

# PUBLIC LIFE

February 2008 – Volume 5, Issue 1

# Advocate

## “We the People”

Town Meeting underscores need for meaningful public participation in major community decisions

Nov. 10th was a remarkable day in Owensboro. That Saturday, 650 citizens gathered around 67 tables to discuss the issues facing the community. It was an unprecedented expression of citizenship and love of community.

Participants crafted a vision for a 21st century community within the framework of five discussion topics. They listened to people from all walks of life, shared opinions, and discussed options in a spirit of civility.

More than 60 volunteers planned the event over a six-month period, and more than 140 volunteers assisted on the day of the event. To help those who faced obstacles to participation, event organizers provided transportation, child care, translation, signing for the deaf and large print versions of the discussion guide.

Trained facilitators captured comments on laptop computers so the “Theme Team” could analyze and present information on large screens to facilitate voting throughout the day. The voting was tabulated instant-

ly using individual keypads.

Committee members worked extra hard to attract participants that reflected the demographic profile of the community. And we came very close – in age, race, income, employment, and place of residence.

For example: 62 percent of the town meeting participants lived in the city, and 34 percent lived in the county – just a few percentage points off the actual census breakdown.

It was a special day, a day that folks are still talking about. In fact, some people have told us it was like a spiritual experience, a rebirth of their belief in the democratic process, a new model for engaging the public in important decisions and directions.

So what were the outcomes from the town meeting? Here are the most frequent recommendations:

### **A Community Committed to Education and Learning**

- Increase parent and community involvement in education.

### Also In This Edition:

[State shortfall](#)

[Re-examining the Peirce report:  
On downtown and the riverfront](#)

[Let the sunshine in](#)

[OHS, Vick recognized  
Reflections on city-county school study](#)

[Regional initiative a plus](#)

[Another power plant](#)

[Citizen initiative was  
catalyst for WKU project](#)



- Provide high quality preschool experiences for more children.
- Merge city and county school systems.

### **A Region of Opportunity and Appeal**

- Transform downtown and insist on well-planned suburban expansion.
- Continue to attract, grow and retain businesses.
- Maximize new technology opportunities.

### **A Uniquely Green and Clean Community**

- Expand recycling.
- Be a leader in conservation and develop renewable energy alternatives.
- Reduce air pollution from coal-fired power plants.

### **A Healthy and Caring Community**

- Help low-income get on solid financial footing.
- Fight substance abuse.
- Expand and sustain programs that promote healthy lifestyles.
- Expand public health services when needed.

### **A Government for the 21st Century**

- Establish policies that ensure openness and transparency in government.
- Require leadership training for elected and appointed officials.
- Consolidate city and county government.

Based on further analysis of the results, several striking recommendations emerged.

- People who work in government favor city-county consolidation more than people who work in other fields – by as much as 19 percentage points.
- By a two-to-one margin, participants favored city-county consolidation over retaining the current structure. Only 22 percent want to keep things as they are with two separate governments.

We learned that people do indeed care about their community and are more knowledgeable about pressing issues than we thought.

We learned that people want great things for this community. They want it to be a vibrant, attractive community rich in amenities and economic opportunities.

We learned that people have a strong sense of ownership in their governments, public agencies, and community institutions such as our schools, our hospital and our library.

We learned that people understand that our democracy belongs to us all – even those who are not well-educated or who have a disability or struggle in poverty; they should all have a place at the table.

We learned that when dialogue is carefully structured and ground rules established, we can disagree without being disagreeable.

We learned that people believe that our democracy should be a participatory democracy.

We are still analyzing the 200-plus pages of raw notes and the 800-plus pages of demographic comparisons. These will be summarized in our final report that will be released soon and will be available on our website

([www.wethepeople.townmeeting.org](http://www.wethepeople.townmeeting.org)) or the Public Life Foundation website ([www.plfo.org](http://www.plfo.org)).

The town meeting has many positive applications. It has already proved to be a tool to

- inform citizens of community problems and opportunities
- bring people together from all walks of life and all areas of our community
- facilitate listening, civil dialogue and mutual respect
- imagine possibilities and learn what other communities are doing
- better understand the complexities of issues, tradeoffs, costs and consequences of various options we face
- help us find common ground for action

More than 300 participants indicated an interest in staying involved, and more than half of those have already attended meetings. Five work groups have been established to focus on the five discussion topics, goals and priorities that emerged from the town meeting:

- Community Education and Learning Committee
- Region Of Opportunity team (ROOT)
- Environmental Impact Council (EIC)
- Healthy and Caring Community Group
- Citizens for Good Government

More people are involved. Great ideas are coming forth. And good things are already happening!

