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E-mail: tribbz@greatfallstribune.com

Work force development group begins groundwork on project

By PETER JOHNSON
Tribune Staff Writer

A work force development group consisting of Great Falls business and education leaders formed subcommittees Tuesday to research ways the community can encourage students to start thinking earlier about potential careers in fields in which the area needs skilled workers.

It was the first meeting after a dozen educators and business people traveled to Kalispell last month for two days to study that city's successful work force development model.

Business leaders there have worked together with the school district and community college to identify needed community jobs, encourage high school freshmen to identify what careers they are interested in and structure classes and programs so that more students can get college credit in vocational and technical classes while in high school.

Great Falls Area Chamber of Commerce President Teresa Olds said she likes many aspects of the Kalispell plan, especially getting high school students to think of career goals earlier. A majority of high school students do fairly well in classes, but have no solid plans for what they'll do after they graduate, she said.

Mary Sheehy Moe, dean of Montana State University-Great Falls College of Technology, agreed, saying it's troubling that more Montana students don't take advantage of two-year colleges, which

can lead to good jobs. A lot of students "swirl between different four-year colleges and different majors," she said, adding that spending \$15,000 on the first year of college with vague plans and then dropping out is not a good investment.

Moe said it took Kalispell 10 years to develop the comfort level among the different schools and business officials to make its program work.

Great Falls Education Association President Mike Picking said "Great Falls doesn't have 10 years."

He said the city needs to get some aspects of the program going as early as next fall in order to help young adults, including his four sons, find a way to get the training for good jobs so they can stay in Great Falls.

Group members said they want to invite officials with MSU-Northern, the University of Great Falls, Great Falls Central Catholic High

School and nearby school districts into the discussion.

Moe said some smaller Hi-Line schools with declining enrollments could remain open longer if ways can be found to share teaching resources with the Great Falls district and area colleges through distance learning and other means.

The group plans to meet Jan. 8 to get updates on what the subcommittees have learned.

Reach Tribune Staff Writer Peter Johnson at 791-1476, 800-438-6600 or pjohnson@greatfallstribune.com.



Olds



Moe

Subcommittees to research issues

The group formed subcommittees that will do research in three areas:

- The school district's Assistant Superintendent Tom Moore, work force development facilitator Tom Kotynski and Picking, as well as MSU-Great Falls Associate Dean Joe Schaffer will put together reports on the vocational and technical programs that their schools offer, noting how successful they are. That will allow each school to learn more about what the other offers and help them coordinate and share teachers, classes and resources.

- Moe and Great Falls school trustee Steve Erwin will head an effort to determine what types of jobs Great Falls businesses need to fill and which types of skilled workers could help attract better paying companies. The subcommittee expects to conduct a survey of existing businesses in January.

The group also will work with the Great Falls Development Authority and the existing Chamber of Commerce Business Development Committee, which already are studying aspects of the issue. In addition, Moe will review earlier roundtable discussions in which medical and financial companies told MSU-Great Falls officials what skills they need in new workers.

- A third subcommittee headed by MSU-Great Falls Associate Dean Heidi Passé will research student success rates at two- and four-year colleges. It also will research how to better share career information among students, parents, teachers and counselors at different schools.