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## Fast-paced program aims to help Flagler's farmers grow

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**BUNNELL** — Volunteers committed to gathering information for an agricultural business retention and expansion project won't have time to sit and watch the sod grow. Officials expect the effort to move swiftly into an ongoing program to increase local farmers' sustainability and profits.

Flagler County extension agents, as well as a University

of Florida "sustainable agriculture" agent and members of the Flagler County Department of Economic Opportunity, met Wednesday with a dozen volunteers to ensure surveys are distributed and retrieved, follow-up interviews are conducted, data analyzed, numbers crunched, a report written and a program in place for a January 2014 "community kick-off."

"It's a bang-bang process," David Dinkins, sustainable

agriculture agent, told the volunteers.

"We think retaining our ag businesses is an urgent thing," he said. "Current retail doesn't work to keep the family farmer in business. This is not only a Flagler County issue (or) a state of Florida issue, this is a developed country issue."

Agriculture is big business in Flagler County, said local extension agent Mark Warren. While results of the 2012 "Cen-

sus of Agriculture" have not been released, the last census in 2007 listed the market value of Flagler products at \$35.1 million annually and an "average per farm" of \$428,538.

"This program will be a pretty intensive look at the agricultural industry," Warren said. "We think about the big producers — potatoes, cabbage, sod, timber — but there is a lot more." Cattle production, blueberry crops and agri-tourism — like

Brittany Cowart Kinney's fall crop maze and festival — all fall within Flagler County agriculture, he said.

"It's a new way of working with local land owners and producers," Warren said. "We also need to think about the diversity of the scope of individuals involved to create an action plan."

Gathering and analyzing the

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### FARMERS

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information is critical, said Helga van Eckert, executive director of the Flagler County Department of Economic Opportunity.

"This is really important for us to move forward," said van Eckert, who was instrumental in attracting agricultural producer WP Rawl, which is building a 30,000-square foot facility on the west side of the county. "We need this to make plans for growth

into the future. If we can bring diversity to the ag community, we can really make a difference."

The few dozen survey questions were tweaked to contain "local flavor" from those in use by the University of Ohio since 1986. Examples include: Do you have any plans to change your operation within the next two, five, or 10 years? And, how do you feel about the future viability of the agricultural economy in Flagler County?

"If a farmer says he's going to quit farming next year, we want to know why," Warren said. "We want to know if there is something we can do to help."

Each volunteer's first task is to recruit another volunteer so follow-up interviews can be conducted in teams of two. Volunteers also are required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

"Y'all (Farmers) are tough nuts to crack. We know that. You're close to the vest," Dinkins said. "If farmers know we are serious and sincere, maybe they'll talk to us."