

Reeling in the jobs: Pressure's on state's new alliance

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

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For a state like Alabama, job creation doesn't equate to fishing. It's not as simple as baiting a hook, casting into a good spot and reeling in your catch.

It's a multi-layered duty that requires smarts and good fortune to master. Let's trust that the state's new Economic Development Alliance understands that.

Gov. Robert Bentley has assigned this new alliance, whose roster was announced earlier this week, several tasks. One of them should be quite intriguing: The creation of a state economic master plan, which officials say will be the first of its kind in Alabama history.

However, it's clear that the alliance's sole focus is on job creation, a need that affects virtually all of the state's 67 counties. That's certainly the case for Calhoun County — which had a 9.6 jobless rate in May — and its northeast Alabama neighbors.

Bentley has stocked his new economic alliance with a few heavy-hitters, among them Greg Canfield, the new director of the Alabama Development Office, and Bill Taylor, president of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama.

Smartly, he also has included Freida Hill, chancellor of the state's two-year college system, and Malcolm Portera, chancellor of the University of Alabama System. This part can't be stressed strong enough: Without education at the table, any discussion about creating new jobs and retaining current ones is a wasted exercise.

As we said, this isn't a simple issue.

Going at this in a singular way — recruiting industries — has often paid off for this state. The auto industry is a prime example: With its deep incentives packages and low taxes, Alabama is now home to a list of automakers who pay competitive salaries and lure in other jobs through auto suppliers.

But the recession's aftermath means new approaches are needed. This alliance would be wise to hone in on two key points: (a.) how education levels affect a state's ability to create quality jobs, and (b.) recruiting sustainable jobs that are immune to most of the economy's wide swings.

Alabama is a diverse state on many fronts, and we wish Bentley's alliance looked more like the state. We're curious: Who on the alliance will make the Black Belt a priority, or that of low-income regions across the state? And, as we have seen locally with the McClellan Development Authority, boards that include people with expertise specific to a board's role have a much better chance of succeeding.

Perhaps those are quibbles for another time.

From the get-go, a holistic approach is critical for this new alliance. Industries find certain traits sexy: low taxes, good infrastructure, competent political leadership and workers who have the required education and training levels. They are all part of the job-creation puzzle.

The state can't afford for Bentley's alliance to struggle with the pieces to that puzzle.

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