

# Funding the Dream

The Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council strives to bring high-paying jobs to Charlotte County while establishing a solid working partnership with local and county governments.



Story and photography by Barbara Bear-Mellinger

As the business portion of the April lunch meeting of the Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council's investors got underway, ECEC President Lew Albert discussed the "innovation 2 industry" (i2i) contest the council had sponsored. Designed to encourage new entrepreneurial business, the contest committee had chosen its three winners from the 38 applications submitted.

The winners will receive stipends to start their businesses, rent space in Charlotte County and paid services involved in starting business. In return, the entrepreneurs agree to domicile their businesses in Charlotte County. The identities of the winners, it was announced, would remain a secret until the ECEC's May investors meeting, but the room was abuzz with excitement over the success of the contest.

The member announced his intention to donate, right then and there, to help fund the contest. Spurred on with enthusiasm, several other members announced their donations as well, some from their own pockets, some from their employers. The room almost took on the atmosphere of an auction, as more and more "bidders" chimed in. "It doesn't usually happen that way at our meetings," Albert acknowledged later. "This was unique because of the contest."

Typically, investors join the ECEC by pledging at a certain level: \$10,000 as a Corporate investor, \$2,500 as a Bronze investor, \$5,000 as a Silver investor and \$10,000 as a Gold investor.

The impromptu luncheon donations, however, illustrate what

makes the ECEC so different and so vital to development in Charlotte County. Unlike government agencies and county departments that must follow specific rules and procedures, the ECEC is not bound by most of these. Instead, the ECEC can act quickly when needed and make decisions on its own.

For example, the ECEC receives no public funding and is not bound by the Florida Sunshine Laws. This means the group is not required to announce their meetings to the public or receive public opinion or direction before acting.

In fact, it was for these reasons that the ECEC was formed. Prior to 2008, an organization called the Enterprise Charlotte Foundation worked with the Economic Development Office to promote economic growth in the county. The groups soon realized that they needed to be able to bring interested developers, investors and business leaders to the area on a regular basis and that costs money. They needed a partner arm that could raise the money and allocate it as needed, quickly and without waiting for approvals each time.

On May 12, 2008, the Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council was incorporated. The ECEC is a 501(c)6 nonprofit. This allows the ECEC to make funds available for entertainment and promotional purposes, such as paying for dinners and hotels or business receptions for guests who are brought into the area in the hope that they will become economic partners. The designation also lets the organization be advocates for political and economic positions, which is sometimes necessary when making development decisions. ▶

"From the start, the ECEC's focus was to bring high paying jobs into the area," explained Kevin Russell, an area attorney who was the organization's inaugural president. "We set a goal of raising \$100,000 that first year. We didn't quite reach the goal — we raised just under \$70,000 — but we have since met the goal."

The ECEC's most important achievement, Russell believes, was establishing a solid working partnership with local and county governments. Local chambers of commerce, the Charlotte County Airport Authority, area hospitals, Edison State College and a variety of business leaders are represented on the board of directors and as members. Board members meet regularly with each county commissioner to discuss issues of concern and to convey the ECEC's position.

Lew Albert, CEO of Calusa National Bank, took over the presidency of the ECEC from Russell, and is in his third year as president.

"It's not that the ECEC is a 'secret society,' but because we aren't subject to the Sunshine Laws, we are able to be confidential when necessary," Albert said. "Many times, businesses that are considering making a big move into the area don't want it to be front page news unless they decide to go ahead with it."

The ECEC does more than wine and dine and entertain prospective developers. The council funded the study to determine



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are so fortunate to have a jewel like Murdock Village to make use of. Not many counties have 800 developable acres like this, but we have to think of the whole picture, not just one piece. How will developing one area impact another?

~Lew Albert



the feasibility of bringing The Ripken Experience to the area. Five months ago, the ECEC invited the Brazilian Trade Mission to visit to discuss possible business ventures in the area.

"We're so fortunate to have a jewel like Murdock Village to make use of," Albert said. "Not many counties have 800 developable acres like this, but we have to think of the whole picture, not just one piece of it. How will developing one area impact another?"

Now firmly established, the ECEC is starting to hit its stride, which Albert credits to the council's partnership with the Charlotte County Economic Development Office, headed by Tom Patton.

"The ECEC has such a wide representation of the types of businesses we have here in the county, that when we bring in developers or businesses who are considering locating here, we are able to match them with similar businesses," Patton explained. "That way, they have people who understand their business to discuss business synergies, workforce training and educational facilities with them."

Patton joined the Economic Development Office as its director in September 2011 and is already enthusiastic about the partnership between his office and the ECEC. From his office on the sixth floor of the Suntrust Building in Murdock, Patton can view the wide expanse of area to be developed and imagine what it might become. ➤



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He acknowledges that not everyone is enthusiastic about economic development. As he talks with people in the community, he said he often meets and talks with concerned retirees. They moved to Charlotte County to carve out their slice of paradise, many having come from bustling northern cities. They worry that developing the area will change it adversely by clogging the roads with traffic. Instead of living in what has been called "The

Without this, taxes would have to be raised to keep government services from suffering.

