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# Flagler County economic development taking off

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Armed with a new economic development agency, Flagler County is exchanging foreclosed home signs for ribbon cuttings.

One of the nation's hardest-hit metro areas during the recession, the county formed a Department of Economic Opportunity in November 2011. Within the past 15 months, it has reeled in five new businesses.

The most stunning announcement came last month from Aveo Engineering Group, a global manufacturer of LED lights for aerospace, marine and other industries. The company plans to build an airport hangar and manufacturing plant in Flagler and create 300 jobs, mainly in engineering and paying an average wage of just above \$40,000.

The difference from two years ago, said [Helga van Eckert](#), the department's executive director, is Flagler has become a community that not only wants economic development, but has put everybody on the same page in pursuing it.

"A lot of people say that they're there for the businesses. We really are," she said. "The businesses, the county government and the cities are all set up to welcome them and offer assistance. It's a concierge kind of strategy. If there's something they need, all they do is pick up the phone."

## Economic rollercoaster

A decade ago, Flagler County was a poster child for the housing bubble that, when it burst, wreaked havoc with economies in the state and nation. Average home values, according to Zillow, rose from \$157,000 in September 2003 to a peak of \$276,000 in June 2006 — and then plummeted to less than half that value by mid-2011.

Sold to the baby boomer generation as a retirement community, Flagler's population growth in 2005 hit 10.7 percent, the fastest in the nation.

As the floor dropped out from beneath the housing industry, foreclosures in the county grew, topping out at 280 in July 2009. Flagler's unemployment rate followed, rocketing from 4.8 percent in June 2006 to a high of 16.2 percent in January 2010, according to Florida's

Department of Economic Opportunity. For five years, Flagler routinely posted some of the worst unemployment rates in the state.

#### Attitude adjustment

It's a very different story now.

Aided by the housing recovery, Flagler's foreclosures had calmed to 81 in June, and in July, unemployment had nudged downward to 10.4 percent.

But the systemic problems that had led to the vulnerability remains.

"Part of the problem for Flagler County was the economy was based in construction and real estate," van Eckert said. "So when the real estate market hit the skids, a lot of people ended up being unemployed."

Today, the county wants more industry and economic diversity. Flagler's Department of Economic Opportunity joined Jax USA Partnership, a regional development agency, and borrowed ideas from its playbook, seeking targeted industries with high-paying jobs and luring businesses with incentive packages and concierge services.

One of the most important changes, though has been a shift in attitude: In the past, the county, aided by a now-defunct private-public planning group, foundered from political splintering. That's no more.

"We try to make sure everyone feels that they're getting fair play," said Flagler County Commissioner [Barbara Revels](#). "In the past, I think, they figured you had your favorite Realtor, broker or builder that you funneled people to. That does not happen now. At all. The customer has the best opportunity possible no matter where it's at in Flagler County."

#### Gaining traction

A lot of credit for the newly-found consensus goes to van Eckert's low-key, driven and well-organized approach, Revels said, skills van Eckert honed for 12 years as a director of redevelopment and revitalization in the city of Perth Amboy, N.J.

In late March 2012, a month into her new job with Flagler, van Eckert led a day-long strategic planning session to forge a mission statement and five-point task list. About a dozen elected officials and business leaders came.

A year later, the planning session's attendance grew to 82. Eighty-four had been invited.

That's when van Eckert knew her department had gained traction. "You don't have a wedding without that kind of response," she said.

The county's coordinated effort has not passed unnoticed among business prospects.

Among them were Aveo Engineering CEO [Christian Nielsen](#), who had been evaluating airports at mid-sized cities nationwide in search of a place to establish a U.S. manufacturing base.

He swung by Flagler County's airport on a Saturday, when, by chance, the county was celebrating the opening of a new hangar. On the spot, the county administrator and its airport director showed Nielsen an industrial park planned along the airport's south side. The tour didn't stop there.

"They introduced us to everybody — lawyers, architects, builders. It's a full-service treatment and it's quite visionary," Nielsen said. "They have a crackerjack team. I've talked to a lot of counties all over the U.S. and we just did not see the vision and the passion that these people had."

Four other companies found themselves lured by Flagler, including marine canvas manufacturer Gioia Sails Southern Division, organic vegetable company WP Rawl, nutritional supplement company Designs for Health and cloud computing company Coastal Cloud.

Each was drawn by different county assets. Gioia moved from St. Augustine to be closer to Sea Ray Boats, one of its main clients. WP Rawl found synergy with Flagler's agriculture industry, which dominates the county's western half. Coastal Cloud was attracted by reliable, affordable Internet connectivity and by the county's quality of life.

A common thread was the county's streamlining the process of moving businesses there.

"Their performance with us was tremendous," said [Patrick Moynihan](#), vice president of Gioia Sails. "Helga put me personally in contact with all the right people for permitting and we got it done in a reasonable time. I've dealt with other counties. But even during a basic conversation about moving to the county, she was excited. She shows what her job is: that she wants growth."

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