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CENTERPIECE

Summit

Economic forum draws crowd

Speaker urges growth from within

By GERRY O'BRIEN H&N Editor

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Around 150 community members gather Friday to hear a wide-ranging talk about what rural communities can do to grow their economic base.

"Think Local First" was the mantra during the morning session of the Great Basin Economic Vitality Summit at the Ross Ragland Community Center Friday.

Keynote speaker Maury Forman told about 150 members from the Basin and cities beyond that while Klamath Falls has had a series of setbacks economically, it has also seen an uptick in positive news. Much of it is due to expanding what is already here.

"I prefer 'Think Local First' as opposed to 'Buy Local,'" Forman said. "There's not a lot you can really buy locally that wasn't made elsewhere. But if you look at spending your money here, about two-thirds of your dollar stays in the community."

In a wide-ranging talk about what rural communities can do to grow their economic base, Forman, a senior manager for the Washington State Department of Commerce, emphasized growing the economy from within.

"Smokestack chasing, going after one industry to replace another, is just not very effective," he said. "Targeting your best prospects is better. But remember, this year there are about 150 to 250 businesses that will relocate in the United States. There are about 2,000 cities that are going after those businesses."

The one-day summit was staged by the Ford Institute for Community Building, based in Roseburg, and a group called Rural Development Initiatives (RDI), based in Eugene. It is the second such economic summit in as many weeks. Last week, Oregon Institute of Technology hosted a state-sponsored economic forum that is traveling the state.

The thirst for solutions was evident by the size of the crowd. The turnout was the highest so far of any of the forums, according to organizer Noell Colby-Rotell of RDI and Joyce Akse, director of the Ford Institute. All eight communities in the county were represented as well as the Klamath Tribes and several people from Medford, Portland and other cities in the Northwest.

Forman keyed in on quality of life as a way to lure new businesses to town. He noted that every hotel, home and local business all should "act as a concierge desk" in providing visitors information on what to see and do in the Basin. The more helpful residents are, the more likely visitors will return.

He also noted that growing the arts culture is a proven way of attracting more visitors. The Ross Ragland staged 400 events alone last year.

"Adding more foot-tapping, smile-inducing moments to our lives is sound public policy," he said.

And, quality broadband access to the internet is key for any community wanting to expand, especially in the medical fields.

Forman said these principles have been applied in other communities such as Yakima and Walla Walla, Wash., with great success.

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Pluses and minuses

Over the past few years Klamath Falls has seen:

- **Bad news:** SkyWest pulls out; jobless rate at 9.8 percent; retail restaurant closures; jobs transferred out of state; donations to nonprofits falling.
- **Good news:** Sanford Children's Clinic opens (including groundbreaking research in diabetes); Bealls Department store to open; FedEx Ground terminal; Festivals and events such as Winter Wings and Kruse of Klamath draws a few thousand visitors a year; Housing sales climbing; Kiger Stadium to host a Babe Ruth World Series; Leadership Klamath develops young leaders; County schools building bond issue passes; EagleRidge robotics program; Precision Helicopter to partner with KCC.