To get involved or for a schedule of meetings, contact the Public Life Foundation: 685-2652.

**ANOTHER “WE THE PEOPLE” FULL GROUP MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR MARCH 4 – THE 90-DAY MARK FOLLOWING THE KICK-OFF MEETING. MAKE A NOTE OF IT! MORE DETAILS LATER! ALL ARE INVITED!**

### **A model for community decision-making**

While it is not practical to organize a town meeting of this magnitude on a frequent basis or in conjunction with routine decisions, a variation of the *AmericaSpeaks* methodology could be used by local governments, public commissions, tax districts, and major community nonprofit institutions as they consider options on major expenditures, capital projects, site selection, major policy or program initiatives.

Issues can be framed objectively, setting forth the pros and cons for each option. Discussions can be facilitated and ground rules established to maintain civility. And the keypad technology used during the town meeting could be used for voting to obtain instant results.

Officials and policymakers should welcome the opportunity to better understand the views of a broad, informed constituency. The town meeting has demonstrated that our community can set a higher standard and openly engage our community in dialogue on major issues and community decisions.

## STATE SHORTFALL

The condition of the national economy drives state government revenues. In sluggish times such as these, state revenue shortfalls can be huge. Budget shortfalls and cost overruns for this fiscal year will total \$434 million - about five percent of the state's General Fund, according to the Consensus Forecasting Group, independent state economic advisors. That's close to \$900 million over the biennium.

These revenue shortfalls can be devastating to local institutions, including:

### Schools

- Reduced resources for early childhood education, K-12, postsecondary and adult education
- Reduced resources for scholarship funds and school safety programs
- Tuition increases resulting in decreases in college enrollment

### Capital projects and building maintenance

- Owensboro Community and Technical College
- Western Kentucky University – Owensboro

### Health and social services

- Medicaid (health care for low income, nursing home care)
- Health department services

### Environmental protection

- Coal mine safety inspection
- Water and air quality regulatory capacity

### Justice facilities and programs

- Drug court
- Detention center

The Fox Report, commissioned in 2001 by the state legislature, projected that state government would have to raise \$2.3 billion by 2010 to maintain existing services. This was attributed to an outdated tax system.

Since then, the Fletcher administration stood by its tax modernization "revenue neutral" plan and was able to point to numerous administrative efficiencies and a large surplus. However, many analysts noted that a "structural deficit" remained, that the surplus was only possible because funds were borrowed from sources designated for other purposes.

Beyond the impact of the national economy, why is state government under such financial pressure?

- House Bill 44, enacted in 1979, put limits on state and local property tax increases. State property taxes decreased from 31 cents per \$100 valuation to 13 cents. (The estimated current annual revenue loss is \$300 million.)
- Since 2001, six rounds of budget cuts have reduced revenues by \$1.1 billion.
- In the 1990s, state taxes were cut 26 times.
- While some tax exemptions are warranted, many reflect the influence of special interests. (There are 70 exemptions to the sales tax.) Tax exemptions reduce state government revenue by \$6.4 billion per

According to *Governing* magazine, Kentucky is ranked 50th in per capita investments in education.

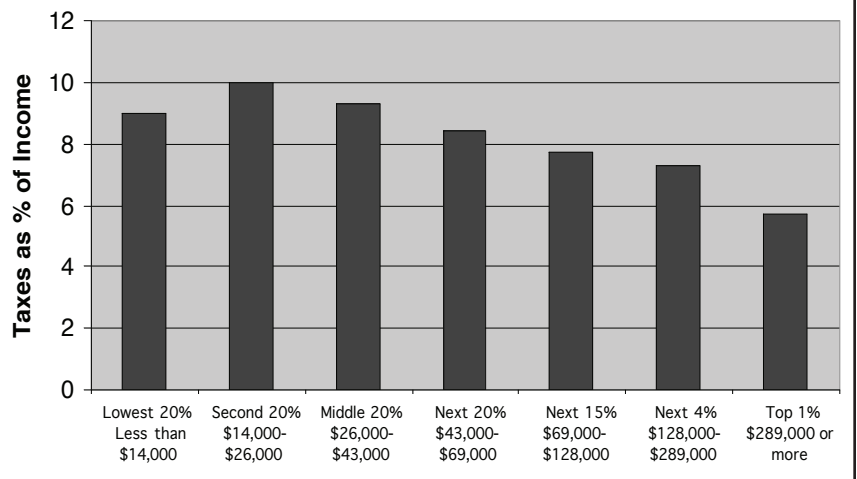
In Kentucky, people who earn just above the poverty line pay about 10 percent of their income to state and local taxes, while the wealthiest one percent pay six percent of their income in state and local taxes.

