



DRIVING the ECONOMY

Leaders from across Martin County's business community dine, discuss and debate the future of the local economy.

By Ike Crumpler | Photography by Thomas Winter



Though not as remote nor as exclusive as Northern Ireland's Lough Erne Resort (the five-star hotel that hosted the last G-8 summit), the location for Martin County's own economic discussion proved plenty posh and private for its eight guests.

The long, desolate drive along Southwest Sand Trail in Palm City culminates at the spectacular fountain entrance of Copperleaf. Behind two security gates stands the stunning site of the night's dinner and deliberations: the 5,562-square-foot Marbella 103 model created by custom builder Arthur Rutenberg Homes.

Under the vaulted ceilings of the foyer and at the edge of the great room, Executive Chef Brian Yager of Cuisine 256 greets the arriving guests. Servers jot down wine selections and offer hors d'oeuvres consisting of Korean beef tacos with pineapple-cilantro relish, potato cups with braised beef and salmon and scallop sausage dripped in bacon-onion mayo.

Nocturnes by Chopin streams from the 80-inch plasma mounted above the fireplace.

Greetings complete and glasses in hands, everyone drifts into the club room by the pool table. Attendees include Chuck Gerardi, executive director of the Martin County Economic Council; his wife, Lisa; Jim Chrulski, legislative and economic strategies manager for the City of Stuart; his wife Mally, nutrition director for Florida Department of Health in St. Lucie County; Kevin Powers, Martin County's representative on the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District, director of external affairs for the Florida Commerce Park in Indiantown and founding

Kevin Powers; (far right) Marsha Powers chats with Jason and Angela Hoffman

principal of liquefied natural gas provider Florida LNG Groups; his wife Marsha Powers, Martin County School Board member; Angela Hoffman, executive director of the Hobe Sound Chamber of Commerce, and husband, Jason Hoffman, construction lead for FPL nuclear projects.

Having created cuisine on Capitol Hill, The District and other swank enclaves in Washington, D.C., Chef Yager draws everyone to the round dinner table for roasted carrot soup accented with apples and ginger. But first, a toast. To, what else? Martin County's economy.

Soon the conversation wades into economic matters—attracting development in Stuart, preserving the small-town character of Hobe Sound, protecting the waterways, fighting All Aboard Florida. Quickly, a structure in the conversation forms based on the principles of economics.

Principle No. 1) Human appetite outpaces productive resources, and the resulting scarcity creates (constantly competing) choices.

A renaissance of entrepreneurship and activity in downtown Stuart leaves the city conflicted about how to best monetize its real-estate holdings while addressing the shortage of parking spaces, says Jim Chrulski.

“A shortage of parking,” Chuck Gerardi says, “that’s a good problem to have, Jim.”

The city invested in its electric tram service to help alleviate gridlock, Jim Chrulski noted, and give passersby a lift.

“As it relates to parking,” he says, “we all probably walk further from a spot in the mall parking lot to the mall than we do almost anywhere downtown, but it’s the perception.”

The next big idea, suggested Kevin Powers, could entail adapting Uber—which in larger cities dispatches private drivers using personal vehicles to transport passengers—to the water.

“When the city first put in the courtesy dock, nobody was using the boat slips,” says Marsha Powers, who had recently joined the crowd of thousands gathered in Stuart to see the Clydesdales. “But now you can never get a spot.”

Principal No. 2) Choice opens opportunities—and costs them.

With brutal northern temperatures pushing more visitors southward, Martin County is reportedly collecting near-record-setting totals from its hotel tax. With a large percentage of the county’s hotels located within the city limits of Stuart, Jim Chrulski emphasized the importance of a well-staffed welcome center to make the best first impression.

“You really want to remain a community—not just feature a



cold, digital kiosk at a welcome center,” says Jim Chrulski. “Over 70 percent of our investors first come as tourists. It just makes good sense for us to have someone there to offer a warm handshake and welcome them to our community.”

Four 10-foot-tall sliding glass doors—one at a 90-degree angle—open, inviting in the cool night air and luxurious backyard fireplace, outdoor kitchen and swimming pool, spa and wading pool. As the servers deliver the salads—mixed greens, spicy pecans, zucchini threads and strawberries, all sprinkled with ginger-sesame dressing—the fortunes and misfortunes of weather draw deeper consideration.

Bitter winters bring visitors but what does really wet weather cost? With some reports putting the overall economic benefit of the Indian River Lagoon at a combined \$3.7 billion—and supporting 15,000 jobs—Kevin Powers expressed relief at 2014’s



Mally and Jim Chrulski discuss with
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Lisa Gerardi

zero releases and the desperately needed respite from conditions causing the previous year's "Lost Summer."

"There are 68 projects ongoing right now and not one of them is complete," he says. "Government has to start finishing projects. I think government should be required to finish three

projects before starting another one. Before coming back to us, the taxpayers, show us some things that work. There's \$248 million dedicated to these projects. Let's continue them."

While admiring public organization opposing the Lake Okeechobee releases, Kevin Powers also emphasized a comprehensive review of current practices that impact the waterways.

"Not one gallon came out of Lake O in 2014, but there were still signs at Leighton Park that said, 'Stay out of the water,' so there are still things we need to be doing," he says. "It's a blessing to be a part of a community that puts its money where its mouth is. I'm a resident of Stuart, and no one does it better."

