

Economic Summit: Valdosta can 'do better'

BY DAWN CASTRO
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VALDOSTA — A motivational speaker traveled to Valdosta Tuesday to encourage area leaders in the areas of economic development, business expansion and community growth.

The Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with Express Employment Professionals, hosted the 2011 Economic Summit at the James H. Rainwater Conference Center. The keynote speaker for the day was Chris Miller, chief executive officer of Illuminomics out of Savannah.

Illuminomics works with communities and organizations to develop innovative solutions and adaptive sustainable economic, social and environmental strategies to ensure success in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive global economy.

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The focus of Tuesday's summit was on urban ecology, community building, cultural advancement and business development, just to name a few.

A report gathered by Valdosta State University students compared Valdosta-Lowndes County to 14 other peer communities throughout the Southeast.

Miller said, in comparison to these communities,



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Keynote speaker Chris Miller of Illuminomics speaks to business, city and county leaders during the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce's 2011 Economic Summit, It's the Mix that Matters, presented by Express Employment Professionals Tuesday at the James H. Rainwater Conference Center.

Valdosta is below average in some areas, such as wages and knowledge-based jobs. However, the area has shown signs of growth since the last numbers were calculated, a 2009 economic survey showed.

This is not Miller's first trip to Valdosta. He has been working with the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce since 2008.

"Every time I come to Valdosta, I am just thrilled to be here," Miller said. "After listening to the business representatives and the comments and questions from the attendees, I am very impressed that you all already know the challenges here."

Miller talked about the challenges the community faces, one being the lack of efforts and the lack of communication.

"You guys have great

leadership here, but in my experience, you could do better. People here want to do better. Valdosta has resources and opportunities, but they have to be utilized. If you're having conversations, but things are not moving, you may need to redirect or change the conversation."

Miller gave examples of how other communities made positive changes that led to economic growth. He used Thomasville's lack of technical support.

"Thomasville didn't have hi-speed internet, so the process of moving products quickly was not possible," he said. "With Rose Net hi-speed broadband, it is now able to work 25 times faster. That one simple step boosted economic product growth, and as we all know, the technical industry creates a wage growth path."

Miller ended his speech by telling the packed conference room that what Valdosta needs is to work as a single entity, become less territorial in the decision-making process, have decisive leadership, an intense desire to do something, a creative approach, boldness of action and communication, just to name a few.

Walter Hobgood, owner of Express Employment Professionals, said in order to move forward like so many of Valdosta's peers some level of change is required.

"We have a lot of assets in this community," Hobgood said. "We do recognize we have areas to work on. If you're not moving forwards, then you're looking backwards. We need to have community involvement. We all have to want to do it together."