

## **Elected officials meet in Gardendale**

By Melanie Patterson

Talk has been ongoing for several years about expanding the Birmingham Jefferson Civic Center, but that does not make it old news.

About 30 elected officials discussed a BJCC expansion Friday morning at the Gardendale Civic Center for the monthly Jefferson County Elected Officials Meeting.

The topic centered on how an expansion would have an economic benefit on the area. A BJCC expansion would affect not only Birmingham, but also other parts of the county.

Mayor Kenneth A. Clemons of Gardendale is all for an expansion. "It would be excellent for Gardendale," said Clemons. "Anything that happens at the (Birmingham) civic center has an impact on our city."

Clemons, who is on the BJCC Authority board of directors, said that people who are attending events at the BJCC often stop in Gardendale to eat or to rent a hotel room.

And being even closer to Birmingham, Fultondale also gets its share of revenue from BJCC events.

"Kenny (Clemons) and I both support a BJCC expansion. It would be the biggest boom bar none," said Fultondale Mayor Jim Lowery. "Our proximity means that we get business here. An expansion would be good not just for Birmingham, but for all of north Jefferson County," Lowery said.

The featured speakers for the breakfast were Jack Fields, executive director of the BJCC, and Jim Smither, executive director of the Greater Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Fields said there are four areas in which the BJCC needs to expand: Available space, hotel rooms near the BJCC, dining and entertainment in the area, and accessibility. The most urgent need is space for conventions and trade shows, Fields said.

"We need meeting and exhibition space immediately," he said. "That's our primary goal."

Fields said a BJCC expansion of 150,000 to 200,000 square feet is needed to make Birmingham competitive with other cities for conventions and trade shows.

"Other Southern cities have recently expanded" their civic centers, he said, including Memphis, Savannah and Knoxville. Fields said the BJCC is currently used mostly for consumer shows by local groups.

"Consumer shows have become very successful," said Fields, but added that they restrict outside business and keep new money from coming in.

The need for hotels and restaurants near the BJCC is another area that Fields and Smither said Birmingham needs to improve. Smither said there are only 750 rooms within walking distance of the



BJCC that are "committable" to BJCC events. He said there needs to be 1,000 for Birmingham to be competitive with other cities for civic center business. The goal, he said, is to have 2,500.

"We're going to continue to lose business more and more," said Smither, if Birmingham does not get more hotels near the BJCC. The same is true for restaurants.

"Food availability is scattered throughout the metro area," Fields said. "It is certainly a necessity that there be dining and entertainment in the immediate area."

For these reasons, Birmingham is not a competitive city for gaining conventions and trade shows, according to Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, who has been organizing the monthly meetings for about a year.

The impact is significant. Smither showed figures from planned events at the BJCC through 2010. The BJCC has more than \$1 million in planned commitments, or money the BJCC will give to groups to have their events in Birmingham.

The estimated economic impact from those events is more than \$292 million, he said. Fields gave examples of the BJCC losing business because of limited space, restaurants and hotels. He said one college-related group decided not to have its 2009 meeting at the BJCC because of the lack of nearby hotels, restaurants and entertainment.

"They had decided not to come back to the BJCC," Fields said. "There was nothing in the immediate area for children and young people to do."

The group did not like the idea of college students taking a trolley to Five Points for food and entertainment.

"Due to that reason ... we were eliminated," Fields said. "That was 1,000 hotel rooms."

The total cost of expanding the BJCC will be more than \$600 million for a multipurpose complex. Fields said that cost includes retiring existing bonds, paying for a revitalization of the existing BJCC, and the needed expansion.

He said the main three funding sources would be the city of Birmingham, Jefferson County and the state. Fields said he has talked to Gov. Bob Riley about helping fund an expansion. He said Riley told him that the state would support the expansion only after the BJCC had gained financial commitments from the city and county.

Fields said the city of Birmingham has committed \$8.8 million, but that the majority of Jefferson County Commission members do not support the current BJCC expansion plan.

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