

Opinion

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COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Key to economy's success is 'all about jobs'

The stock market crashed and Congress passed the bailout shortly before The News-Press convened business leaders in November 2008 to discuss the economy.

Memories of the housing boom still loomed and the bust threw many people into a tailspin, be they home or business owners.

Our panel of business leaders offered ideas for how to take our economy in a new direction — and diversify it by investing in new industries, such as green and biomedical jobs.

On Friday, we convened the first of three new panels to take a look at the past year, try to forecast what lies ahead and develop appropriate solutions.

The phrase, "It's all about jobs," succinctly describes how success will be measured.

We all know of — and some have experienced — unemployment's effect on decreasing consumer confidence and consumption.

The panelists were far

more sober and realistic than the previous year.

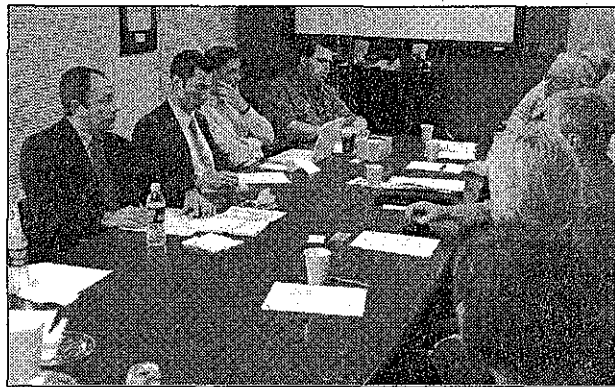
Neither credit nor loans is as easily available as before, and businesses are feeling overburdened by payroll tax increases and the uncertainty over how health care reform will affect them.

There is optimism, however, that we have reached the bottom, though the recovery will be slow.

"We're starting to finally stabilize," said Gary Jackson, director of FGCU's Regional Economic Research Institute.

While not discounting the need to diversify the economy, panelists argued that strengthening the traditional parts of our economy — tourism, real estate and construction — is essential. Our area needs to leverage its strengths.

"Real estate led us into (the recession), it will lead us out," said Jim Moore, director of Lee County's Economic Development Office. Moore said his office is more focused



JESSIE VEGA/THE NEWS-PRESS

Local economy and business professionals meet Friday at The News-Press for a panel discussion on the state of the economy and recovery strategies.

than before and armed with its county-approved \$25 million incentives to attract businesses to create jobs.

Business leaders are working together to create new opportunities, such as micro-loans.

In addition, our economy has reverted to one where retirement — and housing — is cheap and attractive once more.

"It's still paradise, just affordable," said Jeff Tum-

barello, director of the Southwest Florida Real Estate Investment Association.

An important question is how to define the new "normal." For now, business owner Gail Markham describes it this way: "Flat is the new good."

— David Plazas is The News-Press' community conversation editor. E-mail dplazas@news-press.com. Call him at 335-0224.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PANELISTS

Friday, Dec. 11

- Mark Blust, Prawnbroker
- David Hall, First Community Bank of Southwest Florida
- Bert Hamilton, Harvey Software
- Gary Jackson, Florida Gulf Coast University
- Gail Markham, Markham, Norton, Mosteller, Wright
- Jim Moore, Economic Development Office of Lee County
- Steve Tirey, Chamber of Southwest Florida
- Jeff Tumbarello, Southwest Florida REIA
- Carlos Urzola, American Institute of Architects

Tuesday, Dec. 15

- John Albion, Fort Myers Beach Chamber of Commerce
- Samira Beckwith, Hope Hospice
- Dr. James Browder, Superintendent, Lee County Schools
- Eddie Felton, Home Ownership Resource Center
- Amy Gravina, Gravina, Smith & Matte
- Ambassador Al Hoffman, Hoffman and Partners
- Steve Shimp, Owen-Ames-Kimball
- Bo Turbeville, Lehigh Acres Chamber of Commerce
- Bill Valenti, Florida Gulf Bank

Wednesday, Dec. 16

- Pam Cronin, The Shell Factory
- Leonardo Garcia, Hispanic American Business Alliance
- Barbara Hagen, Comcast
- Lalai Hamric, Family Health Centers of Southwest Florida (retired)
- Steve Koffman, Century 21 Sunbelt
- Tony Lapi, Tween Waters Inn, incoming chair, Visit Florida
- Terry McMahan, Hodges University
- Roger Mercado, Oswald Trippe & Co.-BB&T
- Dean Piccirillo, Social Media Club of Southwest Florida
- John Wiest, Lee Memorial Health System/president, Horizon Foundation

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Watch a replay of Friday's live blog of the panels. From 8-10 a.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, watch live blogs and type in your questions.