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CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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### **Economic Summit Discusses Change in Tough Times**

VALDOSTA, Ga.—*It's the Mix that Matters* was the title of the Chamber's 2011 Economic Summit held Tuesday at the James H. Rainwater Conference Center. A room full of top leaders came together to discuss the economic health of Valdosta-Lowndes County at the event sponsored by Express Employment Professionals.

Dr. Cynthia R. Tori presented the VSU Center for Business and Economic Research study, *Lowndes County by the Numbers: How Do We Compare With Peer and Aspirant Communities?* and a panel of local economic development organizations discussed their economic development strategies and solicited questions and ideas from participants. Myrna Ballard, Chamber of Commerce President; Michael Jetter, Interim Executive Director for the Valdosta-Lowndes Conference Center and Tourism Authority; Amanda Peacock, Valdosta Main Street Manager; Allan Ricketts, Valdosta-Lowndes Industrial Authority Project Manager; and Jane Shelton, Valdosta-Lowndes Airport Authority Member were panelists. "The economic development organizations represented here today can come together as a team and have more impact on our community," said Jetter.

Economic Summit participants raised substantive questions for the panel and shared ideas for moving forward during the facilitated discussion portion of the Summit led by VSU Center for Business and Economic Research Director, Scott Manley. Lowndes County Planner, Jason Davenport posed the question, why does Valdosta-Lowndes County lose businesses? Ballard replied, "Having a pro-business environment is the most important part of the economic development process. The Chamber has partnered with the local governments on our SORT initiative, and the local governments have been extremely responsive. We're on the right track." Ricketts replied with an answer regarding maintaining a competitive edge over other communities and playing to our strengths. "It is important for the Industrial Authority to recruit the industries that can be successful in our community."

A few main ideas brought to light during the facilitated discussion were the need for a combined strategy and effort to market Valdosta-Lowndes County, the need for a commitment and strategic effort to develop the healthcare industry in Valdosta-

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Lowndes County and taking full advantage of Valdosta-Lowndes County infrastructure as a tool for economic growth.

Chris Miller with Illuminomics ended the day with a keynote address over lunch. “Let’s not get stuck on this first step,” said Miller as he encouraged the crowd to take action on what they heard at the Summit, “Economic development is about increasing quality of life and quality of place—it’s about making your community better. Valdosta-Lowndes County should be doing better, needs to do better and can do better.”

Miller challenged the group to not let the Economic Summit be just another meeting where everyone talks about what needs to be done and never does anything about the issues. “Let us look back on today and say this was the day that Valdosta chose a different path.”

To ensure that Valdosta-Lowndes County moves forward, each of the economic development organizations will discuss how they can plug the ideas and suggestions into each of their respective strategies and programs. As a follow up to the meeting, the Chamber is also hosting an interactive workshop on Oct. 13 with Peter Kageyama, creative community consultant and author of *For the Love of Cities*. For more information about the Summit or workshop, contact ReKasa Deen at [rdeen@valdostachamber.com](mailto:rdeen@valdostachamber.com).

A full report of *Lowndes County by the Numbers: How Do We Compare With Peer and Aspirant Communities?* and details from the Economic Summit can be downloaded at [www.ValdostaChamber.com](http://www.ValdostaChamber.com).

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A panel of representatives from local economic development organizations shared their strategies and solicited questions and ideas from participants at the Chamber Economic Summit presented by Express Employment Professionals on Tuesday, May 17 at the James H. Rainwater Conference Center.