

Economic Development Summit

Final Report 2007

The Lake Okeechobee Regional Economic (LORE) Alliance of Palm Beach County Economic Development Summit was held on January 4, 2007 at the Dolly Hand Cultural Arts Center in Belle Glade, Florida. Approximately 150 residents; city, county and state officials; business leaders, and agency directors met to continue the dialog and discussion of issues developed at the Tri-Cities Economic Development Summit of 2005, to review activities and developmental progress since that time and to consider prospects for future economic development in the Lake Region.

Topics included:

- Economic Development: Creating Jobs, Attracting Businesses and Enhancing Our Community
- Education: Preparing Our Students for Successful Careers
- Area Infrastructure: Maintaining and Improving the Essentials for Economic Development
- Housing Choice and Opportunities
- What's Next? Conclusions.

The following pages address the progress of the Lake Region since the Tri-Cities Economic Development Summit in October 2005, and the needs and hopes of the community, region and state for area economic development in the upcoming years.

Accomplishments since October 2005:

The Tri-Cities Economic Development of 2005 sought many solutions to the multi-faceted issue of economic development. The 2005 Economic Development Consensus requested important infrastructure, education and housing needs. The LORE Alliance of Palm Beach County Economic Development Summit of 2007 displayed evidence of economic development in the Lake Region and the beginnings of some significant improvements to help the area move forward. Actions taken as a direct result of the 2005 Tri-Cities Economic Development Summit are as follows:

Education:

- Palm Beach Community College has increased its training programs. It now includes a correctional officers' academy, welding, diesel, practical nursing, child care and criminal justice. The Community College has future plans to add programs in the areas of electrical, plumbing, Commercial Driver's License (CDL) classes and cosmetology.
- Webster University is collaborating with PBCC's Belle Glade Campus to offer psychology degrees.
- Nova Southeastern University is partnering with PBCC to offer Bachelors and Masters degrees in business in the Lake Region.
- Florida Atlantic University and PBCC are launching a "Grow Your Own" teacher education program – Project Good FIT (First Introduction to Teaching). Freshmen and sophomore education majors will have the opportunity to intern in public school classrooms with model teachers in the Lake Region. Upon graduation and passing the teacher certificate exam, participants commit to teach 3 years in the Lake Region.

Area Infrastructure:

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has/is surveying the safety of the Lake Okeechobee dike system. However, federal funding is still needed for

improvements and more information is needed from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to move forward.

- Funding to implement the creation of the Belle Glade boat lock to provide recreational access to Lake Okeechobee and to promote tourism has been appropriated by the Florida legislature.
- The South Florida Water Management District is partnering with PBCC and the Department of Labor to provide a fast track introduction to construction course to assist in bringing local work to fulfill Lake Okeechobee needs.
- Plans are underway and fundraising has begun for a new 70 bed hospital that will be constructed in the Lake Region and will serve the Tri-Cities.
- The Business Development Board's Senior Vice President, Gary Hines, stated that the Lake Region's development is the highest priority for the BDB.

Housing:

- Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has begun the Belle Glade Renaissance project in Belle Glade where 22 of 100 homes have been completed with prices ranging from \$138,000 - \$175,000. These homes are currently the most affordable new homes in Palm Beach County. However, much more needs to be done in this area. The Lake Region has the potential to address some of the affordable housing crises that exist in Palm Beach County, but it must be utilized and planned thoroughly.

Listed on the following pages are the detailed priorities of the 2007 LORE Alliance of Palm Beach County Economic Development Summit. Included in the text are those points that were not addressed after 2005's Tri-Cities Economic Development Summit.

Area Infrastructure

Goal. Prepare the Tri-Cities communities for upcoming economic development.

