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Economic opportunities in county still high

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Escambia County and southwest Alabama have a wealth of opportunities, despite the economic downturn and the effects of the 2010 oil spill in the gulf, an analysis by economic development experts shows.

That was the advice of economic development officials at a meeting Tuesday designed to get local leaders thinking about how to work together with other counties to maximize those opportunities.

The Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, working with state universities and other groups, is using a

federal grant to help develop a strategic plan for the region.

“You have the energy and location to really shine,” said Nisa Miranda, director of the University of Alabama’s Center for Economic Development, speaking to a group of community leaders at Flomaton’s Escambia County Bank.

The EDPA is studying the eight counties in Alabama most affected by the oil spill — Baldwin, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Escambia, Mobile, Monroe and Washington. Escambia County is already partnered with four of those counties in the Coastal Gateway Economic Development Alliance.

That regional approach is both unique and effective, Miranda said.

“The bad news is that the Birmingham metro region has 1.6 million people,” she said. “(Industrial site selectors) zero in on Birmingham, because of the airport. So it’s important for you to think of yourselves as a group.”

Focusing on quality of life — including schools and healthcare — can help attract new industries, Miranda said.

“You also should focus on retiree attraction,” she said.

Easing poverty — which has grown in the county and throughout the state — should be a priority of local leaders, Miranda said.

Also chief among the priorities for the county, economic development officials said, is greater workforce training.

“People still have skill gaps,” said Al Bennett, director of workforce development for Jefferson Davis Community College.

Dr. Rosemary Watkins, director of Alabama State University’s Southern Normal campus in Brewton, said preparing students with new technology is important.

“We have to connect with tomorrow,” she said. “If you train people, you have to train them for tomorrow, not yesterday.”

Probate Judge Emilie Mims said programs at the K-12 level can also help encourage students that they have opportunities.

“We need to present to students that there is hope,” she said. “They can learn technical skills so they can get a job and have a life.”



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