Furthermore, Patton said, high-paying jobs are needed to bring students back to the area after college. The goal is to remain an incredible retirement community but also bring in new development as well as entertainment that will make the county an exciting and rewarding place to live for people of all ages.

Patton is excited about the possibility of bringing in smart technologies, like mobile wellness devices and smart home technologies. He believes Charlotte County can be on the cutting edge of manufacturing or marketing various smart wellness items. One he uses himself measures how many steps he has walked in a day and connects wirelessly to his computer or iPad, allowing him to track his progress over the course of a year.

"Wouldn't it be cool to be not just a great retirement community, but the healthiest retirement community?" Patton mused. By tapping into resources we have — excellent medical facilities and surrounding educational institutions along with the funding from the ECEC to bring in potential businesses — we can make it happen.

**High-paying jobs bring in skilled workers and their families, thus increasing the tax base. Without this, taxes would have to be raised to keep government services from suffering.**

When the home building business picks up, Patton said we need to be able to meet it with the latest smart home technology and have people who understand how to incorporate it and use it. The ECEC can help supply the funding to bring in the technology companies and entrepreneurs as well as fund the studies that can help us determine what may work here and what may not.

At the ECEC's monthly member investor meetings, Albert and others gave updates about current projects in the works, studies under consideration, potential business partners or developers and measures that have been taken to attract such people.

Ray Desjardins, the Charlotte County's information technology operations manager, spoke at the April meeting about the community broadband infrastructure that is already in place for new business ventures.

"Charlotte County has a significant amount of infrastructure fiber underground already, and there is space available that can be used for the private sector," he said. "Every time development is done, conduit is put in place underground. That's the expensive part, and the best time to install it. It's much more cost-effective for businesses this way, and it's one way we can attract them."

Another way to attract new business is through contests like i2i, which was the creative brainchild of the ECEC. The contest was announced nationally to encourage technology-related businesses to start in or relocate to our area. The three winners were chosen by a panel of business leaders and kept a secret until the ECEC's May meeting. ►



Tom Patton

Best Place to Retire" by Money Magazine and others, they fear that the beauty, tranquility and hometown feel they have found here will turn into an overdeveloped, commercial, tacky tourist trap. After talking with Patton, they usually come to understand why that won't happen under the partnership of his office and the ECEC.

Their focus is on bringing in high-paying jobs, Patton said, echoing both Albert and Russell. High-paying jobs bring in skilled workers and their families, thus increasing the tax base.



Kaley Miller from Mosaic presents the award to second-place winner Paul Marcuzzo.

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~Lew Albert

The third place winner was Sundaraja Sitarama Iyengar, of Davie, Fla., for his invention of a device that will allow individuals to detect glaucoma just by looking in the mirror. The tiny device can be surgically implanted in the iris with a small incision. When intraocular (eye) pressure increases, the device will change from its normal color or pattern, allowing individuals to contact their ophthalmologists as soon as a change is noted. After medication is given, patients can continue to monitor changes in the device to determine the medicine's effectiveness on a daily basis. This device will need to go through clinical trials and seek FDA approval.

Second place honors went to Paul Marcuzzo of Punta Gorda for his portable electronic charger. It's designed to eliminate the worry over not having your cell phone, GPS or other device charged in the event of a power outage or natural disaster, or just being somewhere that you need to use it, without worrying about carrying enough extra batteries. The charger comes in a tough Pelican™ case, which many military and emergency services items already use. Marcuzzo submitted several ideas that the judges felt had great potential, but his winning idea was chosen because it is simple, practical and ready to go to market now.

The grand prize winner of the i2i Contest was Thomas Contreras of Port Charlotte, who has invented a lobster snare that's designed to protect the diver and the environment at the same time. The snare, which can be opened underwater, has a five-foot shaft, making it possible for the diver to use it without touching delicate coral and other sea life with his hands. At the other end of the shaft is a bright red diver's flag. When the diver decides to surface, the shaft and flag cut through the surface ahead of the diver, alerting other boaters and divers to watch for a diver about to surface if he has moved away from his original flag. Contreras, too, had



Mike Grant from Ambitran presents a \$7,000 check to first-place winner Thomas Contreras.

several feasible entries that the judges liked. Judges ultimately selected this particular invention because it is complete, already patented and ready to market, and there are already some interested buyers. "He is the embodiment of what an entrepreneur should be," one judge said of Contreras.

After the winners were introduced, the room was still full of the excitement generated by their ideas and the unknown prospects of what their businesses may become. "Remember that Google was once a start-up, begun in one small room by an entrepreneur with a big idea," Albert said.

And that thought is enough to keep the Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council running at full speed, clear in their mission to bring high-paying jobs into the county, determined to make Charlotte County all that it can be. ■■



Sundaraja Sitarama Iyengar receives third place honors from Lew Albert.