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County maps way as governor touts computer science

by [Jordan Gass-Pooré](#) | July 2, 2015 at 3:07 a.m.

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BATESVILLE -- Gov. Asa Hutchinson touted computer science education opportunities in Arkansas during an economic development meeting Wednesday.

A survey initiative, Impact Independence County, that asks residents to identify Independence County's needs and create a plan to meet those needs was discussed and distributed at the meeting at Independence Hall on the University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville campus.

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Hutchinson signed legislation in February that requires all Arkansas public and charter high schools to offer computer science courses beginning with the 2015-2016 school year.

"The next Bill Gates, the next developer, the next idea could come from here," he said.

Education is one of the six Impact Independence County focus areas. The others are health care, leadership, economic development, tourism and housing.

Community members who attended the meeting Wednesday night provided input on each area and elected to participate in the planning process on a subcommittee through the anonymous survey.

"Transparency is No. 1 in this process," Crystal Johnson, president and chief executive officer of the Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce, told the about 350 audience members.

In addition to the community meeting, black cardboard kiosks are set up at grocery stores and gas stations around the county -- population 36,647 -- until Aug. 30 so that residents who couldn't attend the meeting will still have an opportunity to complete a survey. The survey will also be available online.

Survey results will be made public by Sept. 1 and, at that time, subcommittees will be formed to look into the main areas of concern or potential development, Johnson said.

Once those are identified, a master document will be created and used by the Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce to implement ideas that may help spur economic growth.

Deborah Frazier, University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville chancellor, said Impact Independence County not only provides an outlet for residents' opinions, but may also make the area more appealing to private investors and federal and state grant committees.

Independence County could be linked to what Hutchinson referred to as "supply chain drivers" in the state.

The proposed expansion of Lockheed Martin's Camden operation to manufacture military vehicles may have benefits beyond that city's industrial park.

If it is awarded the contract, Lockheed Martin will utilize suppliers up to 175 miles from its production facilities, the governor said.

"When I'm looking to grow the workforce, I'm looking at Batesville and Independence County to set the way," he said.

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The initiative was launched by the Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce, Lyon College and the University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville.

Although Impact Independence County is a volunteer-based project, the Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce is leading and staffing the initiative.

Impact Independence County is primarily funded by the Batesville/Independence County Economic Development Foundation, but donations are also being accepted.

Johnson said the Independence County Economic Development Foundation has received \$25,000 in donations as of a week ago.

More information, including surveys and an opportunity to donate, is available at www.impactindependencecounty.com.

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