

ST. THOMAS SOURCE

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BY JAMES GARDNER — APRIL 5, 2016

EDA Kicks Off Public Education Campaign at Local Schools



[1]Members of the territory’s Economic Development Authority kicked off a public education campaign Tuesday with a stop in at Ivanna Eudora Kean High School, where they tried to address “myths” about their organization and speak to students about available job and scholarship opportunities.

“We have public education mandates for our beneficiaries and we felt that we also had that mandate,” said Margarita A. Benjamin, director of applications for the Economic Development Commission, after the presentation. “We have been hearing within our community that our public schools

are still being left behind by some of the companies that we try to have working with them and we felt that our students needed to know what opportunities are out there for them within our programs.”

Benjamin spoke to students about the importance of economic development and how the agency contributes to improving the quality of life in the territory. Controlling inflation, building employment, providing services to the disadvantaged and improving the overall business climate are all parts of the EDA’s mission and Benjamin said all beneficiaries also have a commitment to developing the local education system.

“There are myths about the program that are out there, that we are doing nothing for the local economy, that we are ‘giving away the place,’ that our beneficiaries are not hiring locals and are contributing to corporate welfare,” she said. “Now, when you hear these comments, you can counteract in a positive way, with information about what we do and how we try to benefit the economy.”

Looking around the room, Benjamin asked the students, all part of Kean’s Career and Technical Education Program, about their future and career goals.

Students thinking about becoming accountants, entrepreneurs, stock managers or even looking ahead to investing in a retirement plan can all take advantage of the programs EDA offers, she said.

Learning about the agency and its beneficiaries can also open up career opportunities.

“We don’t want our students to go away to college or start their career and never come back home,” Benjamin said. “Part of our mission is creating jobs with meaningful salaries and, as students, we want you to know what opportunities exist. These companies are looking for students or residents with the skill sets needed to fill their positions, and we want you to be able to come back home and work within them.”

While many companies come in from off-island, Benjamin said there are also many local beneficiaries that have been part of the program, including the former St. Thomas Dairies and Cruzan Rum.

Any company must hire at least five to 10 local employees based on the size of the business, fill 80 percent of its positions with local residents (here in the territory for more than one year), and fill 20 percent of management or supervisor positions with locals (this can be completed within three years,) contribute \$3,000 to the Board of Education, \$2,500 to the Labor Department and provide educational scholarships, among other things.

“So the myth that these are companies that are just coming in to tear the shirts off our backs is just that, a myth,” Benjamin said the presentation. “Our benefits are marketed to companies that can help grow the territory by hiring local residents and bringing in new dollars and our students need to know how they can tap into that, either through jobs or scholarships that are offered.”

Other speakers Tuesday spoke about the EDA’s Enterprise Zone Commission Program, its compliance efforts, lending programs and energy initiatives. The next presentation will be held Friday at Charlotte Amalie High School.

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