



## Alabama's leading job-hunting agencies plan realignment

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By **Michael Tomberlin** -- The Birmingham News



Seth Hammett, shown in an April 2010 file photo. (The Birmingham News/Joe Songer)

MONTGOMERY -- The heads of Alabama's leading job-hunting agencies said Wednesday a new plan to realign the state's economic development efforts could be in place by spring, including the creation of a statewide business incubation program advanced by Gov. Robert Bentley.

Seth Hammett, director of the Alabama Development Office, and Bill Taylor, chief executive of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, told state industry hunters about the realignment at the Economic Development Association of Alabama's winter conference.

Taylor said progress is being made quickly on creating an economic development plan that aligns the state's public and private

resources to operate more efficiently under new economic restraints.

Many expect the plan will lead to the creation of a new "department of commerce" that includes a public-private partnership between ADO, a state agency, and EDPA, a private organization. Taylor conceded that is a possibility, but he said the plan also will reshape all economic development resources in the state in a bid to avoid waste and duplication.

"We're going to come out of this with more clarity of roles," Taylor said. "That's something that is needed."

Taylor pointed to the drop in the number of projects economic developers are working on in the state, and he said it is nobody's fault that the downturn has dealt economic developers a poor hand. But, he added, it is up to everyone to help determine how things will be done going forward.

The EDPA has hired Little Rock-based Boyette Strategic Advisors as a consultant to help develop the economic plan. Surveys of economic developers will conclude Monday, with the entire process scheduled to be completed by March 31.

The final product will better define the state's lead agency for recruitment, retention and renewal when it comes to economic development efforts, Taylor said.

"You need a framework, or you have chaos," Taylor said. "It's about structure with me."

Hammett said that new structure will include more efficient use of the state's worker training and education programs, including AIDT, the Alabama Technology Network, the state two-year college system and other resources. Agencies will coordinate to work on initiatives such as the statewide business incubator program described by Bentley on Tuesday.

Hammett said by better using existing resources and aligning them into useful systems, the state can do more to directly address the needs of companies and minimize the impact of budget cuts.

"We've got to look at things differently across the board and be real judicious in the use of funds we have for economic development and the funds we have for incentives," Hammett said.

In an interview, Hammett said though the pool of money for incentives is down significantly, those funds are not part of the state's budgets that are subject to cuts. However, all agencies in the state could find themselves grappling with budgets in 2012 that are half of what they were two years ago, so all state and local agencies need to work now to change the way they do things, he said.

"If we work hard now, we can do a lot through alignment to offset the cuts," Hammett said. "We have to look at partnerships and consolidation and everything that makes sense."

Hammett, who left a job heading economic development for Andalusia-based energy cooperative PowerSouth to become ADO director, said he plans to return to the private sector in the not-too-distant future.

"I'm going to be here long enough to make sure we have a development plan in place that will continue to create jobs for the state," Hammett said. "I'm trying to work my way out of a job."

Taylor said the goal is to be prepared for an improved economy as companies that have cash now get ready to spend it on new projects and plants.

"I suggest we build a big mitt right now so we can catch some of this," he said.

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