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Daylong session helps set priorities for economic development in Flagler

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PALM COAST — Economic development workshops don't normally attract standing-room-only crowds. But Monday's daylong retreat at Island House in the Princess Place Preserve was an exception.

More than 80 Flagler government officials, community and business leaders, and county residents met for the second annual economic development strategic planning session to review progress and set goals and priorities for the rest of the year.

Flagler County Department of Economic Opportunity Executive Director Helga van Eckert opened the morning session with praise for those who attended.

"I believe a conservative calculation of the intellectual capital in this room would put us at over \$150,000 of volunteer time focusing on our future economic development path," she said.

After the preliminaries and introductions were completed, those attending split into eight groups covering topics such as agriculture, aviation, health and marine science, high technology, infrastructure, manufacturing, recreation, and workforce development and education.

After breaking for lunch, Marilyn Crotty, facilitator for the session, reviewed the morning's work.

"Hopefully this has been a learning experience for all of you," she said. "I was struck by the idea that this is a cooperative effort. That's the first ingredient that you need in your pursuit of more economic development."

One of the ideas that permeated the meeting was the strong partnerships Flagler County and its municipalities have created with other areas.

"The idea of partnerships has seemed to come through over and over and again and again," Crotty said. "All of these things have some really positive outlooks."

Ky Ekinci, co-founder of Office Divvy in Palm Coast, said one of the positive things to come out of the session was a broader sense of participation in the economic development process.

"One of the curses of the past was (it) was always top down," he said of the county's previous economic development efforts. "It is tremendously beneficial to brainstorm together with all the stakeholders."

Keeping communication open between public and private entities and with the public was a theme echoed by many participants.

"We're trying to find ways to get input from the community on a regular basis," van

Eckert said.

Flagler Beach business owner Lea Stokes said spending a day focusing on economic development was important.

"I think we all have a vested interest in strengthening our economy in Flagler County," she said. "It's all about maintaining our quality of life."

Among the priorities discussed by the group were promoting Flagler County, economic development funding, improvements on lifestyle issues, developing more partnerships and communication of economic development efforts with the public.

Former Flagler County Commissioner Alan Peterson said he hoped that more meetings will take place to bring public and private entities together to focus on economic development issues.

"There's no substitute for sitting in a room and listening," he said.

Flagler County Commissioner Barbara Revels said she was pleased with the session's results.

"It was fabulous," she said. "I heard many new ideas I had not heard before."

Results of the planning session will be compiled by the Department of Economic Opportunity and made available on the department website at flaglercountyledc.com.

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