

Article published Nov 4, 2007

Big Bend Green

Environmental needs spawn economic opportunity

Prosperous businesses and the most successful communities have a lot in common.

Both recognize opportunity and seize it ahead of the pack. They refuse to be pulled down by those who tell them why they shouldn't chart the course rather than help them get there. They anticipate and innovate.

Those who succeed become the best of the bunch - great businesses measured by profits and working conditions; the best communities assessed on the basis of livability.

This includes job opportunities; a vibrant tax base that pays for great public services such as parks and recreation, mass transit and performing arts centers; creativity that pervades a city's streets and shops and other gathering places - a sense of possibility.

"Green" has both economic and environmental connotations. For a region chock full of opportunity in both respects, "green" should be the Big Bend's collective moonshot.

Since Tallahassee became Florida's capital in the first half of the 19th century, government has been the economic staple of our region. Even many of the jobs that aren't in the public sector exist to serve it.

For more than 25 years, government and business leaders in Leon County have sought to diversify the employment base - not only for economic growth, but also to strengthen the safety net in the event that public-sector jobs dry up.

Despite their homage to principle and earnest effort, success has been modest at best. Some attribute that to complacency created by the high percentage of government jobs. Others blame a lack of teamwork among public and private sectors, local governments, town and gown.

But the bottom line is the same: Tallahassee and the Big Bend are, to paraphrase the U.S. Army, not all they can be.

No more excuses. Between the global environment and the regional economy, the need for results versus rhetoric is urgent. In the United States, Florida is ranked third in total energy consumption and fifth in carbon-dioxide emissions. With immediate concerns about global warming and Gov. Charlie Crist's executive orders to substantially reduce carbon emissions statewide, the capital region has a chance to capitalize.

Today's newspaper describes a multimillion-dollar construction recycling operation that Tallahassee businessman Kim Williams will launch soon as a subsidiary of Marplan Supply. Besides new jobs, it will benefit the community by reducing the volume of construction debris at the county landfill.

Others have seized opportunity, too, or see a chance to seize it.

Businessman Joe Barry opened The Inn at Wildwood in Wakulla County, a hotel that's based on the nature-based principles of sustainability. A year ago he hosted a "green" regional economic forum.

Chuck Mitchell, a former Tallahassee builder, envisions an affordable and "green" residential community on several hundred acres off Miccosukee Road that the city bought in 2004 from the owners of Welaunee Plantation.

Like those entrepreneurs, a growing number of business and government leaders and others understand the importance of merging regional economic and environmental interests. In September, for example, a brand-new regional chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council hosted about 200 people at its inaugural reception. Organizers initially expected only 40 or 50.

There's no shortage of ideas, but they alone aren't enough. For Big Bend to become truly "green," a regional initiative is needed.

One business leader last week wondered why the Big Bend couldn't create a "green" economic development corridor, where businesses devoted to sustainability could locate.

"I truly believe a green corridor in this region could be part of our equivalent to the Research Triangle," Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce Chairman Ron Sachs said.

Business and political leaders say they're all for regional collaboration. Here's a chance to put words into action.