

Focus on local economy

County, partners update economic plan

BRAD BUCK
Staff Writer

TAVARES — A consultant may be hired by April to help county and business leaders develop a strategy for Lake County's economic development.

Dottie Keedy, the county's director of growth and economic redevelopment, has been working with the county's Industrial Development Authority, the chamber alliance, the Metro Orlando Economic Development Commission, Lake's cities and Lake-Sumter Community College to create a scope of services to hire a consultant.

Keedy said she has budgeted \$50,000 for a consultant to work on the plan that should come out of the session.

Once the consultant is hired, government and business leaders will meet in public sessions around the county to get input on numerous ways to improve the local economy, Keedy said.

When the plan is developed, perhaps a year from now, it will update a plan last visited 13 years ago.

The new plan would identify ways to increase industrial and commercial development in the county and guide a strategic plan to carry out the ideas generated, said Keedy.

"We have to figure out what it is we want," she said.

One place local leaders are looking to hook up with is the expansion planned at the University of Central Florida.

UCF is home to the Burnham Institute for Cancer Research and will soon have a medical school.

"They're creating a huge, high-tech cluster that will have a huge impact here in Lake County," Keedy said. "What impact will that have on Lake County? Certainly the medical industry will continue to expand."

"We hope to develop a list of targeted industries and realistic opportunities to attract them," Keedy said.

Incentives for new businesses may include providing water, sewer, roads and Internet services, she said.

Other incentives include paying companies a set amount of money for every higher-wage job it creates.

The groups will also work on a marketing strategy to let the world know Lake is looking for certain industries, Keedy said.

The group will also set up a monitoring program to review how well they're doing in attracting businesses to the area.

Schools also must graduate people prepared to work in the industries being brought in, Keedy said. The county's land-use map must have places set earmarked for industry, she said.

What's a perfect economy to Keedy?

One that is not too dependent on any one industry, she said, with jobs that are here so fewer people have to commute out of Lake County to go to work.

Between 30 and 40 percent of Lake County's workers must commute to another county to their jobs, she said.

Lake County workers commute 27.6 minutes, the second longest in the area, up from 14.2 minutes in 1990.

"We need to have a plan for the next 20 years," said Robert Johnson, director of the alliance. "Demographically the county has changed significantly (from 1993). There are a lot of new organizations that should have a role in economic development."

Johnson presented county commissioners with a proposal for Vision Lake 2025 in September, and Keedy's office took over from there.

The last time the county embarked on such a task was in 1993. Though somewhat out of date now, many elements of the plan were adopted into the county's comprehensive plan's economic element.

"At that point we had just come off of the (citrus) freezes," Johnson said. "We have migrated from that and have grown tremendously in medical and industrial manufacturing."

One lasting effect of that plan was the creation of a large commerce park on U.S. Highway 27 that has become a hot property for industries moving into the county.

Though the comprehensive plan does have an economic element, Johnson said it is too narrow in scope and a larger plan, unencumbered by state doctrines, is needed.

"The comp plan is limited because it is governed by process. You can only put in there what is consistent with state law," he said.

Keedy added that workforce housing would also be an important issue. Lake County workers pay 60 percent of their salaries toward home costs, up from 21 percent in 1990.

The plan probably won't be completed for at least a year.

Staff writer Joshua Davidovich contributed to this report.



MATT ROURKE Associated Press

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