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New opportunities fair comes to county

BY SARAH LANG
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The Boone County Learning Network and the Boone County Economic Development Corporation are teaming up to bring a new opportunities fair to Boone County residents.

The Boone County Education & Career Opportunities Fair will be held from 5 to 8 p.m. Wednesday in the Witham Pavilion at the Boone County 4-H Fairgrounds.

"We're excited about this new prospect," said Dax Norton, executive director of the EDC. "It's the first time around, and it's a very unique event."

Instead of those interested in college or a new career change traveling around to the different colleges, universities and other organizations, the opportunities fair will bring everything together in one

place. Fifteen colleges and universities will be represented, along with several apprenticeship programs, the three county's high schools, and the U.S. Army National Guard, U.S. Army, U.S. Marines, U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy.

"It's an opportunity to come and check out what your options are, whether you're a traditional college student or an adult trying to re-track your career," said Audra Poe, executive director of the Boone County Learning Network.

Norton said this fair will be a very valuable tool as the county moves forward in economic development. When the economy rebounds, he said one worry will be whether there is a skilled work force to hire from.

"One way to assist a dislocated - unemployed or under-employed - work force is to enhance or raise their skill level," Norton said.

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Fair

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"I think it will be very profitable for those residents of Boone County who are at a crossroads, moving in a new career path, to start down that path of finding those skills to work in the 21st-century economy."

The county will need that skilled work force, Norton said, to continue to attract premium jobs to the area. Other than finding money for a project, that skilled work force is the No. 1 necessity when it comes to Boone County landing major projects.

"We're trying to be proactive here," he said. "We desperately need to take folks in the community and assist them in raising their skill level. We have a great work force, but we believe that a higher-skilled work force will enable them to raise their level of standard of living and level of pay, and that's our goal. That's true grassroots economic development."

This "desperately" needs to

be done, he said, because high school graduates who go on to college typically do not return to the county.

"We have great school systems," he said, "but those who are going on to college - we're not seeing them flood back into the community."

Zionsville, Western Boone and Lebanon high schools will be at the fair to answer any questions on financial aid in college and career planning, Poe said.

"It's really an opportunity for both parents and students to come and speak with counselors and get some of those questions answered," Poe said.

Break-out sessions at the fair will include topics like Indiana grants, how to find a job in this economy, career guidance and resume writing.

Poe and Norton both said the fair has attracted a lot of interest from the military, colleges and apprenticeship programs.

Colleges and universities represented will be Anderson University, DeVry University,

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Indiana University Kokomo, IUPUI, Indiana Tech Community College Fort Wayne, Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana Wesleyan University, Manchester College, Marian University, Martin University, St. Joseph College - Rensselaer Indiana, St. Mary of the Woods College, University of Indianapolis - MBA and Vincennes University.

Apprenticeship programs represented by Top Notch Indiana will be electricians, bricklayers, carpenters, teamsters, ironworkers, sheet metal workers, plumbers, steamfitters, operating engineers, laborers, cement masons, roofers, sprinkler fitters, painters, plasterers, insulators and millwrights.

There will be no job fair this year, Norton said. Instead, they are helping to support Congressman Steve Buyer's March 1 job fair.

For more information on the opportunities fair, visit the learning network's Web site at www.boonelearning.net.