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BDB Teams With Glades Leaders to Recruit Businesses

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BELLE GLADE —

The Glades region, long an afterthought in Palm Beach County's business community, is getting new attention from economic developers.

The Business Development Board of Palm Beach County today opened an office in Belle Glade to market the region to manufacturers and distributors.

Sky-high jobless rates in Belle Glade, Pahokee and South Bay provided the inspiration for the new office, said Kelly Smallridge, president of the Business Development Board. The region's unemployment rate is estimated to be far higher than that of Palm Beach County as a whole, where unemployment stood at 8 percent in December.

"It's a crying shame," Smallridge said of the Glades' weak labor market. "With 38 percent unemployment, we don't have a choice."

The Business Development Board budgeted \$100,000 to run the office this year and plans to spend \$150,000 a year each of the next two years. The first \$100,000 was raised by the Lake Okeechobee Regional Alliance of Palm Beach County — no small sum for a nonprofit with an annual budget of less than \$50,000.

"The Glades had to pony up," said Donia Roberts, an attorney in Belle Glade and chairwoman of the Lake Okeechobee Regional Economic Alliance.

Contributors included the Howard E. Hill Foundation, sugar giant Florida Crystals, the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative and the cities of Belle Glade, Pahokee and South Bay. The Lake Okeechobee Regional Economic Alliance is seeking donations to cover the costs of the marketing effort over the next two years.

The largest budget item is the salary of the Business Development Board's new recruiter for the Glades, Smallridge said.

Brandon Carson, a veteran of Enterprise Florida, started today as vice president of the Business Development Board. He said his goal will be to raise the Glades' profile among employers looking for an affordable alternative to pricier coastal properties.

"There is a lack of awareness or a lack of visibility about what is truly available," Carson said.

Economic development in the Glades long has been a tough sell. With a population of 30,000, the area for decades has struggled with high unemployment and a lack of good jobs.

John Hodgdon, a Wellington real estate broker who's marketing a 10,000-square-foot industrial property on Main Street in Pahokee, calls the Glades "a different world" — an area that rarely attracts outside employers.

"It's just a tough market to move into," Hodgdon said. "It's its own world."

But John Boyd, a site selection specialist in Princeton, N.J., said such perceptions might not matter to out-of-area business executives looking for a low-cost place to build a plant.

"It's a matter of perspective," Boyd said. "To someone sitting in Palm Beach, it's a different world. But to an aerospace executive in Hartford, Conn., it's all part of Palm Beach County."

One economic driver could come in the form of an "inland port" on 850 acres between Belle Glade and South Bay. Florida Crystals Corp. and IDI, an Atlanta-based real estate developer, hope to build 10 million square feet of warehouse space and a rail yard to handle cargo from South Florida's ports.

But Smallridge said the Business Development Board's marketing campaign will go on independently of the proposed inland port.

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