Specific Objectives:

- The Business Development Board should designate at least one full-time staff person to ensure economic development in the area. The County should fund this activity.
- Prepare the Glades for Economic Development including area infrastructure, job training, housing, land and funding.
- Continue feasibility study of an inland port and pursue possible positive opportunities to help improve the area, region and state.
- Seek legislation and funding to create a Glades Regional Plan for infrastructure, including: wastewater, storm water, the full implementation of the Regional Potable Water System and the completion of roadway systems to allow for area economic development.
- Fund a feasibility study for an air-cargo facility to be located along U.S. 27 near the Palm Beach/Broward county line.
- Update land development regulation to provide flexibility in housing types and densities.
- Revitalize deteriorating neighborhoods, buildings and commercial corridors.
- Facilitate the annexation of lands into South Bay, Pahokee and Belle Glade.
- Help implement the creation of the Belle Glade boat lock to provide recreational access to Lake Okeechobee.
- Explore opportunities of expanding Palm Beach County's needed industrial space by using area land.
- Provide improvements needed to US 27 and SR 80 and develop a "Heartland Corridor" for future highway development.

Justifications

One of the findings of the 2002 Strategic Economic Plan for the Glades is, “Commercial and industrial land is limited. Land for commercial and industrial use is limited.” With the help of the County in facilitating land annexation, this hindrance can be resolved.

Many of the panelists of the LORE Alliance of Palm Beach County Economic Development Summit advocated for an inland port. As Michael Williamson of Cambridge Systematics, Inc. pointed out, as “congestion continues to worsen, population continues to grow, the global economy is driving international trade and the transportation system capacity is being outpaced, we need to explore more solutions.”

Mr. Williamson is doing just that. In the company’s South Florida Port Feasibility Study, they have noted that an inland port can “Expand existing seaport capacity, increase system reliability, improve intermodal connectivity, improve congestion management activities, improve/modify local and regional distribution patterns, create new market opportunities and support regional economic development.” The study is ongoing, but seems to show promise.

Another noted barrier in the 2002 Strategic Economic Plan is, “Housing limitations. Housing is limited in the Glades.” The need for housing is prevalent, and the availability for the area to fulfill both its needs and the County’s needs for attainable housing is possible with the proper support and infrastructure. As the Study states, “One of the primary roles of the public sector with respect to economic development is infrastructure, i.e. roads, water, sewer, electricity.”

At the 2005 Tri-Cities Economic Development Summit, Mary Helen Blakeslee, Chief Analyst of the Governor’s Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development stated the infrastructure can and should be in place for more housing and business developments on agricultural land in order to accommodate the growing economy.

Economic Development

Goal. To promote policies that encourage economic development, including eco-tourism, while ensuring the sustainability of agriculture in the area.

Specific objectives:

- Promote the expansion of equestrian activity in the Lake Region.
- Promote policies that will ensure the sustainability of agriculture in the area.
- Promote legislation and public policy that will increase the use of renewable energy derived from agriculture.
- Create a large regional farmers' market in the area.
- Fund a feasibility study for an air-cargo facility to be located along U.S. 27 near the Palm Beach/Broward county line.
- Implement the creation of the Belle Glade boat lock to provide recreational access to Lake Okeechobee.
- Develop a plan for Eco-tourism in the Lake Region coordinated among the Business Development Board, Tourist Development Board and Palm Beach County to capture the potential of the Torrey Island Plan and the Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail (LOST).
- Develop and enhance the relationship with Visit Florida to promote the eco-tourism, fishing and water-oriented recreation of Lake Okeechobee.
- Continue with plans and fundraising for the new hospital in the Lake Region.
- Develop high-quality and affordable workforce housing.
- Request the Arts Council to identify the quality of life benchmarks for Lake Region heritage and culture.
- Implement a plan to decrease crime in the area.
- Accelerate the inspection and any necessary repairs to the Herbert Hoover Dike surrounding Lake Okeechobee to ensure the safety of the surrounding communities.

Justifications

The Lake Region has been an agricultural area for decades. The area is a major supplier of the nation's winter vegetables, and the sustainability of agriculture is important to the success of the area and the country.

