

Local leaders seeking dividends from White House trip

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Local business leaders are hoping to turn a productive business briefing into definitive benefits for the Memphis business community.

More than 30 local business leaders traveled to Washington, D.C. on Feb. 3 to participate in a Business Leader Briefing at the White House as part of the White House's Business Leader Briefing Series. The series selects business people from various cities to interact with administration officials about issues including health care reform implementation, infrastructure

development and access to capital.

The briefing series is conducted by Business Forward, an organization that works with leaders in 31 states to address concerns of the business community. The mission of the Washington D.C.-based organization, founded in 2009, is to bring more business leaders into the policy-making process.

"White House officials were more than a little eager to hear directly from Memphis leaders on issues important to the area's economy and ideas for spurring job growth," [Bert Kaufman](#), vice president of Business Forward, said in a statement.

The Memphis group met with senior White House officials, including [Mark Doms](#), Chief Economist, Department of Commerce; [Beth Osborne](#), Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Department of Transportation; [David Kappos](#), Under Secretary of Commerce for Intellectual Property and director of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, Department of Commerce; [Rachana Bhowmik](#), Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy White House Cabinet Secretary; and [Brad Cooper](#), executive director, White House Joining Forces Initiative.

[Roby Williams](#), president of the **Black Business Association of Memphis**, who attended the briefing, called the meeting very productive, saying attendees need to take advantage of what they learned and the connections they made.

"It's time for us to move forward and develop practices and programs to work with the White House as well as our mayors and the governor," Williams said. "Most urban areas face the same problems, so if we can do that, we can make some things happen."

The group also discussed public/private partnerships that could address issues like workforce development.

"It's not just the curriculum that's lacking, it's the ability to find and employ good teachers. And sometimes college isn't the answer," [David Kemme](#) executive director of the Memphis Economic Club, said. "We need more trade certification programs, and other workforce development courses to train young people to work in manufacturing and other industries."

[Juan Self](#), a principal with **Self Tucker Architects**, who also attended the briefing, said that as Memphis continues to land major manufacturers like **Electrolux Home Products Inc.** and **Mitsubishi Power Products Inc.**, the quality of the workforce the city has to offer will become more important.

"I think it will have a great impact in short order, but there are still a lot of things that need to happen in the long term," Self said. "We have a commitment for some follow-up meetings with people from the administration and we want to regroup to ensure that we're getting the resources we need here in Memphis."

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Williams said the group needs to make sure the dialogue remains open.

"We need to follow up with specific ideas or further discussion on how to move the needle on projects, initiatives, practices and/or programs, which will have an immediate and long-range impact on the current business and economic and workforce issues (in Memphis)," Williams said. "Improving the manufacturing base improves the economy, so we must construct initiative programs to reboot manufacturing capacity. We went from a manufacturing economy to a service economy and wages fell. The next economy is a knowledge-based economy, so we have to be prepared for that."

Michael Sheffield covers bioscience and biotechnology; manufacturing; tourism and hospitality; and sports business. Contact him at msheffield@bizjournals.com.