Roanoke region needs to 'start getting those storks busy', economist says

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Regional economist Terance Rephann joked that he would try to avoid offending his audience Wednesday at Virginia Western Community College. And he seemed to succeed, even though his overall presentation was a few graphs shy of upbeat.

Rephann, an economist with the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, said deaths in the Roanoke Metropolitan Statistical Area are close to outpacing births.

He said it’s time to “start getting those storks busy.” Or, barring a reproductive rebound, the Roanoke MSA can continue efforts to attract and retain young professionals — a goal long identified by just about everybody in the region who gives a hoot about its future.

Rephann spoke during a Business Summit hosted Wednesday by the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce at VWCC’s Whitman Auditorium.

Rephann said the Roanoke MSA, which includes the cities of Roanoke and Salem and the counties of Botetourt, Craig, Franklin and Roanoke, is attracting some “long distance migrants” who arrive with graduate or professional degrees.

Yet, generally, he said, the Roanoke metro area “lags behind on important measures of a high performance economy,” including lagging rates of educational attainment and a low concentration of high-tech industries.

No news there.

Rephann said the numbers improve if the Roanoke metro area sucks in data from Montgomery County.

Wednesday’s summit also included a panel discussion titled “Retaining Young Professionals/Building Regional Talent.” The panel featured three presidents of regional academic institutions. They were Robert Sandel, VWCC; Nancy Gray, Hollins University; and Nathaniel Bishop, Jefferson College of Health Sciences.

Kay Dunkley, director of the Virginia Tech Roanoke Center, moderated.
Sandel said that about 85 percent of VWCC’s students stay in the region after attending classes or graduating from the community college. Bishop said survey responses suggest that about 50 percent of JCHS graduates remain in the region.

Gray said that although most Hollins students are not from the Roanoke metro area about 31 percent of the class of 2014 elected to stay after graduation.

The three presidents said they work well together when collaboration seems to offer benefits for students and their institutions.

“We look to find ways to complement each other,” Bishop said.

And the trio said VWCC, Hollins and JCHS also work to introduce students to the region’s quality of life amenities, such as touting the many opportunities for outdoors recreation and schooling them about Roanoke’s downtown.

“We are really trying to make a concerted effort to connect students to the Roanoke Valley,” Gray said.