

Three groups combine forces for economic development

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FORT WALTON BEACH — The city government has not had a reputation of being pro-business in the past, but a new partnership with two business groups looks to change that.

While city officials previously would meet with representatives of the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County, each organization worked independently on economic development, said Bob Mearns, Fort Walton Beach's city manager. Now, the three agencies are working together to try to bring in new businesses and expand existing ones.

“The city wants to show how they're supporting the business community and I think that's very smart on their part,” said Larry Sassano, president of the Economic Development Council. “We always worked together in the past. Now it's a more formal process, working together to be more business friendly.”

Mearns said the city has tried to be more proactive about economic development since he became city manager in April. However, it did not have the funding to devote an employee solely to economic development.

Instead, Mearns met with Sassano and chamber President Ted Corcoran to take the initial steps to create a formal partnership.

“The business community is very excited about the possibilities of what could happen in the greater Fort Walton Beach area with the municipality working with the EDC and the business community to be more pro business,” Corcoran said. “It's a wonderful thing that will benefit everybody. It should be a great thing for our citizens and more jobs and more opportunities.”

The city formed the business retention panel earlier this year to connect its staff to the business community.

The staff also is working to update its Land Development Code to create 11 special zoning districts so each district can be organized based on its needs and is developing incentives to offer new businesses.

“The city certainly wants to encourage any type of operation that's going to create good, high-paying jobs,” Mearns said. “They benefit everyone.”

Sassano said he would like to develop similar partnerships with the other cities in the county.