Funding for Kentucky's community mental health centers has not increased for 13 years, despite a 17 percent increase in caseloads.

For Kentucky to reach an average status among other states in higher education attainment, we need to double the number of college graduates.

Kentucky's Community and Technical College System receives \$569 less per student (full-time equivalent) in 2006-08 than it did in 1998-99 despite educating significantly more students.

**Kentucky State and Local Taxes in 2006 as a Share of Personal Income (After Federal Offset)**



year.

- Skyrocketing health care costs, intensified by unhealthy lifestyles, an aging population and growing number of state government retirees.
- An exploding prison population due largely to tougher drug sentencing.
- Significant funds directed to economic development incentives.
- Federal tax cuts and unfunded mandates that shift responsibilities and costs to state government.
- Reduction in corporate taxes.



What are our options for dealing with this circumstance?

• **Reduce spending and focus on efficiencies.**

In early January, Gov. Beshear ordered \$78 million in cuts through reductions in the workforce, state contracts, travel, printing, furniture, equipment, surplus property, energy and more. Officials could streamline cabinets and departments; consolidate or eliminate programs.

*Potential consequence: Significant reductions in resources for education, health care, projects, courts and more.*

• **Eliminate exemptions and loopholes.**

Some analysts project \$300 million per year could be raised by closing corporate loopholes alone.

*Potential consequence: Incentive for corporations to move jobs and investment elsewhere.*

• **Raise taxes.**

- By increasing the 30-cent cigarette tax by 75 cents (the national average is \$1.15), the state could generate \$307 million per year (and reduce youth smoking significantly).
- By restoring Kentucky's Estate Tax to reclaim losses due to federal policy, the state could generate \$40 million or more per year.
- By creating a more progressive state income tax, the state could generate \$225 million or more. (see graph)

*Potential consequence: Political consequences for officials focused on re-election, reduced personal income and business profits.*

• **Expand gaming.**

In 2005, Kentucky's thoroughbred racetracks offered \$400 million annually to state government for casino licenses. Gov. Beshear's recent

## NEED FOR PUBLIC DIALOGUE

Which option, or which group of options, does the public favor?

- Is the public well-informed on this issue?
- Do we have a spending problem or a revenue problem?
- Do citizens understand the options?
- Should there be a public airing of the tradeoffs, costs, consequences and points pro and con connected with each option?
- Have citizens had an opportunity to listen, learn, deliberate and share their views with decision makers?

Our Commonwealth, our elected leaders, would be well-served to make a place for meaningful public participation on this pivotal issue and to integrate into their deliberations the collective wisdom of an informed citizenry.

proposal for casinos at seven racetracks and five free-standing locations could produce \$600 million per year in taxes and fees.

*Potential consequence: Social costs, controversy, market saturation.*

**Sources:**

Kentucky Economic Justice Alliance ([www.keja.org](http://www.keja.org))

Loftus, Tom "Austere budget spreads pain throughout the state, *Courier-Journal*, Jan. 30, 2008

Loftus, Tom "Increase in cigarette tax gaining support in House, *Courier-Journal*, Jan. 18, 2008

[www.stateoftobaccocontrol.org](http://www.stateoftobaccocontrol.org)

## RE-EXAMINING THE PEIRCE REPORT: ON DOWNTOWN AND THE RIVERFRONT

Sixteen years ago this fall, the Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer* published a series of articles by columnist Neal Peirce. The series was based on a comprehensive strategic assessment of Owensboro-Daviess County completed by Peirce and his associates.

Peirce specializes in examining the best and worst of what's happening in states and communities across America. Author of 12 books, including *Citistates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World*, his weekly column has been syndicated through the Washington Post Writer's Group since 1978.

The series, "Owensboro, Kentucky: Reforging Community," analyzed more than a dozen issues, including economic growth and agriculture, education, downtown and the riverfront potential, environmental concerns, governmental services and more.

