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Upstate leaders hold forum on cooperation

Officials seek better regional, state, federal communication

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Elected officials from the Upstate kicked off a 2012 meeting series Thursday aimed at promoting collaboration in the 10-county region.

Nearly 100 county and municipal leaders gathered for the 90-minute meeting in the Zentrum at BMW Manufacturing Co. to discuss how they can better communicate and work with one another, as well as with state and federal legislators.

Thursday's meeting was a continuation of previous gatherings that involved local entities making short presentations and a panel discussion to help leaders interact and discuss ways to improve their cooperation.

"I think we're really starting to build some momentum," said Dean Hybl, executive director of Ten at the Top, an organization created in 2009 to encourage collaboration and planning in the Upstate.

"This is a place for relationships to be built. It's a great first step. Solutions are probably not going to be made here, but they will be made down the road based on the discussions that happen here."

The meeting was hosted by the Appalachian Council of Governments, Catawba Regional Council of Governments, Ten at the Top, Upper Savannah Regional Council of Governments, Upstate Chamber Coalition, Upstate Forever and the Upstate SC Alliance.

Hybl said the group hosted two meetings in 2011 and is targeting three meetings this year.

During the meeting, Dan Hamilton, chairman of the Upstate Legislative Caucus, gave a brief preview of the state's upcoming legislative session.

Reba Campbell, deputy executive director of the Municipal Association of South Carolina, and Josh Rhodes, staff attorney with the S.C. Association of Counties, also contributed to the legislative discussion.

Campbell said her group hopes to target certain issues, such as making it easier for cities to annex enclaves, allowing city residents to decide which infrastructure projects are important to them, rehabilitating abandoned and dilapidated buildings, and ensuring revenue collected by the state is returned to cities through the Local Government Fund.

U.S. Rep. Mick Mulvaney stopped in briefly to give leaders a few insights about the upcoming legislative season in Washington.

Chip Felkel, CEO of the Felkel Group, discussed South Carolina's upcoming Republican Presidential Primary.

"The South Carolina GOP Primary has become the Super Bowl of GOP primaries," Felkel said. "We should see a nice windfall from it. We should embrace it. ... We have an incredible opportunity to show the Upstate off."

The panel discussion portion of the meeting drew input from Spartanburg County Councilman David Britt, Butch Kirven, chairman of the Greenville County Council and Greer Mayor Rick Danner.

Britt said he would like to see better understanding from state officials of the duties carried out by county and municipal leaders.

"I think there's a gap there," Britt said. "I think meetings like this will help us bridge that."

Danner touted the collaborative spirit shared by the region's 600

elected officials.

“It’s important for us going forward to have these types of meetings,” he said. “They can be a great benefit to us. It’s really incredible to see this kind of gathering.”

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