

Hillsborough, cities 'Open for Business'

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We live here, work here and raise our families here. We all know the treasure that is the Tampa Bay region — the quality of life, diversity of experiences and community, and economic opportunities that have provided so well for so many. This economic downturn, however, has been our wake-up call.

Our community has experienced losses at an unprecedented rate. Over 2008 to 2010 greater Tampa has lost 30,859 jobs, with a current unemployment rate of 11 percent. The ad valorem tax base in Hillsborough County has dropped 17 percent over that same time frame.

The answer is not simply making cuts in our budgets and reducing services. It's about realizing our potential and finding new ways to work together to create more opportunity for all.

The newly organized and independent Tampa Hillsborough Economic Development Corporation (EDC) has dramatically expanded private-sector involvement and funding to create jobs. We have in place for the first time a focused, multi-year strategic plan to diversify our job base.

We must work to ensure that a future downturn in one sector will not have the devastating market effects recently experienced by our entire community.

Your EDC has assembled industry-specific and business coalition task forces led by diverse business executives to identify opportunities for new business prospects as well as expansions of existing businesses. We are also working diligently to improve our business climate to promote job growth.

The city of Tampa recently formed an "Economic Competitiveness Task Force." Hillsborough County is just completing its efforts to simplify processes — including the expedition of permitting for new business.

Hillsborough, Tampa, Plant City and Temple Terrace are working together on key initiatives to attract new businesses and support our existing businesses.

As we look at other communities around the country we see several truths. Among them, successful job recruitment occurs when a community provides certainty and timeliness in addressing business needs.

Essentially, businesses will invest in us if we invest in them. We are proud that our citizens have approved the institution of a property tax abatement program to support recruited businesses.

However, today our community still has too few sites to support job creators, and the process to create or redevelop permit-ready opportunities has become time consuming and costly. This means one thing: We must reduce the burden of doing business, provide for flexibility where warranted, and empower government regulators to move economic development forward.

This isn't about ignoring our cherished environmental assets, paving over the county or setting aside much-needed review and oversight. It's about embracing the new economy, incenting high-quality sustainable economic growth, supporting business needs and creating needed infrastructure.

Most importantly, it is about realizing we are an economic powerhouse and sharing our success with others. We simply must commit to doing more to face the new challenges of job creation. We must build our brand as a vibrant, sustainable business community — a community nationally known as a place "Open for Business."

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