Since Peirce published his assessment, much has happened in our com-

munity. And much has stayed the same. We offer an update on some of the more compelling observations and recommendations included in the Peirce report: in this issue, the challenges facing downtown Owensboro.

### Downtown, Riverfront Development and the Arts

Peirce devoted considerable print to downtown and the riverfront:

*"Owensboro must pledge itself to an intensive campaign to recreate a downtown with character and attractiveness, a true meeting place for the region's people and visitors from afar. Developing a fully accessible, lively waterfront must be a top priority."*

Peirce encouraged the development of riverfront open-air restaurants and the completion of a walkway from Smother's Park to English Park. He endorsed an extensive riverfront cleanup, a major downtown corporate office, downtown parking facility, expanded recreational boating, mixed in-

come downtown housing and specialty retail. He was struck by the unique compactness of downtown that lends itself to walking.

*“Only in downtown do you have a chance to get where you want to go on foot, to shake dependence on the automobile for every move. Downtowns offer...history, color, variety – rare commodities in the world of homogenous subdivisions and shopping malls.”*

*“Fighting for good aesthetics isn’t an interest in botany. It’s a competitive thing. And nowhere is the competitive challenge greater than downtown.”*

*“Downtown’s future is everyone’s interest.”*

He also stressed the importance of Downtown Owensboro, Inc. and the need for centralized downtown management. Peirce found it refreshing that a majority of Owensboro leaders believed in downtown, but he warned that downtown goals will only be achieved through *“serious staff time and long-term commitment”* ... *“Owensboro could do it if it cared.”*

RiverPark Center was under construction while Peirce conducted his research. He called the riverfront site ingenious and the private fundraising extraordinary for a city our size.

He concluded that RiverPark Center could be a white elephant or a cultural mecca, a center of community pride and accomplishment, a *“crown jewel of downtown redevelopment.”* He cited several key challenges: RiverPark must be managed as well as it was conceived; Bluegrass Music must be promoted *“with verve and imagination;”* and the residential area surrounding downtown must be an inviting place.

*“Yet, however impressive the downtown and waterfront revival has been, it’s too soon to celebrate, to rest on one’s oars.”*

Peirce praised the leadership of Terry Woodward in creating an international hub for bluegrass music in Owensboro: the establishment of a trade association, the proposal for an annual bluegrass festival on the riverfront, and the location of a Bluegrass Museum and Hall of Fame right next to the new RiverPark Center:

*“So far the Woodward timetable is working almost perfectly ... would be tough to think of a better business move: 40 million Americans listen to bluegrass. Bluegrass and barbecue, twin legends, demonstrate Owensboro’s skill at capitalizing on a longstanding local tradition.”*

## Update and Analysis:

Since the Peirce report was published, downtown Owensboro has seen many improvements. But the district faces challenges and has also fallen short of its potential.

**RiverPark Center** has indeed become the cultural center and community gathering spot envisioned by Peirce. Home of the Owensboro Symphony, Broadway productions, children’s programming and more, RiverPark is a prominent community landmark, source of pride and economic development sales tool.

President/CEO Zev Buffman has expanded Broadway show construction and launched several national-international tours. He also founded the Young Adult Theater Academy and the International Mystery Writer’s Festival. RiverPark features a premiere arts education program that exposes youth to performances, involves youth in productions, and integrates the arts into the teaching of other subject areas.

RiverPark’s endowment fund is insufficient to meet the long-term building maintenance and operational needs of the center. Capital construction has been financed through lease payments to the City of Owens-

boro that are equivalent to the debt service. RiverPark earns more income and attracts more private support than most performing arts centers, but considerable fundraising challenges remain.

Peirce praised the five-point plan to establish a bluegrass music hub in Owensboro. Unfortunately, due to the condition and limitation of Owensboro’s hotel-convention facilities in the mid-1990s, the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) moved its annual World of Bluegrass extravaganza to Nashville. A huge blow to the bluegrass vision; a move still resented by a community that birthed the association and supported it through its fragile early years.

Despite the IBMA move, the **International Bluegrass Music Museum** (IBMM) remains in Owensboro and continues to expand its reach and promise through initiative, innovation and technology. A Video Oral History Project, Bluegrass Radio International Internet program, workshops, lessons and jam sessions, and a Bluegrass in the Schools program are among the notable achievements. A few years ago, the museum’s River of Music Party (ROMP) moved from English Park to Yellow Creek Park in east Daviess County. It would be in downtown’s best interest to lure ROMP back to the riverfront when the master plan is completed.

