

## Business Boom

[MATHEW PELLEGRINO](#)

2009-09-23 11:02:20

Many communities are talking about closures and the need for more business.

Santa Rosa County is extolling just the opposite.

Talks of Southwest Airlines coming to either Ft. Walton Beach or Pensacola is just the tip of the iceberg.

Recently Santa Rosa County Commissioners have celebrated the ground breaking of H.T. Hackney, the Blackwater Correctional Facility, Gulf Cable, and even phase one of the widening of Avalon Blvd.

Currently rising from the ground is the new private prison as the area job market booms.

When construction began at the beginning of the year, both Johnson and the commissioners agreed that the construction site looked like a desert. Since May, the facility has started to show some progress, and is well underway for completion.

“Back in April it was an anthill,” said Johnson, “Right now, our construction completion is 60 percent, which we and the state of Florida are happy about.”

The best news out of construction was the construction of new jobs. Don Salter said he is happy that the facility is looking towards its completion and will hopefully bring in jobs to the area.

“In the end, you are going to provide great jobs. Bringing in new industry to this area is going to bring in new jobs,” said Salter.

For the correctional facility, those jobs will mainly come in the form of correctional officers. So far, the new facility has had a line of people in question as to when hiring will begin.

“I can’t give you a number of how many jobs this is going to advertise, but it’s moving forward,” said Johnson.

So far the new facility has begun recruitment of correctional officers for and they are currently being trained for their officer positions.

“Workforce Santa Rosa has already recruited people for the Department of Corrections, which is about 200 people. By the time GEO comes in, they will already be trained,” said Johnson.

On the note of job growth, TEAM Santa Rosa’s Ed Gray brought up the second item on the agenda, which was an update from TEAM on the job rate in the county, which looked promising.

According to Gray, the Correctional Facility is just one step the county is taking to help bring

the economy back into Santa Rosa County.

“Gulf Cable is opening up 100 jobs in the area...Clear Wire hired 300 people, and is asking for an additional 100-200,” said Gray.

“The point of these success stories is if we put it upon ourselves and create a strong economy, the local job market will grow,” said Gray.

Gray said that despite the budget woes, job creation should be the county’s number one priority in the upcoming years, and continues to be TEAM’s goal.

Salter acknowledged the growth of both TEAM and the jobs they have helped create since their start in the early ‘90’s.

1.

The discussion of bringing more business to the area was foreshadowed by the third topic from the Economic Development Committee, which was the push for Southwest’s smooth landing into Pensacola Regional Airport.

Now the focus of the airline has extended into Ft. Walton Beach, where talks of bringing the airline east of Santa Rosa County has taken flight.

Commissioner Gordin Goodin said the move into Ft. Walton Beach could help the county establish some revenue in local businesses.

“The request has been made towards a bed tax, which would be used to drag people into the area from wherever Southwest travels,” said Goodin.

That move would allow advertising wherever Southwest flies, and should bring in more tourism to the area, if the company was approved at the two airports.

Alongside the advertising idea, the use of Southwest's website, which is the number three travel site on the net, could come in handy for the county. On their website, Southwest allows people to book rental cars and hotel packages, which could mean a boom for local business owners.

Goodin also noted that in the past, when AirTran came into PNS, rates dropped tremendously because of competition, and should happen again if Southwest came to the area.

“If Southwest comes into the area, we can expect airfares to drop by up to 30 percent,” said Goodin.

In the administrative committee agendas, discussion on how to handle the leftover Sheriff’s budget was brought before the committee by Wendell Hall.

Job cuts sparked Hall’s interest in the leftover \$1.5 million, in which he is asking for only 1.2 million of.

The Sheriff asked for the \$1.2 million in order to save jobs, which he sees in the line of fire

within the coming months.

If the money is not spent by the Sheriff's office, the dollars will be distributed in the general fund, which could diminish it the sheriff needed extra funds.

"If it goes into general fund, and we have to come back in 6 months and can't find it, it's going to hurt us," said Hall.

Commissioner Goodin's concern was on future budget cuts, and using the money to save programs that could be on the chopping block soon.

"What happens when we get a budget, and we have to cut? And how are we going to handle that?," asked Goodin.

The budget hearing, which Salter said was scheduled for later that evening will help the commissioner's decide where the money will go.

"Between now and 6 p.m., we will let the sheriff know. Nobody should assume we are against the sheriff, everyone is just trying to maintain and do more with less money," said Salter.