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## Economy on menu at forum

### Breakfast teleconference first of its kind for state

By Laurie Whalen

*Posted today at 4:40 a.m.*
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FAYETTEVILLE — Kathy Deck, the director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, declared the recession to be technically over Wednesday morning during the first-ever Arkansas Economic Issues Breakfast.

But, to the average consumer, "it doesn't feel like we're out of a recession," Deck said.

The average American is still attempting to rebound from layoffs, declining home and retirement portfolio values and an uncertainty about the future, she said.

Deck and research counterparts in Jonesboro and Little Rock broadcast economic data to audiences in Fort Smith, Jonesboro, Magnolia, Monticello and Pine Bluff, who assembled on private and public university campuses or at Acxiom Corp. headquarters in downtown Little Rock.

More than 800 people were estimated to participate in the event intended to help shape regional and state economic issues to be brought up for discussion in future sessions. The next forum is March 17.

Jim Youngquist, executive director of the Institute for Economic Advancement at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, said many of the event's attendees were also included in the focus groups that had met weeks before the breakfast that will continue evolving in its organization and content.

Participants on Wednesday were also recruited to narrow a list of issues ranking the importance of topics ranging from funding for education and transportation to Arkansas' usury law.

Jennifer LaPerre, a business development representative with Mercy Health System of Northwest Arkansas, said the data helped attendees figure out the direction the economy is heading.

But LaPerre said she found the interaction with others in attendance more useful.

"I applaud the university for seeking input from all disciplines in the industry," she said.

About 175 people turned out for the presentation at UA's business school and which was

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led by Deck.

Youngquist said future sessions will likely increase university and attendee participation.

After a subject area has been chosen "all universities will be asked to contribute something," he said. "And we'll all be interconnected and be able to share" information.

Alice Mahony, an El Dorado community member who also sits on the state's Board of Education, said the event reassured her that the Louisiana border community is not isolated from the rest of the state.

"It's good to have people come together," she said echoing a theme touched on in Gov. Mike Beebe's opening remarks.

Beebe, a Democrat, said networking to result from the event would help set the stage to take ideas to the next level.

Beebe assured attendees that what was good for Little Rock was good for Texarkana as well as other communities in the state.

"We're in this together," he said.

To contact this reporter:

**[lwhalen@arkansasonline.com](mailto:lwhalen@arkansasonline.com)**

*Business, Pages 25, 30 on 10/01/2009*

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