# Congressional forum studies ‘Campbellsville Comeback’

*City rallied after suffering loss of 3,200 jobs to outsourcing*

**Bowling Green Daily News**
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Tuesday, May 11, 2004

CAMPBELLSVILLE — Many towns across America are facing a situation that Campbellsville found itself in during 1997 and 1998, according to U.S. Rep. Ron Lewis, R-Cecilia.

At that time, Fruit of the Loom let 3,200 jobs go overseas to save costs at its plant in Taylor County, with a population of 22,000.

Instead of giving up, the city pulled together. The town has since added 13 new employers, including Amazon.com. More than 3,700 jobs have been created from those employers and expansions from others, according to Lewis’ office.

There are two reasons that the so-called “Campbellsville Comeback” occurred, according to Kevin Sheilley, executive director of Team Taylor County, the organization in charge of economic development for the county.

Sheilley said Monday that leadership immediately stood up and said they couldn’t let Campbellsville die. He said they didn’t care about politics, nor about who got credit. They only cared about results.

“The biggest thing is there is nothing like a crisis to pull people together,” Sheilley said. “You can forget about tertiary turf battles,” he said. When everyone pulls together, such a comeback “can happen in any community.”

Monday, Lewis brought together a roundtable of local leaders and two House Ways and Means Committee members at Campbellsville University to discuss Campbellsville’s comeback, in hopes that lessons from this town could be transferred elsewhere in the United States.

California Congressman Wally Herger, chairman of the Ways and Means Human Resources Subcommittee, and Illinois Congressman Phil Crane, chairman on the Ways and Means Trade Subcommittee, both Republicans, attended the roundtable.
The committee has jurisdiction over trade and unemployment benefits legislation and also plays a key role in charting the nation’s economic vitality through its control of personal and corporate tax policy, Lewis said.

Helen Parker, a representative of Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, also attended.

The congressmen and audience of about 30 listened to two former Fruit of the Loom employees, Lana Wright and Karen Brockman, discuss their experiences after the closure.

Wright had worked at Fruit for 15 years. She was shocked at being let go, but she also saw an opportunity.

She went back to school, along with many other former Fruit employees, with the help of federal financing.

Campbellsville University embraced the former employees, while the kids "hated us" – the former Fruit employees actually studied and did their work, Wright joked.
The closure affected not only her, but also her family. Numerous relatives also had worked there.

"It can be devastating," she said. "But everybody in Campbellsville got together – I think the work ethic in Taylor County is the best."

Brockman had started working for Fruit right out of high school and had been there nine years.

"When it came time to leave, I was scared," Brockman said. She also attended Campbellsville University, and earned an associate's degree in office management, after which she found a new job.

"I now work with other people who had worked at Fruit," Brockman said.

J.R. Wilhite, commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Community Development, spoke at the roundtable.

"When you have a business close, it comes to be a mission of creating real jobs in real time for real people," Wilhite said. "There were no turf battles, no split agendas."

The community pulled together to make it attractive to other business. He went on to talk about the state as a whole.

Last year Kentucky sold more than $10.7 billion worth of exports to 163 foreign markets, Wilhite said. He estimated that more than 47,000 jobs exist in the commonwealth to create those exported products.

Between 1997 and 2003, Kentucky ranked 10th in the nation in exported goods, he said.
Crane commended the university for retraining many of the workers, and congratulated Sheilley for his work.

He also asked how the foreign companies learned of the work force available in Campbellsville.

In one case, a connection was made to a new companies from Brazil as a result of a decade-long international relationship with Baptists through the university, replied John Chowning, vice president for Church and External Affairs at Campbellsville University. Crane also wanted to know how Wright and Brockman got back into education after they lost their jobs.

Brockman said when she realized it would be paid for by federal funds, she went for the opportunity.

“Who wouldn’t want to further their education?” Brockman asked.

Herger commended Campbellsville’s story, especially in the current atmosphere of many negative tales about outsourcing.

“You gave the example of this community – you gave the example of insourcing,” Herger said.

He was also amazed that 341 foreign companies operate in Kentucky, including companies from Europe, Japan and Mexico.

“It’s an incredible story, a secretive story,” Herger said. “You’re the role model on how to take the bull by the horns. We want to study this and take this out.”

He pondered if the success came from the uniqueness he found in Campbellsville – its location in the Bible Belt and its “can-do,” “roll-up-your-sleeves” attitude.
Chowning said the North American Free Trade Agreement’s Transitional Adjustment Assistance program, which helped retrain a significant number of former Fruit employees, was key.

“Livelong learning is a reality in this market,” Chowning said.

Sheilley said government programs that work best are ones with local control, making it possible to find out what each local employer needs. He also felt it critical for federal lawmakers to keep some discretionary money, which could bypass state or regional control.

Chowning also identified one example of how the entrepreneurial spirit had “bubbled up” in Campbellsville.

Former Fruit employees got together and started Campbellsville Apparel, a company now is under contract with U.S. Armed Forces to make T-shirts and men’s briefs. Lewis said success starts with personal responsibility.

Those in Campbellsville had to have a vision of what they wanted to accomplish, partisan politics aside, Lewis said. He said they shouldn’t reach a point and stop, or rest on their

success.
“The worst thing a community can do is have all its eggs in one basket,” Lewis said.
Crane left the roundtable impressed with what was done right in Campbellsville.

“I’m overwhelmed that the community pulled together,” Crane said. “The values are very high of the people that recognized the need to reeducate.”

In taking some of these lessons home to Chicago, he wondered how they could be applied to some of the community colleges in his district.

“How do you develop this sense of community in big cities?” he asked.

Herger brought away the joy of discussing something positive in the realm of foreign trade.

“We rarely hear about insourcing,” Herger said. “The results have been nothing short of phenomenal. A lot of places are down and out because of job loss, but here there’s hope.”