Stuart is earning acclaim across the region for many of its water management programs, including incentivizing customers to voluntarily switch from the antiquated septic systems that endanger the St. Lucie River to sewer service. Nearly 60 percent of its customers have signed up to make the upgrades—which, originally projected to take 10 years—are now slated for completion in half that time.

Principal No. 3) Economic incentives and disincentives spark usually predictable consumer responses.

Stuart is challenged by how best to capitalize on its existing resources, said Jim Chrulski.

"The City of Stuart is only 8.5 square miles inhabited by 17,000 people," he says. "But we're the downtown for [250,000] people for special events. Even though we just celebrated our 100th anniversary, we really have to think about what our growth priorities are. Infill is definitely important."

Chef Yager pauses conversation to introduce dinner—top loin filet of beef, au gratin potatoes and asparagus with pineapple-ginger butter.

City commissioners recently reached out to the development community—including producing an in-house video complete with drone footage—in search of ideas for how best to utilize the Triangle property it owns at Sailfish Circle.

"Right now, the city is seeking requests for developer qualifications for the Triangle prop-



Chuck Gerardi



Chef Brian Yager prepares the dinner.

erty so we can determine the best type of project that will blend with what city needs and wants," he says.

When it comes to needs and wants, it's tough to find any segment of the community—economic-minded or otherwise—backing All Aboard Florida, the proposed passenger rail from Miami to Orlando. The train has garnered support in Miami-Dade, Broward County and West Palm Beach, where stations are slated for construction. But All Aboard Florida has elicited skepticism in Stuart regarding its business model and concern over potential quality-of-life impacts.

"For this region in particular, for the Economic Council to be against an economic initiative like the train feels a little awkward for us, but it's just a disruption for marine industry and public safety, so we took the opposition," Chuck Gerardi says. "I don't think anybody really believes there's demand for 32 trains a day. If you're talking two or four or six stops a day, maybe."

The Economic Council applauded Martin County Commissioners for dedicating \$1.4 million to fight the train. Broad-based strategy is essential to success, Chuck Gerardi said.

"I don't know if we're in favor of just throwing money at a lawsuit," he says. "But if there's a smart attack on that, let's have a conversation about that."

Principal No. 4) Economic systems and market realities shape the choices people make.

Understanding the unique rhythms of each Martin County community—from the county's four municipalities, Stuart, Sewall's Point, Jupiter Island and Ocean Breeze, to its unincorporated areas, Hobe Sound, Hutchinson Island, Indiantown, Jensen Beach, Rio, Palm City and Tequesta—is vital to comprehending the larger economic picture, Kevin Powers said.

"What I find interesting are the similarities that exist between Hobe Sound and Indiantown, especially when you look at them in terms of taxes," he says. "They are the two largest donors in the county's tax base—Jupiter Island/Hobe Sound and Indiantown."

Florida Power & Light, Indiantown Cogeneration, Louis Dreyfus Citrus and Bay State Milling account for up to 20 percent of the tax burden—while Indiantown is less than 5 percent of the population, Kevin Powers said.

The similarities split when it comes to growth issues. During the building boom, Indiantown enjoyed strong public support when national home builders planned significant residential housing. The market faltered, however, and two proposed large developments eventually folded. By contrast, during the economic downturn, major developments proposed for Bridge Road in Hobe Sound encountered sustained public opposition.

"People are very sensitive about protecting and preserving Hobe Sound," says Angela Hoffmann, "and the chamber is sensitive as well in striking the balance between



living in a wonderful community that has all the characteristics that we want in a wonderful, small town and still enjoying an environment that supports our small businesses."

"Small" being the operative term.

"Ninety-seven percent of our chamber businesses," she continued, "have three employees or less."

Principal No. 5) Choices carry intended and unintended consequences—that usually don't arise until later.

Signs of Hobe Sound's recovery are emerging, Angela Hoffman said.

"Although some private property owners were sitting on businesses in downtown Hobe Sound during the recession," she says, "there's now a renaissance taking place there, with shops opening and people walking around and it's great."

"But there's still signage and improvements and core infrastructure that needs to happen and that's why the Neighborhood Advisory Committees are so key," added Hoffman, a county-appointed to the Hobe Sound NAC. "Community engagement is where and how creating a healthy downtown starts."

As everyone acknowledged hearing rumors of various unincorporated areas weighing the virtues and downsides of incorporating into municipalities, conversation turned to tales of caution

from neighboring areas

"There's also been some not-successful businesses that have gone to Port St. Lucie," Angela Hoffman says. "And even City Place caused an exodus of businesses from other popular areas in West Palm."

Principal No. 6) Through fair trade and exchange, both parties benefit.

No one arrived under the delusion that the night's assembly—no matter how diverse, experienced or ambitious—would produce all the solutions to maintaining and strengthening Martin County's economy. But in such a picturesque retreat, after good company, fine wine, a delicious dinner and dessert of brownie cake with chocolate mousse, glazed in chocolate and mango-coulis, the key ingredients for wider success—cooperation, compromise, creativity—were recognized.

"There are plenty of big enough issues out there where the five chambers and the Business Development Board, the Economic Council, the municipalities and key community leaders should get together and share ideas," Chuck Gerardi says.

"It's what unites us that really makes Martin County work," Kevin Powers says.

"If we could reach out and collaborate," added Marsha Powers, "it could be amazing." ■