IBMA aggressively solicits support from foundations, individuals, corporate sponsors and governmental bodies. Securing sustainable operational funds and building an endowment are principal museum priorities.

Three phases of the **Riverfront Master Plan** are complete: the RiverPark Center BB&T Patio expansion; McConnell Plaza; and new English Park boating facility. In spring 2008, construction will commence on a retaining wall to stabilize the riverbank and allow for a dramatic expansion of Smothers Park and public space. This will include open space, playgrounds, fountains, access to the water and other features.



A state-financed downtown **parking garage** serves RiverPark Center and the bluegrass museum conveniently. Because the structure was tucked between buildings on Second Street and First Street (now Veteran’s Boulevard), it has stimulated several major building (former McAtee, Salm, Newberry) renovations on Second Street. Surprisingly and disappointingly, development has not occurred along the riverfront side of the garage.

In fact, stimulating **private investment** to complement the \$50 million riverfront plan has become a top community priority. Advocates and planners stress the importance of tasteful, complementary projects in terms of use, scale, and design.

Since the Peirce report was released, the RiverPark Center Main Street buildings have been converted to a home for the Owensboro Symphony and Tourist Information Center. Downtown landed the Old National Bank project and property is targeted for another bank. Several tasteful restorations have been completed by MediaWorks, First Security Bank, Terry Woodward and others.



The future of the **Executive Inn** is a critical variable for the future of downtown Owensboro, setting the tone for a new events-convention center, additional hotels and other development potential in the downtown and along the riverfront.

There may be **special opportunities** for substantial developments if large tracts can be assembled in the Executive Inn area, along the

riverfront and the vacant land east of downtown hit hard by a recent tornado. High-density housing, specialty retail, major hotel and office facilities, restaurants and entertainment investments are being explored. Advocates, planners and some developers appear intrigued with the appeal of a downtown characterized by “new urbanism.”

A local developer has assembled several key tracts along the riverfront and is proposing a major **condominium project** opposite Smothers Park. The plan apparently hinges on the developer’s ability to pre-sell condos to owners and investors.

If the 2008 state legislature and local voters authorize expanded gaming in November, there could be interest in a downtown **casino**.

Some businesses appear to be content with **downtown locations**. Downtown stores include a pharmacy, several antique shops, jewelry store, restaurants, and others. However, these businesses do not always occupy appealing space and they are not clustered in a way to enhance appeal or convenience.

Several public or quasi-public **anchors** may be in downtown’s future: a multi-purpose events center (arena-convention) center and minor league baseball-concert stadium. There has been some reconsideration of a downtown ice arena, tennis complex or water park. Audubon Area Community Services plans a downtown parking garage for its regional transportation system.

Downtown is still the location of choice for **government** offices, **financial** institutions and **professional** firms. County government expanded the Holbrook Judicial Center and is restoring the Smith-Werner building. City government gave a fresh new look to the entrance off the Glover Cary Bridge and has assumed a leadership role in the implementation of the riverfront plan. Several **churches** own significant property downtown. Unfortunately, these governmental and nonprofit expenditures do not enhance the **downtown tax base**.

Downtown advocates have not been effective in retaining important downtown anchors. **Missed corporate opportunities** include: Atmos Energy, Southern Star Central Gas Pipeline, US Bank Home Mortgage, South Central Bank and Independence Bank. Proponents for downtown question why several new public facilities were not built downtown: Owensboro Municipal Utilities, Daviess County Public Library, U.S. Post Office, and Social Security offices.

Meanwhile, downtown continues to lose **street life and vitality** as surface parking lots, vacant or underused buildings and professional offices occupy street frontage. This warrants an infill development strategy and tenant mix plan.

Peirce would surely be disappointed to learn of the dissolution of Downtown Owensboro, Inc., weakened by a declining downtown business

membership base. However, he would likely be encouraged by the restructuring of economic development efforts within the framework of a new **Commerce Center** that now houses the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation, Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce, Owensboro Metropolitan Planning Commission and other agencies.

