

# BUSINESS BRIEFS

## REIS meeting focuses on Lee County's business incentives

Lee County efforts to attract new business and grow existing businesses are attracting national attention and providing significant competitive advantages for economic recovery.

James W. Moore, director of Lee County's Economic Development Office, will provide the Real Estate Investment Society with an overview of innovative marketing efforts and incentive programs at the Jan. 13 REIS luncheon meeting.

The EDO just launched the FIRST (Financial Incentives for Recruiting Strategic Targets) Initiative, a \$25 million incentive fund that can provide capital for business expansion and relocation. The program is in addition to a varied menu of local and state incentive programs, bonds, workforce training, tax credits and refunds that are coordinated by the EDO.

In 2008, Lee County EDO worked

with neighboring economic development agencies to organize the Southwest Florida Regional Development Corporation, to help maximize marketing efforts for the region. The EDO Web site also maintains an inventory of available commercial properties as a resource for site selectors and acquisition agents. Following the presentation, Mr. Moore will respond to questions of specific interest to the real estate investment and development industry.

The meeting is sponsored by Haag Douglas Realty, and will begin promptly at 11:45 a.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 13, in the Osprey Room at Pelican Preserve's Clubhouse, on Treeline Avenue at Colonial Boulevard. Admission is \$25 for members and \$35 for guests, which includes lunch. Reservations are required by Jan. 8 and may be made at the REIS Web site: [www.reis-swfl.org](http://www.reis-swfl.org). ■

## SURVIVORS

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her family had to take a 30 percent pay cut, but eventually outlived the big box store.

Times are just as tough now.

"It's real bad," she said. "We're struggling to keep the doors open with the taxes going up, insurance going up. Everything's gone up and it's hard to keep the shelves stocked."

Her mother, Maxine Mahn, 73, sold out the Ace store to her daughters five years ago, and is confident they'll survive these times too. "They're going to have to pull their belt buckle in," she said, "But we did too in the 1970s. I think the kids will do all right; they've grown up in hardware."

Her secrets to longevity include nuggets of wisdom that, at times, seem fresh again: treating people the way they would want to be treated, and not spending more than you make.

"I think it's basically about time we all woke up to the fact we're living on too much credit," she said. "I think if the American people will live off what they make, we'll make it. We're fighters."

Others businesses say they have not lost profits, in spite of the recession.

"I don't think it's slowed down," said Bob Jones, 78, owner of Bill's Fruit & Gift Store in Cape Coral. Mr. Jones bought the store from the original owner in 1983 and is open on a seasonal basis, October through May. "As far as in-store sales, it's probably running pretty close to what it was last year. People seem to be spending just as much now as they have in the past."

The greatest business challenge Mr. Jones faced, he said, was switching the records and order taking to a computer, about 10 years ago.

At the Beacon Motel & Resort on Fort Myers Beach, General Manager Sherry Guess said new owners refurbished the motel when they bought it two years ago.

"I look out at the people on the street and I don't see a recession," she said. "I had a lot of cancellations for New Year's, but we just book the rooms right back up."

Benson's Grocery on Old 41 in downtown Bonita Springs was issued a 1960

occupational license, but owner Albert DeBono said the store was built in 1926. He bought it from W.C. Benson in 1978 and runs it with his two sons, brother-in-law and wife.

It was a challenge from the get go. Mr. Benson had often closed the store early or at his convenience and it took Mr. DeBono six months to regain a regular clientele.

Then, downtown Bonita was like a ghost town.

"This was a forgotten place in the 1970s," Mr. DeBono said. "Bonita was the stepchild of Lee County."

Still, with overhead like the price of insurance and food costs up, last year was "the hardest year I've had in 31 years," Mr. DeBono said, "and the next one might be worse."

His yearly goal is to have all his debts paid off by Feb. 1, but said he may not make it this year. The only other time it was this bad was when the street out front closed down for six months in the 1990s, when a nearby bridge was being replaced.

Mr. DeBono, 60, grew up in Detroit, where his father owned a small grocery store. Benson's is also small compared to supermarkets, but complete: fresh produce, meat, canned goods, baking and baked goods, health and beauty products and more are all found here, stocked in neatly marked isles.

His secret to success includes working hard (the store is open every day from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., except Christmas and Thanksgiving when it closes at 3:30 p.m.) Also, treating everyone as an equal. Mr. DeBono described at least one occasion when he had to ask a customer who refused to wait in line behind a Mexican man to either go to the back of the line or leave. He also keeps special items in stock for regular customers.

"We take care of people," Mr. DeBono said. "And we don't overcharge anybody."

Although the recession is cutting into many businesses, real estate broker Mr. Bundschu is optimistic.

"I grew up during the Depression," he said. "This is nothing. There's still work out there to do. I know people that are going back to work, people that have done a good job. And things are starting to pick up a little. We're living in a very fortunate area; people are still coming down here." ■



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