

Priorities on development come out of recent forums

By ARLA SHEPHARD
MASON COUNTY LIFE

Mason County residents prioritize industries involving tourism and recreation, as well as food processing and agriculture, among the types of businesses they'd like to see set up shop here.

The Economic Development Council of Mason County released key findings this month from a series of forums held this fall in Allyn, Belfair, Hoodport, Matlock and Shelton. The forums were designed to help the EDC develop its countywide Sparking Solutions strategic plan.

"One of the trends we saw were a couple areas that identified tourism as a high priority, while other areas wanted to build on the county's timber heritage," said Reid Vasek, EDC development associate. "Many also wanted to see more farm-to-table industries."

Unsurprisingly, the Hoodport community ranked tourism higher than other communities, with 22.8 percent of people selecting that industry as its No. 1 priority, while Matlock strongly favored agriculture (27.5 percent), which included shellfish aquaculture and small farms.

Matlock also prioritized the timber industry (27.1 percent), while the Allyn community selected manufacturing (17.8 percent) and retail (14.4 percent) as priorities.

Two forums in Shelton yielded somewhat similar results: At the first, respondents favored manufactur-

ing (16.4 percent) and food processing/agriculture (15.8 percent), while tourism (20.4 percent) and agriculture (19.6 percent) ranked higher the second time.

The Belfair forum was the first forum the EDC held, and while many industries were discussed, the agency did not ask people to prioritize industries, said EDC director Lynn Longan.

"We didn't realize until after that we weren't getting what we wanted and so we chose to have people vote and prioritize industries," she said.

Participants had 15 total votes to distribute among a list of industries that they themselves created.

One of the more surprising priorities to come out of the forums was the desire to see more technology schools.

"I thought it was really surprising and exciting because we don't really think of tech schools as an industry," Longan said. "You look at it as a workforce tool, so it was surprising that so many people thought of it as an industry. It wasn't particularly something I really thought about."

Participants in the first Shelton forum ranked trade schools as a priority (15.2 percent), Matlock residents favored education and technology centers (16.7 percent) and participants in the second Shelton forum also identified education and tech centers as a priority (9.6 percent).

Technology schools can be an industry all on its own while also supporting other industries, Vasek said.

"When someone goes to a tech school, say it's a six-

month program, they have to shop somewhere," he said. "I never really thought about it as an industry, but it does make sense."

Seventy-eight people attended the six forums, and others will be able to view the plan and submit comments online on the EDC's website.

The EDC plans to take the results and meet with officials from Mason County, the City of Shelton, the chambers of commerce and the various ports around the county in the coming months to discuss how the results can help shape those agencies' strategic plans.

"We want to ask what are you doing to support these industries, and what can you do to adopt these priorities as part of your strategic plans?" Longan said. "For example, with manufacturing, we can work with the Port of Shelton on what their key businesses are and what are they doing to grow in that field."

Next year, the EDC plans to submit another report to show the community its progress.

"I heard a lot of, 'We've done this before and nothing has happened,'" Longan said. "I don't think this will change things overnight, but it's a start. I think there's a lot of potential in this county."

To read the EDC's 2015 Sparking Solutions Strategic Plan, visit www.masonedc.com. To participate in a survey about the industries Mason County should prioritize, visit www.surveymonkey.com/s/FSQ2MDV. ■



PHOTO BY ARLA SHEPHARD

The Port of Allyn waterfront brings tourists to the area. Mason County residents prioritize industries involving tourism and recreation, according to the findings from a series of forums held by the Economic Development Council of Mason County.

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