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Businesses Form 2-County Economic Development Organization

More than 30 businesses in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties have joined together to form First Place Partners, a private-sector group designed to support economic development efforts in the two-county region.

The organization, which has been in the works since last October, has elected a board of directors and began forming working committees to get the private sector more engaged in job creation.

“Economic development works best when you create partnerships in a community – that’s an important part of our mission,” Keith Hoskins, First Place Partners president, said. “Local and state government, education, workforce development organizations and others in the private sector need to all be working together if we are going to be competitive. And it makes sense to approach it as a two-county effort.”

Hoskins, who is Gulf Power Company’s Pensacola district manager, said First Place Partners will accept no public monies and will work to create teamwork in the two counties among different organizations.

“Job recruitment will be our focus, but so will working with organizations that are concerned with community health, education and quality of life issues. We are all on the same team when it comes to economic development and getting everyone around the same table is the best way to be competitive.”

Some of the initial committee efforts will include working with Florida West and the Santa Rosa Economic Development Office on developing sites and buildings, workforce development and working with out-of-town prospects.

“We also want to be a resource for local government. For instance – what efforts would the city councils and county commissions in the two-county area want us to work on?”

Hoskins said the organization has three membership levels – Voting Members for \$3,000 a year; Associate Members for \$1,500 a year and Publicly-Funded Members (local governments and educational institutions) at no cost.

Other board members include Mark Faulkner, Baptist Healthcare; Kara Cardona, Navy Federal Credit Union; Freddy Donovan, Baskerville-Donovan; Donnie McMahon, McMahon-Hadder; Donna Tucker, Santa Rosa Chambers; Ed Carson, Carson-Lovell Construction; Carleton Ulmer, West Florida Regional Hospital; and David Bear, Lewis Bear Company.

“Having all the players on the same field, communicating and working together with clear goals, strategies and measurements is the way the best communities do economic development. We think the citizens of Escambia and Santa Rosa counties deserve the best – to be in first place.”

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