Meeting Notes – Aug. 30, 2022 –

The LaFayette Rotary Club met on Tuesday, August 30, 2022. President Dr. Abby Adams was responsible for the program and had invited Gordon Stone, executive director of the Higher Education Partnership and mayor of the town Pike Road. The Higher Education Partnership advocates to strengthen the standing of Alabama's 14 four-year universities and communicates the critical role higher education plays in the economic well-being of the state. Mayor Stone spoke on the value of higher education to the health and growth of Alabama communities and how higher education serves to better the lives of the people of Alabama.

Mayor Stone compared his experience of being raised in Pine Apple, Alabama to his adult experience of living in and leading the town of Pike Road. Pine Apple is a town that had once prospered but, like so many areas in the state, gone into economic and population decline as the labor demands and labor market changed. In contrast, Pike Road grew from a population of 350 in 2004 to about 9,5000 currently. The citizens were interested in uniting in purpose to better their community. The four areas of focus were planning, education, services, and quality of life. As a result of their hard work, one of their many accomplishments was the creation their own city school system in 2010 which now serves 2500-2700 students. They have 100% parent participation in the PTO at all four of their schools.

Mayor Stone attributes the growth and success of Pike Road to the mindset that quality of life can be improved through education. It will not matter where you are from, urban or rural, wealthy or poor, if the values of DREAM BIG, EDUCATE BIG and DO BIG are instilled in the children of the community. He believes young children need to have a dream and a pathway to achieve that dream. That is where higher education comes in. While he readily admits that not all students need to go to college, children need to be motivated and encouraged to go to college if that is the pathway for their dream.

Alabama currently ranks 46th nationally in per capita income. We are 7th from the bottom in terms of poverty. Twenty-six percent (26%) of the Alabama work force has a four-year degree, compared to 33% nationally. Mayor Stone believes we need to raise our sights for the types of jobs we want in our communities and our communities need to raise a diverse and well-educated workforce so that jobs will come to and remain in Alabama. In addition to the programs of studies taught at the universities, the universities teach students how to work collaboratively, to work with a diverse group of people, and to evaluate new ideas and evolve as needed. These are the soft skills needed in our workforce if our communities are to thrive.

Diane Sherriff