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## Secretary meets with officials

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by Meghann Evans  
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DOBSON — After attending the dedication of a new facility in Elkin, N.C. Secretary of Commerce Keith Crisco participated in a round-table discussion yesterday with local officials, answering their questions and offering advice.

The small group met at the college in Dobson for a one-hour discussion. Representatives from all Surry County municipalities, county government, the

governor's office, the department of commerce, the college and the Surry County Economic Development Partnership were present.

Crisco chatted and joked with the officials, quoting lines from famous country songs and getting to know those present. But he spent the majority of his time talking about how to create and retain jobs in the county. He presented a realistic yet hopeful view of the task ahead.

"I wish I could come here and give you a magic wand, push a button ... but I've got bad news for you. The department of commerce doesn't know where that button is," said Crisco.

"But we're working our tail off," he continued. "The good news is the pipeline is really full."

The secretary said he's "keenly aware" of what's going on with Surry County's economy. He has seen the loss of textile and manufacturing jobs across the state.

He did point out that in seven months, the number of people employed in the state has gone up each month. The state unemployment rate was 9.9 percent in July. Crisco acknowledged that 9.9 percent was "still terrible," but that at least there was improvement.

Crisco gave several suggestions to the officials. He said, "First of all, you need to be close to your legislators." He suggested people get to know legislators of both parties and let them know about Surry County's needs.

He also mentioned the importance of collaboration between leaders and planners in the county. He said, "The way to do it is to hire a partner and the leader work on it, too ... You can't hire someone to do all the work."

Members present at the round-table discussion mentioned different collaborations in the county. Paul Johnson, chairman of the Surry County Board of Commissioners, said, "The county and the municipalities are working together ...

We need to know how to do what we're doing more efficiently.”

“Just keep on keeping on,” the secretary gave for advice.

He gave an example of a board in Cleveland County where they decided to have two commissioners focus on economic development. Mount Airy Mayor Deborah Cochran was inspired by this and decided to go back and discuss it with her board members.

Cochran asked during the meeting if there were any funds available for towns such as Mount Airy. She reported that according to Census data, 26.3 percent of people are living in poverty in the southern half of Mount Airy. The secretary said his office would see if community assistance funds could be utilized.

“We need to reach out to you,” he told Cochran.

Cochran said after the meeting, “For me, the meeting today brings hope for Mount Airy.”

Pilot Mountain Mayor Earl Sheppard asked if businesses considering expansion were looking for empty space at new industrial parks or for old buildings. He said Pilot Mountain had many old vacant buildings.

“It varies,” answered Crisco.

Melissa Smith, regional manager for the department of commerce, did say that the majority of the people she receives calls from are looking for existing buildings. Todd Tucker, president of Surry County Economic Development Partnership, said the same thing.

“But your buildings have to fit,” Crisco pointed out.

Lestine Hutchens, mayor of Elkin, told him that one difficulty is all of the rolling hills in the county, which may not accommodate big, flat plants. She did say that some locations would serve as great locations for film shoots. Tucker said someone with a local film group was just in his office last week.

Sandy Hallman, chair of Surry County EDP, said she has seen that companies are reluctant to spend money right now due to the economy. She asked, “Are there things we can do to impact that? ... Until the money gets freed up, we're sort of in a suppressed state.”

Crisco said that was happening across the country. He said it has improved slightly over the past few months. He suggested counties continue to do as much as they can to encourage companies to locate or expand in the county. He says those who continue to work hard and get a little bit now will leave other counties in the dust when the economy turns around.

The group also talked about grants and incentives for small businesses and entrepreneurs. Leslie Schlender, economic development director for Elkin, asked

near the end of the discussion, “What can we do to help you help us?”

The secretary encouraged the officials to contact their legislators and to continue to team up with the department of commerce.

“We don’t take that for granted ... We don’t see that everywhere. Keep up the good work,” said Smith.

After the discussion, Sheppard said it was the first time in his six years serving for Pilot Mountain that he had been in a meeting where the secretary of commerce had sat down with representatives from all of the municipalities.

“I like that,” said Sheppard. “I think that’s pretty big time.”

He also found it encouraging to hear that the county was doing the right things to try to bring jobs.

Crisco said afterward that he wanted the public to know, “You’ve got a whole array of developers that are working hard to bring business.” He also wants the public to know that leaders care.

“North Carolina wins a lot of projects ... We’ve got a good thing going,” said Crisco.

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