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## **Groups meet on Ellensburg economy**

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ELLENSBURG – What can be done to grow the Ellensburg economy?

Leaders from Kittitas County met Monday night with the Ellensburg City Council to brainstorm answers to this question.

No formal action was taken, but relaxed conversation between many economic development groups in Ellensburg and the county created ideas that attendees seemed to believe could generate some cash for Ellensburg.

Ellensburg's historic downtown and its large number of empty storefronts was a concern. But the council, Ellensburg Chamber of Commerce and the Ellensburg Business Development Authority suggested the community look past the brick structures to the surrounding areas.

"We had members telling us we're so focused on downtown, we didn't realize we had a business core outside of downtown," said Ron Cridlebaugh, chamber of commerce executive director.

Ellensburg has 1,600 business licenses, Cridlebaugh said, 256 are in the downtown.

The community needs more businesses, was a consensus among those who spoke Monday night.

The city council's recent decision to pursue a moratorium on regional retail, which would halt any project applications for at least six months, worries Cridlebaugh.

"A lot of feedback we're getting is you're trying to tell us you're open for business but we're getting a different message from the council," Cridlebaugh said.

The chamber is seeking help on how to make Ellensburg attractive to new businesses. Within 60 days, a team from Ellensburg will meet with business people on the West Side to shop this community.

"We're not going to sit here and wait for people to show up," chamber president Bob Hansen said. "We're going to go over there and rattle some cages."

The council can help by revising the light industrial ordinance in the city, Hansen said, a practical solution that may take time, but will broaden the requirements for more businesses to set up shop in town.

New business isn't the only means of pulling in cash, however.

State funding is available to groups in town, it's a matter of securing it, council member Fennelle Miller suggested.

"Successful communities are also the ones who are gobbling up the state funding," she said.

The opportunities exist and the money can be reinvested into the city, City Manager Ted Barkley said.

Give Ellensburg time, Ellensburg Downtown Association Executive Director Timothy Bishop said.

Part of the challenge with downtown is some buildings need tender loving care, he said, and investments are necessary to make those changes.

Bishop came from Walla Walla, where the downtown thrived after 10 years of gradual improvements. He believes Ellensburg can do the same.

But Ellensburg has its limits, County Commissioner Mark McClain said late in the meeting.

The city should pursue small businesses, not Microsoft or Google because this area simply can't compete on that level, he said.

McClain suggested making a tax-friendly environment to give businesses incentive to relocate to Ellensburg. The property and energy prices are not cheap like other cities, so a compromise should be reached between city and company, he said.

Susan Grindle, director of HopeSource spoke Monday night about a labor project her organization is working on.

Citizens want high-paying jobs in the area, according to Desmond Knutson.

Ideas are great, but words are empty without action, said council member Obie O'Brien, who would like to get moving on economic development.

"We've got to make some decisions," he said.

A similar discussion on regional retail is tentatively scheduled for Monday, March 25.