

On the road to progress

Opportunity Florida counties begin the journey

If the first step toward solving a problem is to identify it, Opportunity Florida already has begun helping eight Panhandle counties remove obstacles to their economic development. Opportunity Florida is a non-profit corporation formed to coordinate eight rural northwest Florida counties' efforts to take advantage of state designation as a Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern. The name "Opportunity Florida" also will serve as a sort of brand name for marketing the region, which includes Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty and Washington Counties.

Independent economic development consultant Tucson Roberts, who temporarily heads the organization, recently met with community leaders in each of the Opportunity Florida counties, half of which are in West Florida Electric Cooperative's service area. Roberts sought to evaluate assets and opportunities for improvement, as well as identify "key players" and other influences on each county's development potential.

Despite their differences, the counties shared a list of common problems, Roberts found. "Certain overriding needs are universal throughout the eight counties; they're not limited to just one, and they're all critical. In order to advance the local economies, we need to recognize and solve these problems."

Among the region's needs are increased water and sewer capacity, he said. For instance, Liberty County completely lacks any sewer system whatsoever; all homes and businesses in the county are tied to septic systems, which eventually contaminate the water supply, he explained. "This is true, to some extent, in each of the counties except Gulf, which has adequate sewer and water treatment facilities because St. Joe Company built them."

A lack of affordable housing within the counties, especially along the coast, also has created a dilemma, said Roberts. "People who work in those areas can't find afford to live there — It's just too expensive to build. So one of the things we need to do is to approach developers to come in and construct affordable housing in these counties."

The local economies throughout the area will require diversification to strengthen them, Roberts continued. "Some of the counties are heavily dependent on old, traditional industries. We need to bring in some new, growing industries, which will be good for the long-term health of the communities."

Meanwhile, to enable the area to fully benefit from its status as a Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern, the state should clarify its interpretation of the designation, Roberts added. "The regulatory agencies and some of the other offices of the state need to show some of the local people what the



Tucson Roberts

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advantages are of being in an area of critical concern, because many of them are unaware.”

However, economic development within the counties will require local, as well as state, support, he said. “The local counties and the cities within those counties need to make a commitment to fund economic development. If we’re going to bring prospects into the county, there must be someone there to help and speak for the county.”

Opportunity Florida’s board meets at various locations throughout the eight-county region the third Wednesday of each month. WFEC Executive Vice President and CEO Bill Rimes serves on the board, which is directed and controlled almost exclusively by business leaders, rather than government officials. 

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