

Getting on the radar screen of new and expanding companies
By Tom Patton, Charlotte County Economic Development Office Director

The Charlotte County Economic Development Office works to diversify the economic and job base of the community and region in three ways: recruitment of new businesses to our community, expansion of existing businesses within the county, and helping new business start-ups get established. There are several paths we plan to take to put Charlotte County on the radar screen of companies looking for a location to expand their operations.

The recession our nation has experienced over the past few years may make it appear that not many companies are looking to expand, when actually numerous industry sectors are growing substantially. Finding the right companies to approach is our first challenge. By identifying our region's primary industry sectors, we can then promote synergies other companies look for when making expansion decisions.

The U.S. has struggled to maintain its manufacturing sector and Charlotte County, aside from some strength in agriculture, lags far behind the U.S. average employment numbers in this key economic sector, as well as in transportation, warehousing and wholesale trade. One of our best current opportunities and our lead target area for the coming year is attracting companies in transportation, warehousing and wholesale sectors. With to our proximity to Interstate 75, the abundance of available land near our airport, and our educational system's excellent capacity to serve these industry groups, we will work with the airport to identify and contact companies with a strong presence in southwest Florida who may benefit by joining Cheney Brothers in this industrial area of the County.

A great deal has been written about the promising entertainment district in Murdock Village. Another area within Murdock Village is slated to become a business and research park, adding another key element to our recruitment strategy. Planning and infrastructure improvements will create attractive shovel-ready opportunities for prospective companies providing professional and business services.

The healthcare industry is one of our strongest industries, currently focused on providing essential services to our residents and visitors. Typically we would not target this since our two large hospitals and solid local education and degree programs already support this flourishing hospital and medical services industry. However, because our current medical industry focuses on service rather than research or manufacturing of medical devices, I believe potential exists to expand the latter.

The medical device industry has potential to grow, but is a challenging industry cluster to recruit. Large scientific medical device developers and manufacturers require multi-layered community specialties in engineering and specialized medical fields. These specialized skills are typically supported by advanced university degrees and research, assets we don't truly have in place.

However, I feel we are ready now to explore one medical device industry application. One of the fastest growing markets of new products showcased at this year's Consumer Electronics Show is the expanding array of personal mobile medical devices. These devices record and track your medical health by giving you recorded history of your blood pressure, pulse rate, blood sugar measurements, personal weight, body fat, caloric burn and more. I personally purchased one, a Fit Bit, for less than \$100. This small device uses an accelerator and altimeter to record walking and stair-climbing activity and a sleep sensor to record sleeping patterns. Instant access to medical statistics alerts you to changes otherwise not apparent until your next doctor visit. Our niche could be combining these technologies in a wellness

research facility and educating our citizens (and winter visitors) to utilize these health devices. The result would be improved health and wellness, creating a new “Blue Zone” in Charlotte County where people live longer healthier lives.

As early adopters of this new rapidly emerging industry cluster, and other smart home devices such as those planned at Babcock Ranch, our community can make a mark on the map that catch the attention of companies with new job opportunities based on this rapidly emerging industry of smart home and personal mobile medical devices.

Our current strengths—great location, access to transportation corridors, and an intelligent, trainable workforce—attract today’s solid corporations looking to expand. Embracing and utilizing new technologies will improve our community’s opportunity to attract and grow local companies destined to be tomorrow’s leaders. Our community needs both expanding corporations and new technology companies to flourish and grow.