A new **downtown executive** position has been created and will be supported through an agreement between city and county governments. Local governments appear to be prepared for a more **proactive role** in assembling development sites, downtown planning and developer solicitation. Officials plan to establish a downtown (“blighted area”) **tax increment financing district**. And there is increasing interest in various **public improvements** – for example, the “calming” of Second Street by rerouting truck traffic or converting it to two-way traffic with stop signs at intersections.

Peirce would have been pleased – and impressed – that 650 citizens participated in the Nov. 10, 2007 “We the People” 21st Century Town Meeting, and that one of their top priorities was the “transformation” of downtown Owensboro.

---

## LET THE SUNSHINE IN

Justice Louis Brandeis said, “Sunlight is the best antiseptic.”

Government officials cannot keep ignoring the festering sores of independent **“527” campaign organizations**. It is time they are treated with the soothing rays of openness and transparency. The recent revelation that more than two-thirds of the \$3 million Bluegrass Freedom Fund – that ironically promoted higher ethical standards in Frankfort – was financed by gambling and racing interests reinforces the need to reveal the donors. These 527-funded advertisements technically do not support or oppose candidates. Nonetheless, donors to the pro-Beshear Bluegrass Fund and the Fletcher Defense Fund and other funds like them should have been revealed – immediately after the donation was made.

The public would also be well-served if state legislators would designate joint **House-Senate Conference Committee meetings** as open meetings. Major decisions, compromises and mutually-beneficial deals among legislators are all made in Conference Committee. Let the sunshine in.

And another practical, achievable step that would significantly enhance openness and transparency in state government: In his Nov. 27, 2007 column, *Courier-Journal* columnist David Dyche suggested that the General Assembly **post each and every expenditure** from the state Treasury on a web site for public inspection. Apparently this is already being done in other states. Why not in Kentucky? Why not in Owensboro-Daviess County? A timely and appropriate action considering the top recommendation to come forth from the government discussion period during the “We the People” Town Meeting: “Establish policies that ensure openness and transparency.”



## OHS, VICK RECOGNIZED REFLECTIONS ON CITY-COUNTY SCHOOL STUDY

Congratulations to Owensboro High School (OHS) for being recognized by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of our nation's most outstanding high schools. OHS received the "bronze" designation, and was one of only 23 Kentucky high schools on the list.

Owensboro Public Schools (OPS) Superintendent Dr. Larry Vick was named 2008 Superintendent of the Year during the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents winter meeting in Louisville. The award included a \$2,000 scholarship for an Owensboro student in Vick's honor. The association acknowledged Vick's "...reputation as a quiet, effective leader among his colleagues" and acknowledged the following accomplishments: an increase in test scores; initiatives to engage students in extra curricular activities; an elementary intramural program; piano keyboard and Spanish instruction; fine arts fair; and athletic and fine arts facility expansion.

Laudable initiatives indeed, and the kinds of initiatives Owensboro High will need to offer and promote in order to retain its competitive appeal, as nearly all of the affluent residential developments continue to be built outside the city school district boundary, leaving a higher concentration of students from low-income families in the city schools.

### City-County school study

A Citizens Committee on Education study released in February 2003 concluded that the OPS faced a difficult financial future.

The research, conducted by Mark A. Dartt, Ed.S., Director of Institutional Research at Kentucky Wesleyan College (whose 32-year career included experience as a classroom teacher, principal and district superintendent), concluded that "*OPS faces a challenge to survive long-term as an independent entity. Financial strength, student out-transfers, and limited tax base challenge OPS to attend to strategic planning and greater collaboration with DCPS.*"

Dartt added, "*OPS faces increasing fiscal challenges to its viability: student loss and emigration; more limited, landlocked tax base; general fiscal security; sustaining competitive teacher compensation; teacher-student ratios; and larger burden of special needs students.*"

Since the Dartt study, OPS moved forward with an ambitious \$20 million athletic and fine arts expansion, athletic improvements at Shifley Park under a lease from the City of Owensboro, while retaining a healthy reserve fund. For that, the OPS board and staff deserve accolades.

Does that mean that Dartt's projections were incorrect? Perhaps it could mean that:

- OPS has benefited from capable administrators who stretched available dollars through efficiencies.
- OPS qualified for additional state and federal funds due to its percentage of low-income students.
- OPS attracted significant philanthropic support from the private sector.
- The property tax base in the OPS district has grown more than ex-

pected (but not through annexation, since that tool is not available to the city school district).

- OPS reduced staff or programs.

Whatever the cause or strategy used, a crisis does not appear to be pending.