Additionally, the 2002 Strategic Economic Plan for the Glades, recommended, based on the potential need for "additional commercial airport facilities," that the County "Conduct a feasibility study for a commercial airport located along U.S. 27." This possibility may lead to economic success for the area and the entire County. Kevin Johns explained at the LORE Alliance of Palm Beach County Summit that economic development tends to occur heavily around airports.

The 2002 Strategic Economic Plan also stated that, "A significant hindrance to tourism development in South Bay and Belle Glade is the lack of direct access to the Lake. For the southern part of the Glades to compete with other Lake communities, direct lake access is important." Access to the Lake will allow for more tourism and a thriving economy.

Additionally, one of the conclusions from the 2002 Strategic Economic Plan is that, "A Lake Okeechobee Marketing Plan for tourism," should be in place. Tourism will help the economy thrive and bring dollars to the community. Jim Sheehan from Everglades Adventures is working on this promotion for Pahokee.

Mary Weeks, head nurse at Glades General Hospital, discussed at the Tri-Cities Economic Development Summit that available and affordable housing is needed to ensure that the nurses, teachers, firefighters and others that are recruited live and continue to live and work in the area. They are able to recruit nurses and teachers, but cannot encourage them to stay for the long term because of the commute that many must make due to the lack of housing in the area.

The 2002 Strategic Economic Plan for the Glades noted “The Glades area has a long agricultural history in Florida along with a diverse set of cultures that can be an asset for the community.” As the area develops, cultural and historical opportunities should be embraced, not overlooked or forgotten.

Also noted is that the crime rates in the Lake Region should be lowered significantly. In one of the cities, the violent crime rate is 4.98 times the National Average (cityrating.com), and the others are similar. The area needs a more successful program in place to keep crime rates down. As of 2006, the Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office is overseeing the Lake Communities. Unfortunately, gang activity is on the rise and should be halted.

Available and affordable housing, cultural and historical concepts, community safety and a thriving tourism industry will greatly enhance the area’s economy.

Education

Goal. To improve the quality of education at all levels to enhance employment opportunities and improve poverty levels in the Lake Region.

Specific objectives:

- Immediately and fully implement in all the Lake Region schools the Palm Beach County School Board's Accelerated Academic Achievement Program.
- Continue and improve partnerships with the Palm Beach County School Board, PBCC, FAU and the State Board of Education.
- Maintain and continue to expand vocational training programs at the high school and community college level.
- Substantially increase the incentives for quality teachers to live and work in the Lake Region by adding additional pay increments and providing housing assistance.
- Add funding for accelerated high school programs in the Lake Region to enhance the Pahokee International Baccalaureate program or create new programs at Glades Central High School.
- Expand mentoring and scholarship programs, like Take Stock in Children, to increase opportunities for higher education.
- Require the SFWMD to assure that the job opportunities generated by the multi-billion dollar Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) are available to the workforce of the Lake Region.
- Determine the potential for the Lake Region to capture new jobs from emerging biotechnology, marine science, telecommunications, IT and film/television industries.

Justifications

There is a need for jobs in the Lake Region and employees from the Lake Region. As stated in the 2002 Strategic Economic Plan for the Glades,

Most of the persons providing professional and technical services in the communities drive in daily from the Royal Palm/Wellington areas. While this is certainly understandable, one consequence is that their earnings are not circulated in the community. A second consequence is that the civic leadership that these persons provide in their evenings and weekends is not being provided in the Lake Region. "Community identity"---so vital to development of a strong business and civic infrastructure---is missing among many who make their livelihoods in the Glades.

It also states that a barrier to economic development is, "A labor pool lacking requisite job skills for the present and emerging job markets." Increasing education opportunities will increase the labor pool. Along the same lines, maintaining key vocational programs will assist in the continued success of certain occupations.

According to the 2000 US Census, in South Bay, 65.5% of residents over the age of 16 are not in the labor force. In Pahokee, there is a 38% unemployment rate. In Belle Glade, the average travel time to work is 26.6 minutes.

