

Report: Area needs more 'quality jobs'

by Shane Doyle

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Economic development in the Baltimore metropolitan area needs to focus on creating "quality jobs" and cultivating a skilled workforce, areas that have been lacking, a report released Thursday said.

The report by the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution said that faster growth in industries with low-wage jobs than in industries with mid- to high-wage jobs, and a lack of a sufficiently skilled workforce, are a large part of why 23 percent of the region's residents are classified as low-income. The report defines low-income as a family of four making less than \$46,630 a year.

Jobs in industries that provide mostly low-wage occupations, like retail and arts/entertainment, increased 62.5 percent between 1980 and 2007, compared to 35.9 percent for industries with mostly mid-wage jobs, and 9.6 percent for industries with primarily high-wage jobs, the report said.

The report, which was funded by the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, suggests the region should focus its economic development in industries like manufacturing, bioscience and information technology, which have higher proportions of mid-wage to high-wage jobs.

The report also calls for more workforce development opportunities to enable low-income residents to acquire the skills to land better-paying positions, along with the development of better public transportation so low-income workers can have access to those jobs.

Anirban Basu, chairman and CEO of Baltimore-based Sage Policy Group Inc., agreed with the report's recommendations, but said creating workforce development opportunities is only part of the battle.

"You can bring a horse to water, but you can't make it drink," Basu said. "The water here is career-orientated education, and what you have to hope for is that the workforce drinks from that water."

Jennifer S. Vey, who authored the report, agreed that increasing opportunities isn't the full answer.

"Part of this is an information issue," she said. "Low-income people might not always know about the opportunities that are available to them in the economy, and how to access those jobs and training."

Richard Clinch, director of economic development for The Jacob France Institute at the University of Baltimore, said he thinks the weaknesses outlined in the report are due to a lack of partnership between the private and public sector in creating a vision for the region's future, a notion Vey agrees with.

"Absolutely I think that is part of it," Vey said. "Everybody has a role to play, a lot of these efforts just need to be more coordinated."

Daraius Irani, director of the Regional Economic Studies Institute at Towson University, also agreed.

"We've not really created a vision of what we expect this place to be 20 or 30 years in the future," Irani said.

Clinch and Basu also said that the report's prescriptions are more simple economics than

anything new, but Irani said that's no reason not to take them seriously.

"It's easy to dismiss a simple idea by saying it's basic economics, but that is sort of not the point," Irani said. "The question is, 'Are we doing that?' And I don't think we are."

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