

Sep 24, 2006

Children deserve good plan

A summit implies a meeting of high-ranking people coming to agreement on an important issue. In that regard, it was good news to see that about 30 influential people met last week to discuss what can be done to improve services for children. Those in attendance were from county government, the Legislature, public schools, law enforcement, social services and health departments and nonprofit groups. The county has plenty of groups that fund services, provide services or advocate for children, and no shortage of generous donors who rise to the challenge when a need is made known. But not all the needs are known. In fact, in a county with so many comfortable residents and such a high quality of life, the needs of the most vulnerable often remain unseen. Especially for children, poverty is very real. One in five Henderson County children lives in a home that is below the poverty level, and for those under six the rate is two in five. Previous plans have gotten sidetracked by natural catastrophes, lack of funding or other worthy needs, said former county commissioner Renee Kumor, one of the people who organized the meeting. Businessman Jeff Miller and Times-News publisher Ruth Birge joined Kumor in setting up and conducting the meeting. Birge, Kumor and Miller said they wanted to be sure a current study, undertaken by the Children and Family Resource Center at the request of county commissioners, did not suffer the same fate as a 2002 plan. "We did not want to see all this work just become part of one more report that was put on the shelf with the numerous other community assessments that are done year after year," Kumor said. "We agreed that it was time for a response from our leaders." She has a point. The well-being of children ought to be a high priority. One criticism of the meeting was that key groups such as the county's towns, the courts, the religious community and groups serving minorities were not included. But the leaders said they wanted to meet first with the people who could enact change or who control the purse strings. Future meetings will include towns, churches and minority groups. Having a good plan doesn't mean fixing everything at once. The plan ought to identify the most critical needs but also the low-hanging fruit -- improvements that can be achieved quickly. A good example is providing subsidized child care for the working poor. We already know there is a crying need for the service. The county has about 3,700 children eligible for the service, but the county's Department of Social Services has enough money to serve only about one-fifth of them. Even if the department had enough money to also serve another 400 children who are on a waiting list, that still leaves two-thirds of eligible children unserved. Providing child care helps parents hold down jobs and helps families work their way up to independence. At the same time, evidence is building that the county has a labor shortage, so making it easier for parents to work would also help businesses that need workers. Another example is establishing a family court in the county. Chief District Court Judge Robert Cilley has made changes to better

address family cases, but the cases are still mixed in with the district court's docket of traffic, worthless check and larceny cases. A court dedicated to family matters would handle those cases more efficiently and possibly speed the return of children to their families. The summit was more of a start on many of these issues. The fact that so many were persuaded to attend is encouraging. This is a community that cares, and when it comes to our most vulnerable population that caring spirit ought to be galvanized into action.

Copyright © 2006 BlueRidgeNow.com