That does not minimize the need to keep strategic planning as a priority so that the OPS board is not forced to respond to a crisis in the future. And the board should not be cavalier about the disparity in property taxes between city and county school district residents.

And as for the \$20 million bond issue:

More extensive citizen dialogue and participation would have been invigorating. The public missed out on an opportunity to dream. Citizens from all walks of life – not just parents and teachers – had much to contribute to the process. And all city school district taxpayers had every right to have a voice.

It would have been interesting to sketch out all the options for use of OPS's bonding capacity, and to deliberate over the pros and cons of those options.

It would have been interesting to imagine what facilities will characterize the top schools of the 21st century. What models from other cities, states, or other countries, could we learn from? What would leading education futurists suggest?

Extra curricular activities – such as sports and the fine arts – are important and valuable. But what other priorities might have emerged if citizens had been allowed to engage more fully in the process?

---

## REGIONAL INITIATIVE A PLUS

A hearty salute to the Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce for its Chamber Leadership Initiatives for Northwest Kentucky (C-LINK). For many years, communication and coalescing has been a missing element of community and regional lobbying efforts. Owensboro-Daviess County is not large enough, and does not have the legislative voting clout, to exercise effective leverage with other lawmakers in Frankfort to push forward our agenda. By pooling strength and numbers from the 12 chambers of commerce and 10 counties, that can change.



The 12 chambers represent 3,000 businesses and the 10 counties have a population of more than 300,000. Daviess, Henderson, Hopkins, Union, Webster, Muhlenberg, McLean, Ohio, Hancock and Breckinridge counties are participating.

This is a valuable initiative. We hope chamber leaders will welcome the participation of all interested citizens in that new organization to help shape regional priorities.



## ANOTHER POWER PLANT



The Cash Creek coal-fired power plant cleared another hurdle on January 14 when owners received the final air quality permit. The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued no comments or objections. Citizens have until March 14 to petition the EPA.

Evansville-based Valley Watch has criticized officials for not considering the impact of the plant on tri-state ozone levels. According to the owner, the Erora Group, the plant will use an integrated gasification process that will release considerably less sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides than older coal plants.

Proposed for a Green River site opposite Curdsville on the Henderson-Daviess County line, the plant appears to have strong support and momentum from elected officials, economic development groups and organized labor. Environmental groups have voiced concerns about the concentration of coal-fired power plants in our state and region. There are 17 coal-fired power plants in western Kentucky and southern Indiana.

Environmentalists stress that as new plants are built, older polluting plants are not phased out, resulting in net increases in air and water pollution.

Columnist Neil Peirce's 1991 comprehensive assessment of Owensboro-Daviess County included a recommendation for a well-informed, balanced, citizen-based Safe Growth Committee to assess proposals such as the Cash Creek plant. The Environmental Impact Council, one of the citizen groups that was established following the "We the People" Town Meeting, hopes to serve in such a capacity.

The expanded use of coal promises jobs that pay well, and many people think we should maximize this natural resource to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. Yet concerns over climate change, toxic emissions, mercury contamination and fish advisories in streams, dramatic increases in autism and concerns over mountaintop removal mining in eastern Kentucky are leading more citizens to question our direction in coal production.

Should we ever draw the line on coal-fired power plants in this region? Do we lure more plants with taxpayer incentives? Will we leave the development of wind, solar and other renewable energy technologies to other regions and other states?

## CITIZEN INITIATIVE WAS CATALYST FOR WKU PROJECT

The recent initiative of Daviess County Judge-Executive Reid Haire and the Fiscal Court to acquire property and earmark funds for construction of a Western Kentucky University campus in Owensboro underscores the important role of a group like the Citizens Committee on Education, which is celebrating its 25th year as an advocate for education in our community.



Several years ago, the Citizens Committee raised funds, solicited proposals, and hired a consultant to assess needs and opportunities in higher education in Owensboro-Daviess County. The study proved to be a wake-up call to elected officials, business and community leaders. Many were shocked that our community was at or near the bottom of most every postsecondary education indicator when compared with other benchmark communities.

Our state legislative delegation and WKU President Gary Ransdell are to be credited for convincing Gov. Beshear to include funds for the WKU-Owensboro campus in his budget proposal.

These officials, Judge Haire and the county commission deserve the accolades, as do the Citizens Committee on Education volunteers who were a critical catalyst for this exciting new community resource for learning and economic development.