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Wanted in E. Ky.: young professionals Region suffers challenges in jobs, image

By Dori Hjalmarson
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ASHLAND — Eastern Kentucky loses young professionals because of a lack of jobs, but it also suffers from the incorrect perception that there is no opportunity in the region, young people said Friday at the East Kentucky Leadership Conference.

There are jobs and a lack of qualified applicants, said Jason Benedict, a Minnesota native who moved from Florida to Paintsville and runs a non-profit home-repair organization and a mediation business.

"We don't seem to have people as skilled, so for people moving here, jobs may be a plus," Benedict said.

Through his connections in the non-profit sector, he has run across people from out of state who are willing to move to Eastern Kentucky for teaching and other jobs.

The conference itself — heavy with seminars and speeches by established older leadership — is an example of a perceived lack of diversity, said Carolyn Sundy, an East Kentucky Leadership Foundation board member.

The region is full of "old heads who won't relinquish the power," said Sundy, a professor of cultural diversity at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College in Harlan County.

Sundy said she was inspired by sessions on women in politics and by the new group Young Professionals of Eastern Kentucky, or YPEK.

"If everybody here thought like that at this conference ... 'Who am I lifting up?'" the place would be more attractive for young people to return to after they get their educations, Sundy said.

Lifestyle questions are important to young professionals, especially if they've had a taste of city life, said Lisa Conley, a Wolfe County native who is getting her doctorate at Eastern Kentucky University and works at the University of Kentucky's Appalachian Center.

"I would love to go back, buy a farm and grow food, but I also want to be a professor," and the commute from Wolfe County to a professor's job is too much, Conley said.

Zak Pence, a communications specialist with the Appalachian Center in Lexington, is from Bluefield in southern West Virginia.

"It's a nice idea to move back home, but as a young person, it's not that attractive," Pence said. He said he would miss cultural opportunities, public transportation and city life.

Hilda Legg, a conference presenter who sat in on a session by YPEK, said she thinks Eastern Kentucky needs to overcome the perception that there are no jobs. The region needs a sense of empowerment and entrepreneurship.

"We've taught our children to leave, that there's no opportunity," Legg said.

YPEK board member and West Liberty lawyer Johnathan Gay ticked off a list of rural high-tech companies based in rural Kentucky. He pointed to Garrard County's attraction of Mine Shields, a mining-safety equipment company, as an example of a business that will attract young professionals to stay or return home. He said YPEK is trying to identify the new generation of leadership for the region.

"The challenge is when you come back to these areas, you have to make your own way," Gay said.