to the state.

In other economic recruiting news Wednesday, House Speaker Mike Hubbard announced the formation of the Speaker's Commission on Job Creation, a group of business leaders tasked with identifying opportunities to boost private sector job growth through changes in state laws and policies.

Bentley has charged all his department heads with coming up with a plan to create jobs in the private

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sector.

"Alabama has yet to fully recover economically from the worldwide recession, and many Alabamians are still without work," Hubbard said in a written statement. "We must enact policies that will lift unnecessary burdens off existing businesses, attract new industry and ultimately spur private sector job growth. The best way to do that is to listen to actual job creators, business leaders who best know what it takes to create an environment that is conducive to private sector growth."

New lobbying law

Attendees at the EDAA meeting Wednesday also got an introduction to the amendments to the Alabama ethics law that was passed in December from Tom DeBray of Franklin Resources Group, a Montgomery lobbying firm.

The new law defines a lobbyist as:

- A person who receives compensation or reimbursement from another person, group or entity to lobby.
- A person who lobbies as a regular and usual part of employment, whether or not any compensation in addition to regular salary and benefits is received.
- A consultant to the state, county, or municipal levels of government or their instrumentalities, in any manner employed to influence legislation or regulation, regardless of whether the consultant is paid in whole or part from state, county, municipal or private funds.
- An employee, a paid consultant, or a member of the staff of a lobbyist, whether or not he or she is paid, who regularly communicates with members of a legislative body regarding pending legislation and other matters while the legislative body is in session. The law goes into effect March 17. "On St. Paddy's Day, you may be a lobbyist," DeBray told the group. He said there is confusion about the law and that it contains contradictions, both of which he hopes will be worked out soon. His final advice to economic developers was to check with their attorneys if they have questions about what is and isn't allowed under the new law.

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