

Baldwin County EDA plans for future success (Turner)

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By

Failure to plan, so the old saying goes, is planning to fail.

With that notion in mind, the Baldwin County Economic Development Alliance is working to define its future.

The alliance was formed in 1995 to unify economic recruitment in a county that is Alabama's largest geographically and among the most diverse in the state. Its members and friends will, in coming days, be asked to participate in a survey coordinated by Troy University. Their responses, plus information gathered in focus groups also coordinated by the university, will be used by a steering committee to develop a new strategic plan.

"The last one was developed in 2005 and it was really for fundraising purposes. This one is totally different," Robert Ingram, president and CEO of the alliance, said last week. "Sometime within the next two years I plan on retiring or semi-retiring. When I leave, I want this organization to be on sound footing, not only financially, but organizationally."

Even further, he said, the goal is to ensure that the alliance remains true to its mission.

"We want to make sure that we can continue to do what we're doing, which is continue diversifying the economy with good-paying, non-service-oriented jobs."

Troy University also is working up economic impact data on the alliance's past accomplishments, Ingram said.

BCEDA says that it helped create 5,900 jobs and more than \$250 million in capital investment during its first 10 years.

The survey process will be completed quickly, Ingram said, allowing the alliance steering committee to begin its work sometime in May. The goal, he said, is to be able to present some plans to the public later in the summer, and tweak the plan from there.



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While the goal is to make the organization "even better and more successful than it has been in the past," Ingram said, he doesn't anticipate major change.

"The basic need, as was proven again by Ivan, Katrina and the oil spill, is that we need to diversify the economy and create wealth in the central and northern parts of the county to complement the great tourism industry we have going in the south end," Ingram said. "If we can create enough base wealth and diverse jobs in the county, then we can survive those natural and unnatural disasters without seeing such a terrible effect on the south end, and to some extent on the Eastern Shore. We have to continue to create more (economic) stability, and the easiest way to do that is create new, high-paying jobs outside the service and tourism areas."

The steering committee, Ingram said, will be aided in its work by the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama. The last step in the strategic planning process, he added, will be aligning the plan with the state's larger Accelerate Alabama initiative to recruit new business, retain and grow existing firms, and boost entrepreneurship to renew the state's economy over time.

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