

JACKSON AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



“To develop and maintain an economic climate, which creates and retains jobs and enhances the quality of life for all citizens of Jackson/Madison County and West Tennessee”

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 18, 2011

Chamber addresses school board about impact of public education on economic development

Jackson, TN — The Jackson-Madison County School System board voted 7-2 on Jan. 18 to accept an offer from the Jackson Area Chamber of Commerce to help facilitate and fund a vision setting process for the school system and a national search for its next superintendent.

“We will commit both capital and volunteer human resources to this effort,” said Chamber President and CEO Kyle Spurgeon during the school board meeting on Tuesday evening. “The business community wants to be involved in this process – a process which will most likely be the single most important decision this community will make in 2011.”

Spurgeon urged the board to participate in a vision setting process for public education. He also spoke about the impact public education in Jackson has on creating jobs in the community.

“Creating jobs is a competitive business,” Spurgeon said. “We have an opportunity to build something great together. Our public schools are making progress, but we must do more. Let’s work together to create a vision for our public education system. Let’s pursue a new superintendent only after we have created that vision.”

On Jan. 11, the Chamber’s board of directors voted unanimously to allocate \$100,000 from its Forward Jackson capital campaign toward two specific items related to public education. These items will fund a vision setting process for the school system and a national search for its next superintendent.

The chamber has proposed that three members of the school board along with three members of the chamber’s board choose a firm to conduct and direct the visioning process. The chamber will fund the process, but decisions must be made together, Spurgeon said.

“The nine members of this school board are the only nine people in this community that have the authority to name our next superintendent,” Spurgeon said. “As we have done in the past, we feel it is important that the community have a role in interviewing candidates and providing feedback to this board. There is a lot of experience, expertise, resources and talent in this community that can be tapped into to help us retain the next leader for our school system.”

Chamber volunteers – Bobby Arnold, James Campbell, Ben Ferguson and Russell Williams – asked the school board to accept the chamber’s offer. They also spoke about the importance of public education within their companies.

“The old days of manufacturing based strictly on strong backs has given way to manufacturing based on strong minds,” Williams said at the meeting. “Virtually every piece of machinery that we have is run by programmable logic controllers, or PLCs. We need operators who are able to effectively interface with these devices daily. We need technicians who are able to creatively program these devices. Therefore, higher levels of math and science skill sets are needed in today’s manufacturing environment.”

Arnold, who is President and CEO of West Tennessee Healthcare and second vice chairman with the chamber, said West Tennessee Healthcare needs workers with “a sound education foundation.”

“We need graduates from our public school system who are prepared to enter the workforce, be successfully trained to be productive in today’s healthcare environment or to pursue post secondary education requirements for clinical and other positions in order to meet the growing demand for healthcare services,” Arnold said.

Ferguson, president of Personnel Placements in Jackson, said the Jackson-Madison County School System has a golden opportunity to be a pioneer for the state of Tennessee. He volunteers as co-chair of the chamber’s young professionals program, U40.

“If we as a community will collectively engage in the improvement of our public schools, we can develop a world class education system that is an asset to this community,” Ferguson said. “It will require a lot of time, a lot of sweat and will be complicated, but the results will be worth the effort.”

Spurgeon said if the business community and the school board work together, they can create one of the country’s best school systems.

“It is not our intent nor goal to do anything that would imply that the chamber is trying to take over our public school system or exert undue influence on this board,” Spurgeon said. “We simply want to offer our support.”

About Jackson Area Chamber of Commerce:

The Jackson Area Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1905 – seven years prior to the United States Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber consists of a diverse and talented staff, an executive committee, dedicated volunteers, and more than 1,350 business members – all committed to growing the economy and quality of life for everyone in Madison County and the region. Governed by a board of directors, The Chamber is a nonprofit that concentrates its efforts on economic development, which consists of marketing the area to potential employers, developing and enhancing minority and new business partnerships, workforce development, job creation, and the overall promotion of Jackson-Madison County as a great place to work, live, play and do business.

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