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DR. JOHN MCKNIGHT

County summit brings community leaders together

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For The Bulletin

Dr. John McKnight likes to tell the story about a mother who was alarmed when her daughter and her friends were on the verge of getting into mischief because they didn't have anything better to do.

She rallied other mothers with the same concerns and they found some interesting activities for the girls. They were exposed to art in the community and introduced to professionals who showed them they could have aspirations "beyond winning 'American Idol,'" McKnight said on Thursday at Westmoreland County's First Annual Community and Economic Development Summit.

They found a free place to meet, more teens joined and more adults became involved.

"How many grants did they have?" he asked more than 250 people who attended the summit at the Fred Rogers Center at St. Vincent College, in Unity Township.

There were none. Rather, he said, "One gifted woman had the power to have a vision and the ability to make it come true."

McKnight, on the faculty of Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., was the afternoon's keynote speaker. He is the co-author of *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*.

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The all-day summit was sponsored by Westmoreland Community Action in collaboration with The Smart Growth Partnership, The Community Foundation of Westmoreland County and PNC Bank. The focus was on collaborative efforts to enhance a community.

"A community is the space where you reside and it comes in all sizes," McKnight said, adding that what makes the biggest impact on society is what's done locally and personally.

"We are so intrigued with a national policy on the environment," he said. "But it's me. I decide what light bulb I will use, and how much waste I send to the garbage can. I decide on my transportation, so I decide on fuel consumption."

Building the best community, he said, requires tapping into local assets, the foremost being the skills, interests and abilities of local residents, and the groups of people who form countless associations such as clubs and youth groups.

"They represent the basic foundation of community change," McKnight said.

Local nonprofits and government institutions are another asset, as are physical assets like land and buildings. The economy is another asset and, he added, "The majority of all jobs in the United States are provided by small businesses."

Sandra Moore, the morning keynote speaker, is president of Urban Strategies of St. Louis, Mo., and leads a team of professionals who help to turn impoverished neighborhoods into safe and vibrant communities.

"You really have to focus on people and places," she said. "It doesn't matter if it's a rural, urban or small-town region. The challenges that people face and the objectives they want to obtain are the same ones that everyone has. We have to realize that we are all

the same, not different."

Breakout sessions covered, among other topics, eminent domain codes, improving rural policy, revitalizing areas within Westmoreland County, strategies for turning around vacant and abandoned properties, Pennsylvania's anti-slumlord bill and alternative energy.

Representatives from Eco Clean Burner Corp., Pittsburgh, demonstrated an add-on boiler heating unit that cuts industrial and commercial fuel costs. It works by burning granulated recycled plastic.

"It burns cleaner than fuel oil, is as clean as natural gas, there are no ashes or residue, and it gives you about 30-percent cost savings," CEO Gerald Driggs said. "Now only about 3 percent of our waste plastic is recycled and the rest goes into landfills, which is a huge burden on the landfills and a waste of energy."

It takes about a quart of fuel oil to get the unit started and running on its own plastic fuel. The flame it produces reaches 2,000 degrees.

"Is this sustainable?" Driggs said. "It's not wind and it's not solar, but there's an endless supply of waste plastic."

Participants came from seven counties, including Venango, Washington and Greene.

"This is info that they can take back to their own communities," Community Action CEO Tay Waltenbaugh said. "It's about being able to take a look at what assets there are and what partnerships and collaborations are possible."

Kirk Utzinger, president of the Community Foundation, noted that the summit brought together "some of the best talent across the region as well as the country."

"They are here to share what they know and to provide hope for all," he said.

Highlights of the summit can be seen on repeat broadcasts on PCTV cable, and on Community Action's website, www.WestmorelandCA.org.