

St. Lucie County officials join forces to brainstorm solutions to economy woes

By Jim Turner

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PORT ST. LUCIE — The quality of local education and its access, a more regional airport in Fort Pierce and the creation of jobs were all on the minds of area business and political leaders from throughout St. Lucie County as they gathered Friday to brainstorm solutions to the current downturn in the economy.

About 150 business and government leaders from throughout the county spent nearly six hours pitching ways to revive the fiscal climate that for most of the first half of the decade was booming with construction.

The next step will be for the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County to cobble the different ideas into a single action plan that will be presented to the local governments and business groups to support.

“We want to be ready when we come out of this downturn we’re in,” said David Skiles, president of Port St. Lucie-based First Peoples Bank and the vice chairman of the Economic Development Council.

“The only way we’re going to be successful as a community is for us to band together,” he added.

Hosted by the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County, the idea behind the roundtable at the Port St. Lucie Civic Center was to have the county poised for a rebound mostly by stimulating an innovation-driven economy.

St. Lucie County Commissioner Doug Coward said the desire to attract and grow green industries should be raised to the same level as the life sciences.

“This community really has nothing to hold it back,” added Richard Houghten, president of Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies.

Torrey Pines was enticed to relocate its headquarters from California to Port St. Lucie with a \$90 million state and local incentives package in 2006.

Houghten said what drew him to the Treasure Coast community, after Palm Beach County commissioners questioned if they wanted to pay, was the interaction of the

business community with the local political leaders, who were open to making change.

Port St. Lucie Vice Mayor Jack Kelly suggested identifying businesses that local governments could help set up or bring to the area that would offer much needed manufacturing jobs and fit in with the desired green industries the community desires.

“I want to make something, to be able to touch it,” Kelly said. “We can’t make Toyotas, but we sure can make something like solar panels.”

The participants noted a need to boost the primary and secondary education programs, growing the regional transportation system in part through expanding the regional aspects of the St. Lucie International Airport and establish a group philosophy that is more open to changing the economic engine from depending upon seasonal industries like tourism and citrus, to ones that are year round, such as manufacturing, life sciences and green industries.

They also suggested a more Treasure Coast-wide approach to promoting the area through the county tourism agencies.

The roundtable panel featured Fort Pierce, Port St. Lucie and St. Lucie County officials, along with representatives from the local finance, environment, science, agricultural, education, health care, real estate and media.



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