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Economic summit results in action list

Almost two dozen leaders in local business and industry sat down earlier this week to craft a list of actions that could help improve the local economy in Citrus County and set the stage for a quicker recovery when the greater economy begins to improve.

The group was called together and hosted at what was billed as a local economic summit by Citrus County Administrator Anthony Schembri. It was facilitated by the promotions manager at the Citrus County Chronicle, Neale Brennan, who is professionally trained in facilitating such groups in this kind of endeavor.

After generating 106 possible actions, the participants grouped the ideas by category as much as possible and then voted on what they felt were the most important, feasible and practical actions. The group narrowed the field of actions as much as they could into categories and then voted. The result was actions in eight categories: impact fees, a business park, education, government processes, marketing, transportation, federal programs, and lowering the tax burden.

Schembri was pleased with the outcome. "In convening this group, we brought the business talent of Citrus County together for a purpose, he said, adding, "and the group gave us tools for action." The representatives from business and industry were augmented by the development services director for the county, the city managers from Inverness and Crystal River, the provost for Central Florida Community College's Citrus campus, the CLM Workforce director, a longtime member of the local SCORE chapter, and an economics expert from the University of Central Florida.

That economist, Sean Snaith, Ph.D., is the director of the Institute for Economic Competitiveness at the university. To set the stage for the brainstorming, he reviewed the current situation and gave an economic forecast for the next few years.

The participants included bankers, builders, Realtors, and business owners, as well as representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Council (EDC). After choosing the most important actions, the participants broke into groups to brainstorm how the selected actions could be implemented.

They listed a goal, a structure, a timeframe, how it would be measured and what had to take place to make it happen. Within the categories the groups came up with the following:

Impact Fees:

- *Impose a two year moratorium on all impact fees.*
- *Commission a new impact fee study based on Current Capital Improvement Plan.*
- *Reduce or eliminate change of use fees.*

The group said the qualifications of the consultant used for the study should be reviewed by a blue ribbon task force, and the process should begin immediately, with the request for bids for a new consultant going out in January.

County officials would have to begin working on changing the ordinances on fees and change of use, the commission would have to pass the ordinances, and the commission would have to authorize a request for bids, the group said. Also, the commission would set a two year time frame for the whole process.

Business Park:

- *Create a new business park at the Inverness Airport*

The EDC would take ownership of the park, with input from the cities of Inverness and Crystal River. The park should be deeded over by June 2009, allowing six to 12 months for applications and permitting. Phase I construction would begin by Jan. 1, 2011.

For the park to become a reality, the property would have to be transferred, all the permitting would have to be done, the federal funding sought (for example, from the FAA), the investors would have to be found, a reduced rate lease program would have to be created and implemented, and a marketing program would have to be carried out to bring the new firms in.

Education:

- *Significantly increase participation in Dual Enrollment in AP and IB programs for local high school students to save their families money on college costs.*
- *Bring new university programs for four-year degrees to the Citrus CFCC campus.*

The Citrus School Board would have to work with the president of CFCC. The dual enrollment program is already in place and would only need to be expanded with more parents and students understanding the economic value of the program. The goal for expanded four-year programs should be Spring 2009. Success in the two areas would be measured by increased dual enrollment and the number of local four-year degrees. It would require a marketing effort and community support.

Marketing the County:

- *Attract outside economic resources, such as new homeowners and new businesses.*

This would be executed via the creation of a task force to identify what is currently being done by various groups like the Tourism Development Council, the Chamber of Commerce, local government, the private sector and others.

All the interests would be brought together for a unified effort. The task force would be appointed and begin its work immediately. Success would be measured by the cooperative vision created between the various groups.

Government Processes:

- *Improve government attitude*

The aim would be to improve attitude in county government and would begin immediately through training. Measurement of success would be through the rate of complaints over a two year period. In a light moment in the deliberations, Development Services Director Gary Maidhof quipped that what was needed to make it happen was his retirement.

- *Identify economic impacts of new or revised regulations*

This should be done by a joint public/private review committee, and it should begin immediately and be ongoing. For it to happen, all comprehensive plan changes sent for state review must include economic impact information. An evaluation report should be done six months after the policy is adopted.

- *Instill customer service skills to government regulators through training.*

The action should begin within 30 days and be ongoing. Success would be measured through satisfaction forms of customers and the Internet where comments could be made.

- *Identify and eliminate regulatory duplication*

This would be done via a committee and would start within 30 days. An evaluation report would be done in six months. This "Rules and Procedures Review Committee" would be composed of private sector stakeholders, and process critiques would be given to the county administrator.

Federal programs:

Local government entities, including special tax districts and CFCC, would identify infrastructure needs for proposals to the federal government and the new administration, which intends to propose new programs that would bring dollars and jobs to the county.

This should be completed by March 31, 2009. To be successful, contact has to be established with the appropriate federal agencies, and the area's federal legislative delegation must be given the information, and their support must be enlisted. The information must be in the proper format when submitted.

Lower the tax burden:

- *Adopt a five-year plan to bring county tax spending back to the per capita level of 2001 (plus inflation)*

There would be annual benchmarks and the success would be measured by the tax burden per capita.

- *Create a task force of local business and government leaders to analyze consolidation of, and reduced spending by, local government.*

The public/private task force should be in operation within 60 days and would be augmented by an advisory board of business leaders who would work with county staff to create an equitable tax system for business.

Transportation:

- *Establish effective planning organization to address short term and long term answer to short and long term transportation needs.*

For the short term needs, this would be accomplished by a joint public and private task force, basically a Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) that would be operational in six to 12 months. For longer term needs, a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) would be required, and the TPO would evolve into or be replaced by that, (An MPO is required by the federal government for transportation planning when an area or region reaches a certain population and density. These groups have advantages in securing funding).

The MPO would be operational within three to four years. Success would be measured by how the county is able to maintain the level of service on major roads and whether it can avoid traffic concurrency moratoriums (when the lack of road capacity stops growth).

Critical to the success of the transportation planning will be recalculating what's called "ghost trips," or vested road capacity credits that have not and may not soon be used by prior development but that are now included in determining capacity on a road in relation to the impact of proposed new development. The action list that the conference participants created will be put into a report by Schembri and given to the county commission, which has begun a visioning process.

Schembri said his hope was that the action list would not only be a valuable tool for helping the local economy, but that it would also be a valuable resource for the commission as it creates its vision for the future and sets both shorter term and longer term goals for the county.

"There is no more powerful weapon in government than an idea who time has come," Schembri said. The final report will include all the suggestions generated by the group with a list of the participants.

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