According to the 2000 US Census, in Belle Glade and Pahokee, 9.2% of families and 12.4% of individuals are below the poverty rate. In South Bay, 65.5% of the people over the age of 16 are not in the labor force. People who are able to work must be trained. Vocational training is essential so that residents are employable and poverty levels and unemployment rates are lowered.

The area and the County should implement multiple workforce training programs for many different jobs. The programs should exist not only at the community college level, but also at the high school level.

Only about half of the area's population over the age of 25 has a high school degree or more according to the 2000 US Census. Therefore, the high schools, too, must train their students and prepare them for successful careers. Students will be better off if they learn a trade they are interested in at an early age – especially if they are not planning on attending a community college.

Aside from vocational training, the area would like to see the implementation of the Palm Beach County School Board's Accelerated Academic Achievement Program. All schools in the area should receive a passing grade and ensure that all County residents are ensured a good education.

To help provide a quality education, the Lake Region needs quality teachers. As Marcia Andrews from the School District of Palm Beach County stated at the Tri-Cities Economic Development Summit, available and affordable housing is needed to recruit teachers to the area and attract them to stay here. The homeowner vacancy rate is as low as 1.5% according to the 2000 US Census. There are very few homes available right now, but it is possible to have many attainable homes. This potential must come to fruition to attract quality teachers to the area.

The Lake Region must be trained and needs to have employment and housing opportunities follow.

Housing

Goal. Make workforce housing available in the Lake Region.

Specific Objectives:

- Update local comprehensive plans to allow for smart growth development and flexibility in housing types and densities.
- Develop high-quality and affordable workforce housing.
- Facilitate the annexation of lands into South Bay, Pahokee and Belle Glade.
- Promote the Lake Region as a solution for workforce housing in Palm Beach County and work with the County.
- Streamline the development process and reduce development fees within the County and appropriate agencies to reduce or eliminate unnecessary procedural and financial burdens.

Justifications

With the median house costing over \$370,000 in Palm Beach County, there is a desperate countywide need for attainable housing. Even though the real estate market is soft, the national average is less than 50% of Palm Beach County's average. There is still a crisis, and families still are unable to afford houses.

According to Dr. Edward N. Murray and FIU's Metropolitan Center, "70.6% of large employers (100 or more employees) indicated the cost of housing in Palm Beach County has impacted their business/institution's ability to recruit new employees" and "72.6% of large employers indicated that the cost of housing in Palm Beach County has impacted their ability to retain existing employees."

The Lake Region has the ability to fulfill the County's housing needs and to help the area and the entire County's businesses be more successful in recruiting and retaining employers by being part of the housing solution.

As mentioned previously, area-housing vacancy rates reach as low as 1.5% according to the 2000 US Census. Therefore, in order to see this attainable housing potential come to

fruition, the area will need more land - land that has not reached the cost heights that much of the County has seen. Help from the County is needed in obtaining this land and creating codes and regulations that allow for successful economic development.

Conclusions

The Lake Region is encouraged and enthusiastic for a well thought out and expedited economic development plan and implementation in the community. Together with Palm Beach County, the Governor's Office of Tourism Trade and Economic Development, Florida's Heartland Rural Economic Development Initiative, the Business Development Board, Enterprise Florida and many others, success can be formulated.

As the County grows further and further west, the Lake Region becomes closer and closer to the rest of the County. With the level of commuting constantly rising, the Lake Region wishes to capture some of the County's residents who are looking for attainable housing and a community full of nice and welcoming neighbors. It needs more teachers, nurses and sheriff's deputies, and the area and the County need homes for these dedicated citizens. It also needs to ensure that there is a place for its current residents, and that those residents are trained and have jobs, and that all residents have safe drinking water and an enhanced area infrastructure.

The Lake Region has beauty and charm. Lake Okeechobee is an asset that can be tapped into and used for tourism, residential use, industrial use and recreational purposes. The possibilities for the region are endless, and the time to move on this potential is now.