

THE CONCERNED CITIZEN

Exposing the hard truth about Franklin County

CONCERNING ISSUE 2

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT - IT'S TIME TO STEER THE SHIP TOWARD NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Franklin County's economy developed with maritime roots in waterfront locations. Families prospered; traditional jobs, good income and independence came from our Gulf, Bay and Rivers. Harvests from the sea supported and sustained the lifestyle and traditions for many.

But now, regulations, environmental factors and the controversy around overharvesting have made it more difficult for many water-dependent families and companies to survive. The future reality of dependable economic security from traditional water jobs is uncertain. What jobs, careers and opportunities will be available for those who can no longer realistically find their futures in Bay waters?

Construction jobs, once more plentiful than water workers, have now vanished. For many reasons, the historically and culturally important seafood industry continues to decline. Today, tourism, governmental employment and the limited seafood industry are the three legs of the economic stool supporting our county. Tourism numbers to our beautiful area are growing but the many hospitality jobs created lack the good pay, steady work and benefits that workers desire.

Franklin County has long used generous government grants to support its annual budget expenses. Political philosophies have changed; grant-funding programs are being greatly reduced. Government gifts supporting our economy is not today's solution. Finding and seizing good opportunities is a better alternative.

We understand the need to respect Franklin County's incredibly beautiful biodiversity. Not every economic endeavor is compatible with that conscientious imperative to preserve and protect both environment and heritage. We must realistically look for alternative occupations for hundreds of our residents to ensure future financial livelihoods. We must catch the successful economic development that has largely bypassed Franklin County citizens. We must ask, "What kind of economic development do the people of Franklin County really want?"

Franklin County's quest for more and better jobs has had a checkered past. Planning and visioning efforts having been tried with little to show for the participation and expenditures. There was an appointed Economic Development Committee which

reported to Commissioners. An earlier frenzy of real estate development promised an economic boon. An independent contractor was hired to find companies and attract them here. But all those possibilities have come to nothing. Even worse, the County Commission's anti-growth action has put unreasonable preconditions and constraints on companies willing to create jobs at the Apalachicola airport, for example.

The Franklin County Long-Term Economic Diversification Strategy report identifies a dismal 34% unemployment rate. Many live below the poverty level, including underemployed and discouraged workers. What a startling testimony to the tremendous need for real, good jobs for Franklin's citizens.

But that report also says "some people are not emotionally ready to work." We believe that most Franklin County citizens are willing and able to work. "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; show him how to catch a fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." That well known proverb was never more true than it is here today. We must grow and harvest productive, real life-jobs for all. We can do better.

Planning for success requires more than good intentions.

A lack of cohesive thinking and failure to confront our fundamental challenges hinders our access to jobs with good futures. Short term solutions to long term problems cannot continue to be dealt with politically. We suggest the creation of a privately run, county-wide independent Franklin County Economic Development Authority. It can solicit industries to help achieve diversified, well-paying, long-lasting 'Smart Growth' jobs for all our successful futures. And, those good jobs and their corresponding tax revenues will help to support the county's economic future as well.

A successful Development Authority needs to embrace county realities including:

- Educational issues that keep us from attracting businesses and competing on a level playing field.
- Affordable housing to attract and hold employees.



- Societal factors which help and hinder long-term employment.
- County advantages like our workforce, our hospitality, airports, forests and waterfront facilities that are highly desirable to employers and employees.
- Thoughtful land use planning targeting the kinds and sizes of industries to be solicited and welcomed to our environmentally sensitive lands while preserving and enhancing the maritime heart of what sets Franklin County apart.
- Businesses that play to our strengths, and avoid our weaknesses.

We need to hang an "Open for Business" sign on Franklin County.

What would a revitalized Franklin County look like for you, your children and their children? Together we can envision a successful economic development journey. We can plan for it and exercise the will and commitment to make it happen. Tell your elected leaders that you demand a future filled with opportunity. Ask them to help, not hinder a new, employer-focused process such as we propose.

Of what use are leaders that do not lead, putting you first in the quest for a successful future?

As American hero Thomas Paine once said, "Lead, follow, or get out of the way."

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