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economic development

Charting Flagler's economic future

Strategy session produces recommendations for recruiting efforts

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PALM COAST

The Hammock Beach Resort is usually a place for relaxation. But for the approximately 100 Flagler County officials, business leaders and residents who gathered here Tuesday, it became a place for serious work.

The luxury resort was the setting for a daylong strategic growth planning session organized by the Flagler County Department of Economic Opportunity.



News-Journal/AARON LONDON
 Mark Warren, Flagler County agricultural extension agent, speaks Tuesday at Flagler County's strategic growth planning session for economic development.

Helga van Eckert, the department's executive director, said the planning session was meant to keep the community informed about efforts to attract businesses and build for the future.

"We want to engage the community in Flagler County's future and ensure that we continue on the path of success," she said.

The session was facilitated by Marilyn Crotty, director of the Scott Dailey Florida Institute of Government at the University of Central Florida. "You're here to work today," she told participants.

After introductory remarks from van Eckert and County Commissioners Barbara Revels and Frank Meeker, participants broke up into small groups to discuss specific industry sectors, including agriculture, aviation, high tech, manufacturing and tourism.

Mick Cuthbertson, Bunnell community development director, said he decided to participate because "I want to gain an understanding of the direction we're going in economic development."

After the groups delivered their recommendations, UCF economist Sean Snaith offered his take on the economy, both local and national.

"Flagler County was the poster child of everything that went wrong," he said, referring to the Great Recession when the county had the state's highest jobless rate. Unemployment in Flagler has steadily fallen since then.

"Now you're a different kind of poster child — the good kind," he said.

Snaith said uncertainty over the Affordable Care Act and banking reform as well as interest rates have created "a fog that businesses cannot see through."

Van Eckert said recommendations from the session will be compiled with the best ideas incorporated into the county's economic development plans.

"With the world changing as quickly as it has, we need to be responsive to those changes," she said.

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