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Let city's dreams soar

By Randy Hanna
MY VIEW

As I read Gerald Ensley's July 8 column, "Plans for the future need a dose of reality," I realized how fortunate this community has been to have had leaders who were not afraid to dream big while ensuring that our money was wisely spent.

As opposed to being complacent and being comfortable with "boring baby steps" as suggested by Ensley, our leaders with the vision to build the Civic Center and to invest in General Dynamics, which is now a major corporate citizen in this community.

We had leaders at Florida A&M University and Florida State who recruited some of the best and brightest faculty in the world, including Nobel Prize winners. We had leaders at both the state and local level who said we can relocate the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory from MIT to Tallahassee. And for the sports fans, let us all be grateful that FSU officials decided not to take baby steps when they decided to recruit Bobby Bowden and schedule games against the best teams in college football.

If Ensley had made any of the trips that he discussed, he would have realized that the goal was not for Tallahassee to become Raleigh, N.C.; Austin, Texas; Madison, Wis.; or Chattanooga, Tenn. The goal was for our community to learn about the challenges those communities faced as they reached higher and tried to accomplish things that pessimists thought were impossible.

We have seen results from those trips. The Austin trip gave us significant insight into the challenges of business recruitment and the importance of building a manufacturing sector.

The Madison trip showed the challenges of building both a performing-arts center and a thriving downtown area. These lessons are being used every day by our community leaders working on those projects.

After visiting Raleigh, we have a closer working relationship between the communities and the researchers at the universities. This relationship was critical in our efforts to recruit Torrey Pines, a nationally recognized research institute.

Trips such as these are common for business and community leaders across the country. Failure to study the successes and failure of other cities would be like business students earning a degree without doing case studies about successes and failures in the business world.

A local thriving business environment is dependent upon both growing local businesses and making wise investments. One such investment was in Danfoss Turbocor. Based upon the lessons learned, a wise local investment of \$1.6 million by the City Commission helped ensure an additional 150 high-wage jobs in this community. Because of this investment, local businesses such as Engineered Coolings Services and TeligentEMS were able to grow to serve Turbocor.

Local entrepreneur David Denton launched Global CNC Solutions, a high-tech machining company, to meet the Turbocor production schedules and provide needed services to other local manufacturers.

I firmly believe that we have an obligation to ensure that our children and grandchildren have the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of Tallahassee and the quality of life that we all enjoy. Thousands of some of the best and brightest all across this country come to Tallahassee to receive an education. It is unfortunate that we cannot retain that talent to work in and add to the assets of this community.

In order to do that, we must ensure high-quality, high-wage opportunities. Investments such as the one in Danfoss Turbocor are clearly part of this equation.

While Ensley seems to consider it a negative that we were unsuccessful in attracting Piper to Tallahassee, I consider it a significant accomplishment that Tallahassee was one of five finalists from applicants all across the country and was the runner-up to attract Torrey Pines. The fact that we were finalists in both cases shows that Tallahassee can and will compete successfully.

Ensley is correct that we must think differently about private funding. We must begin to recognize that we are not just a sleepy little town and that we are the capital city of the fourth-largest state in the nation. And we must think broader about those private businesses that are directly affected by what happens in Tallahassee.

We should be thinking of Cascades Park as a potential downtown jewel that can host the “Publix” or “CSX” amphitheater with a view of the Capitol. We should look at Tallahassee as a place where we partner with our largest business, the state of Florida, to ensure that air service is improved and where we undertake innovative cooperative efforts in alternative energy and transportation improvements.

Like most other parents, I have spent hours encouraging my children to have the right amount of realism combined with a healthy dose of dreaming about what is possible. While Ensley makes good points about being realistic, pessimism and lack of foresight can cause our community to lag far behind as we participate in this highly competitive and challenging world.

With both vision and commitment, this area can compete and win. Let's dream bigger.