

## St. Lucie County Economic Roundtable looks at ways to grow local economy

By Tom Weber

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**PORT ST. LUCIE** — The St. Lucie County Economic Roundtable met in Port St. Lucie Friday to look for ways to grow the local economy in the face of a Treasure Coast unemployment rate of 11.7 percent.

Richard Houghten, founder of Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies, kicked off the discussion by telling the audience how he lost two top scientists, a married couple, he was trying to recruit to his St. Lucie West operation.

They would have brought with them \$5 million in grant money, but they turned Houghten down when he could not get their child into a kindergarten slot at Palm Point Laboratory School in the community of Tradition. The school is conveniently close to the Torrey Pines building where the couple would have worked.

Scott Wingfield, immediate past president of the Real Estate Association of St. Lucie County, asked, "Why can we not reserve slots?"

The roundtable included 23 elected St. Lucie County officials.

Jack Kelly, vice mayor of Port St. Lucie, told the group that when it comes to the formula used to place children in schools, "There should be no special exceptions."

Michael Lannon, school superintendent for the county, later explained the law does not give the school board the authority to deviate from the official formula.

The day's discussion swung between high praise for the county's schools and various government initiatives and vexing conflicts that slow economic development.

Dennis Corrick, a St. Lucie County lawyer who has represented land developers, said, "When an out of town applicant comes and is treated badly, they don't sue. They leave. And, they tell 100 people how they were treated and the more the story is told the bigger it gets."

He said, "It is not about lowering standards, it is about having standards that everyone understands."

County Commissioner Charles Grande said, "It is not as simple as a 'yes' or 'no.' We don't always work on a first in, first out basis, and I think that is right and he (the applicant) may go away saying he did not get the red carpet treatment."

County Commissioner Chris Craft said the county has had three or four growth management directors in the past four years and that has caused some delays. He said the county must set priorities for approval.

Rudy Howard, R.V. Howard and Associates, said, "Chris, there is a Torrey Pines project that is a priority, but at the same time small businesses are waiting. They don't have time, because they don't have much cash."

Dave Skiles, vice chairman of the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County and president of First Peoples Bank, predicted the summer will be "brutal" for small businesses trying to survive.

He said, "If we are going to get through this we have to all pull together."

The roundtable was staged by the Economic Development Council and the St. Lucie County Chamber of Commerce.



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