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Dixie County residents discuss future in Chamber-sponsored town hall meeting



Scott Koons, executive director of the North Central Florida Regional Planning Council talks to Dixie community leaders about their economic future.

Story and Photos

By Terry Witt, Senior Reporter © June 9, 2017 at 10:37 p.m.

CROSS CITY -- When the Florida Chamber Foundation came to Dixie County Thursday night (June 8), residents used their smart phones to participate in an interactive survey that asked them how they felt about their community in 2017 and whether the county is prepared for the changing Florida economy in the future.

Residents responded that they loved their community and wanted to improve the local economy, and they were particularly supportive of local government officials.

When asked in the survey about how they felt about their leaders they used cell phones to give local officials a unanimous endorsement for highest rating. They said their leaders were strong and improving.

“That’s a real good number,” said County Commissioner Mark Hatch responded with a smile.

He said four of the five county commissioners attended the meeting.



This satellite photo shows the earth with the most heavily populated areas in lighter colors. The arrow points to Florida as one of the most well lighted areas on the face of the earth, an indication of its population density.

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The interactive survey made the meeting more interesting. As residents typed in their cell phone responses a computer calculated the percentages and displayed them on a large screen in the county commission meeting room.

The Florida Chamber Foundation visited all 67 counties in the state. Dixie County was the final stop. The Foundation will publish a report of its findings in the spring of 2018, probably in March. The central question asked of residents across the state in town hall workshops was whether they think Florida is ready for 2030 when six million more residents will live here and two million more jobs will be needed.

Dixie residents were told the state will attract more than 150 million visitors annually by 2030, will have 4-5 million more new drivers, will need 20 percent more water and the demand for energy will soar by 76 percent.

In Dixie County, the population is expected to rise to 23,000 by 2030 and the county will have to supply 866 new jobs to replace the ones lost to innovation and technological advances. The same economic forces impacting Dixie County will be seen statewide.

Host for the meeting was Scott R. Koons, executive director of the North Central Florida Regional Planning Council. He also sits on the board of the Florida Chamber Foundation, which he described as the “think tank arm of the Florida Chamber of Commerce.”

By the year 2030, Koons said, Florida will have a population of 26 million people, making it the third largest state in the nation behind Texas and California. He said 2016 was a record year for tourism in Florida with 112 million visitors coming to the Sunshine State.

“Florida is now the number one destination in the world,” Koons said, adding that France is number two.

He said the state has a \$928 billion annual gross domestic product. To place the number in perspective, he said if Florida was a nation state it would represent 1 percent of the global economy.

Koons said the state is aware that global economic competition is intensifying. In the year 2000, 5 percent of Fortune Global 500 Companies were from emerging countries. The number grew to 17 percent in 2000 and is expected to rise to 46 percent.

Residents at the meeting were told 15.8 percent of Floridians live below the poverty level compared to 29 percent in Dixie County. On the positive side, Dixie County High School has the second highest graduation rate in the state. Many in the audience thought Dixie County had the highest graduation rate, but Koons pulled up the numbers on his computer. He said Dixie County had a 96.1 percent graduation rate, second in the state behind Gilchrist County’s 97.7 percent. He said both school districts had excellent graduation rates.

The interactive survey indicated community leaders at the meeting were concerned that many academically talented Dixie County graduates go off to college and never return home again for lack of high paying jobs in the local economy. They were also concerned about the housing shortage, noting that some teachers in local schools must live across the county line to find good housing.