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By Beverly Burks - Advance Monticellonian editor

"We will get through this, together." That was the point Governor Mike Beebe stressed during his keynote address at the inaugural annual meeting of the Southeast Arkansas Cornerstone Coalition, held Wednesday night on the UAM campus.



No one person, city or county is strong by itself, Beebe said, but when groups of people join together, as has been the case with the six counties that make up the Cornerstone Coalition economic development organization, "then they create an opportunity to play the game."

In discussing his recent visit to Europe ("I think we're gonna get some stuff out of that," he told the group), Beebe provided an example of a problem Arkansas and the Cornerstone region face in trying to encourage job creation and retention here. He told the crowd of a visit with some executives of a company that already has a manufacturing facility in Magnolia. The company wants to expand, Beebe said, and hire more employees. The executives told Beebe they have a number of managerial positions they need filled, good-paying jobs in the \$70,000-\$90,000 range, but they have an obstacle - they can't find anyone to move to Magnolia.

Arkansas must focus on recruiting the best and brightest students to go to school here, or to come back after school to pursue careers and build lives. Pretending the loss of talented students who move away isn't happening won't make the problem go away, he stressed.

Beebe outlined two ways to combat it. The first is "growing as many of our own as we can," encouraging natives of the area who have a vested interest - family, recreational pursuits, school affiliations - to stay and pursue careers in the state. He urged those in the audience to act as evangelists for the state and their communities to help make this happen, promoting the quality of life and other strong points.

The second way to fight the problem of students leaving, Beebe said, was for as many existing companies as possible to provide internships. Describing how an internship had impacted his life, Beebe said that he went to law school not because he wanted to become a lawyer, but because he planned to become an FBI agent and knew he needed to either be a CPA or have a law degree to do so. Lacking adding skills, he joked, he opted to pursue a law degree, with no intention of ever working in the field. However, he got a summer job working at a law firm in Searcy, and, through that job, fell in love with the law, the firm and the town, and wound up practicing law there for 30 years.

The state needs to make the same type of cultural changes in industry that it has in the field of education, he said. If not, Beebe stated, "all we'll do is send (graduates) to Dallas or Atlanta." He noted recent improvements Arkansas has made in such areas as Benchmark scores, teacher salaries, and job retention, noting that even though the state had lost some jobs, all Arkansans have to do to feel better about our situation is to look at other states that have been hit much harder by the current recession.

He acknowledged that these are tough times, "but we're gonna get through them." The governor added that, for every down side, there were blessings, such as the fact that the state has a balanced budget amendment, meaning Arkansas is not having to take the drastic measures that some other states are and can spend its stimulus money on things such as highways. "We're spending every dime we can legally steal from the stimulus program to put highways out there, because that's key to our infrastructure," the governor stated.

"Don't say 'Thank God for Mississippi'. I'm sick of it. Let Alabama say it. We're not there anymore, people." Working in unity, "as exemplified by groups like the Cornerstone Coalition, is the way to come out" of the current recession, Beebe concluded.