

Officials: New nation ripe for business, trade with county

by Lindsey Robbins, Staff Writer

As part of ongoing efforts to bolster Prince George's economic presence in Africa, county officials hosted a roundtable discussion Monday on emerging business opportunities in the newly formed South Sudan.

And as part their global outreach initiatives, they also announced a trade mission to India, scheduled for November.

More than 100 businesspeople attended the gathering, which was hosted at the Prince George's Economic Development Corp.'s headquarters in Upper Marlboro. It was sponsored by U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mitchellville, along with the county's Africa Trade Office and the Association of Maryland Africa Societies.

"This is an opportunity to play a major role in building a nation," said Patricia Hayes-Parker, executive director of the Africa Trade Office.

South Sudan — which had a gross domestic product of \$30 billion in 2010, according to federal data, and derives 98 percent of its revenues from oil exports — seceded from Sudan in July following a voter referendum. Because of its new independence and the region's history of civil war, economic development in South Sudan represents an array of challenges and opportunities, roundtable leaders said.

"As it emerges, we can profit them and they can profit us," Hoyer said.

Hoyer has a history of involvement in South Sudan, including traveling there in 2007 as part of a diplomatic mission.

Princeton N. Lyman, the U.S. special envoy for Sudan, said the country has significant opportunities for growth in the agricultural, education technology, tourism and mineral fields, as well as infrastructure to support new roads.

"I encourage all of you to look for an opportunity to invest in trade to better this country," he said.

But along with their encouragement, Lyman and Hoyer also cautioned businesses about potential challenges in South Sudan. Corruption often is tied to oil production, there is instability around the new north-south border as the two countries struggle to find peace.

The Africa bureau of the U.S. Agency for International Development, whose mission is to provide economic and humanitarian assistance worldwide, also is analyzing key investment sectors in South Sudan, along with engaging in efforts to improve regulatory framework on land use in the region, said Raja Jandhyala, deputy assistant administrator for the bureau.

She warned business representatives that because South Sudan is new, they might have to work harder to gain trust in the country, which might view them as interlopers who want to tell them what to do with their land.

"The biggest issue is security," said Bernard M. Wright, president of Wright Consultants & Associates in Bowie. "We've been looking at quite a bit of work over there. ... There's a lot of development waiting to happen."

Emmanuel Hakim, manager of EMF Construction Firm in Bel Air, traveled to South Sudan in May. He reiterated the need for improved roads to facilitate development, adding the country has many areas that are ripe for investment, especially in construction and contracting. Hakim, originally Sudanese, has done work in Uganda and Kenya and said he was hoping to learn what opportunities were available in connection with U.S. government work.

Another element of the county's global focus involves a trade mission to India toward the end of November. Details were not immediately available; they are to be announced Oct. 5.

The county's last foreign trade mission, in January, involved sending 10 Bowie State University students to Ethiopia for two weeks to represent Prince George's business interests.

In an earlier trade mission to Cameroon in 2008, Fort Washington construction company Hardie Industries forged a \$122 million deal with Millennium Challenge Corp. to rehabilitate airport runways throughout Ghana.

The Africa Trade Office supported more than \$171 million in business deals last year, mostly to local businesses, and has yielded 18 partnerships through trade shows, forums, trade missions and general support of international trade, Hayes-Parker said.