

Economic Summit

Lowndes County's future brightens

BY KAY HARRIS
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VALDOSTA — The future is looking brighter for Lowndes County, although a full economic recovery has not yet occurred, shared Dr. Cynthia Tori of the Valdosta State University Center for Business and Economic Research.

Tori was one of several speakers Thursday at the 2012 Economic Summit, presented by the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce at the Rainwater Conference Center.

Five presentations were made during the day, each taking a look at different segments of the community, with a focus on demographics and industry sectors. Following the presentations, the large assembly of community members, elected officials, and educators began a brainstorming session to discuss ideas for improving the community. Among the ideas were better access to early childhood education, more emphasis on job creation, more technical and vocational training in the high schools, public transportation, protect Moody Air Force Base, and encourage the community to get involved and provide input.

Following is a synopsis of each presentation:

Lowndes ranking among peer communities

Tori presented a by-the-numbers presentation showing how Lowndes County compares to other communities of similar size and with similar characteristics. Fourteen communities in the southeastern U.S. were used as comparisons in economic indicators. The statistics show that Lowndes' poverty rate, at 25 percent,

Population Growth

Rank	County	State	Population Growth (2000-10)
1	Montgomery	TN	27.9%
2	Houston	GA	26.4%
3	Warren	KY	22.9%
4	Lee	AL	22.0%
5	Lowndes	GA	19.0%
6	Houston	AL	14.6%
7	Clarke	GA	13.9%
8	Nash	NC	9.4%
9	Florence	SC	9.0%
10	Wayne	NC	8.1%
11	Morgan	AL	7.6%
12	Floyd	GA	6.0%
13	Ouachita	LA	4.5%
14	Forrest	MS	4.3%
15	Rapides	LA	4.2%

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is higher than both the U.S., at 15 percent, and the peer communities, at 20 percent. On the plus side, the population is increasing, and Lowndes rankings have remained the same among the peer groups for the last two years.

For job indicators, Tori said the unemployment rate is still high, at 9 percent, although it's not as high as it was a year ago, when it was 10 percent. She stated that there are 35,216 jobs in Lowndes County, with 19 percent of those in the government sector, and knowledge-based jobs at 21 percent. The median income for peer communities went up, but not in Lowndes, where the average weekly wage is \$561 and, for knowledge-based jobs, it's \$735. However, she said that Lowndes was the only county in the group that had an average weekly wage decline in knowledge-based jobs.

Rank	County	State	Median household income 2010
1	Houston	GA	\$54,977
2	Montgomery	TN	\$47,258
3	Morgan	AL	\$44,859
4	Nash	NC	\$42,315
5	Warren	KY	\$41,001
6	Wayne	NC	\$40,274
7	Lee	AL	\$40,102
8	Rapides	LA	\$39,693
9	Houston	AL	\$39,290
10	Florence	SC	\$38,914
11	Floyd	GA	\$38,289
12	Ouachita	LA	\$37,728
13	Lowndes	GA	\$36,486
14	Clarke	GA	\$34,000
15	Forrest	MS	\$32,555

Community impediments for housing and economic development

Mara Register, assistant to the city manager of the City of Valdosta, presented information concerning a study that has to be conducted every five years of the city's demographics in order to meet the requirements of being a HUD-designated entitlement community.

"This report is all just facts. It's an audit of the numbers only," Register said.

The demographics include income, employment, education and housing, and Register shared a host of numbers, including the drop out rate is 39 percent for Hispanics, 30 percent for blacks, and 8 percent for whites.

The percentage of children living in poverty by race were 10 percent for white children, 40 percent for black children, and 30 percent for Hispanic.

Register stated that the city's challenges include improving conditions for those living in poverty, the elderly and the indigent, and said the next step is to formulate a strategy to address these issues.

Peer communities review

Chamber President Myrna Ballard visited all of the peer communities being compared to Lowndes, and stated that in her opinion, Bowling Green, Ky, is the most like Valdosta and how Valdosta should aspire to be.

Ballard said Bowling Green is a cosmopolitan community with excellent tech infrastructure and visionary leadership.

She has scheduled a video conference with officials from Bowling Green on May 7 for anyone in the community who wishes to attend.

What a difference a decade makes

Dr. Andrew Carswell of the University of Georgia presented a number of charts to show how Lowndes compares to its peer communities in industry and community sectors.

He said the statistics are culled from the U.S. Census Bureau County Business Patterns reports from 2003 to 2009.

Lowndes fared well in many segments, with banking and finance the highest percentage of growth since the last census and retail has also remained strong. He compared Lowndes County to the other 158 counties in Georgia, with Lowndes at 116 of 159 in its crime rate, and 107 of 159 in the poverty rate.

Impacting our community

Chris Miller, a consultant with Illuminomics, has worked with the chamber for nearly five years, compiling job data and statistics.

Miller was effusive in his praise of the chamber, its president and its board, saying that the leadership has made a world of difference in Valdosta during the last several years.

Miller stated that a strategic vision is of tremendous importance for a community, in order to decide where they want to be, so that everyone is working towards the same goals.

Miller also said that the focus should not be on jobs, but more specifically on quality jobs. He lauded the chamber for developing a plan five years ago to focus