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## Regional economic exec sees 'hot' Flagler on upswing

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PALM COAST — Encouraged by news that Flagler County's population has surpassed the 100,000 mark, area business leaders and elected officials on Thursday were reminded of another reason for cheer: the county's improving economy and its growing status in the region.



*Photo courtesy Rafael Crisóstomo*  
 Jerry Mallot, president of JAXUSA, addresses attendees at the Think Flagler First luncheon at the Hilton Garden Inn in Palm Coast on Thursday.

The county's jobless rate, which stood at 15.5 percent five years ago, had fallen to 6.9 percent in January — possibly the steepest decline in the state, noted Jerry Mallot, president of JAXUSA Partnership, the regional economic development group for the seven-county Jacksonville area that includes Flagler County.

"Your unemployment rate probably has gone down more than any other county in the state," he said.

"Flagler is hot," added Mallot, the keynote speaker at this month's Think Flagler First luncheon at the Hilton Garden Inn in Palm Coast. The event, which drew approximately 40 people, was put on by the Flagler County Chamber of Commerce and Flagler County Department of Economic Opportunity.

Mallot credited the rebound in the county's economy to a combination of stepped up business recruiting, thanks to the formation of the county's Department of Economic Opportunity three years ago, and efforts to diversify its local economy, which prior to the Great Recession was largely dependent on a single industry: new home construction.

In addition, "hitting that 100,000 barrier is a big deal," he said, explaining that Flagler County's growing population could attract more national retailers.

He suggested elected officials consider incentives to encourage private developers to build industrial buildings on a "spec" basis — meaning in anticipation of finding tenants later — because move-in-ready facilities are "a huge trigger" for companies looking for potential expansion/relocation sites.

Mallot also spoke about how JAXUSA is a collaborative effort to attract employers and projects that can benefit the entire region.

He added that "I really see a very strong (economic) picture (for Flagler and Jacksonville area) for the next five years."

Helga van Eckert, executive director of Flagler County's Department of Economic Opportunity, said "we value our relationship with the JAXUSA Partnership in assisting to promote the area and secure new economic development opportunities."

Gretchen Smith, the chamber's director of government affairs, said Mallot's talk "put things in a different perspective and that we're not going this alone. You get a lot more done when you are working in partnership with others."

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