

Editorial: Improving education levels one step toward raising income in Huntington

December 09, 2008 @ 08:10 PM

The Herald-Dispatch

At the personal level, Huntington's economy has been stagnant or even going backward this decade, according to information released Tuesday by the Census Bureau.

Data showed that household incomes in Huntington fell slightly between the 2000 census and 2007. Considering that Huntington started in a poor position compared with the rest of the nation, that was not good news.

About 46 percent of Huntington's households have incomes of less than \$25,000 a year, compared with 26 percent nationally. At the other end of the scale, only 7 percent of the city's households had income of \$100,000 or more, compared with 19 percent nationally.

The income data include what economists call "unearned income," such as Social Security and pensions. Almost one-third of the \$893 million in reported household income in Huntington came from sources other than wages or salaries.

"This is a city that is not improving economically," Cal Kent, vice president of the Center for Business and Economic Research at Marshall University, told The Herald-Dispatch reporter Bryan Chambers. "It explains a lot of our problems, such as housing. These are problems that can be traced back to the issue of our residents just not having the financial means."

The data also show the difficulty that fiscally strapped Huntington city government has when it tries to raise revenue through broad-based taxes and fees, Kent said.

"A lot of the higher-income individuals have moved outside the city, and they've taken the tax-paying ability with them," he said.

Some of Huntington's problems require action at the state level. Those would include making sure that West Virginia's business taxes and legal climate make it competitive with other states. And some rest with the education level of the city's residents. According to the new data, about half the city's residents age 25 and older have only a high school diploma or less. In today's economy, that's not the key to improving personal income.

There are signs things can turn around. Among them is the increased emphasis on community college education to train the area's work force for jobs of the 21st century. If people are truly as tired as they say they are of being at the bottom of as many lists that Huntington and West Virginia find themselves, they need to take advantage of this new educational opportunity and encourage their children and grandchildren to do so.

This hole was a long time in the making, and it will be a long climb out. But if we as a community prepare ourselves for improvement, it will come.

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