

 URL: <http://tbo.com/pasco-county/zephyrhills-pasco-county-get-tips-on-attracting-businesses-20150626/>

Zephyrhills, Pasco County get tips on attracting businesses

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Consultant Mark Sweeney speaks to Pasco County commissioners and Zephyrhills City Council members about getting properties ready for relocating businesses.

ZEPHYRHILLS — City council members joined Pasco County commissioners and others this week to discuss making local properties more marketable to potential incoming industries.

Two consultants — Duke Energy’s Site Readiness Program and McCallum Sweeney Consulting — helped lead the conversation.

John Walsh, vice president of the Pasco Economic Development Council, told the elected officials, “We’ve been very excited about this whole process. It’s an excellent opportunity for us to promote Zephyrhills and Pasco County and show the rest of the world out there that we’re ready to receive some investments and help create jobs here.”

Mark Sweeney, senior principal of McCallum Sweeney Consulting of Greenville, South Carolina, a firm that contracts with Duke Energy’s Site Readiness Program, explained how to attract businesses looking for a place to build an industrial project, which he said translates into jobs and economic growth for a community. McCallum Sweeney Consulting, Sweeney said, helps companies decide where to locate new facilities.

“The idea of ready sites has really risen up in our business to be an important aspect to how we do searches and how communities prepare,” Sweeney said. “It’s not an easy process. Attracting investments and jobs is more competitive than ever.”

“Dirt won’t do,” Sweeney said. “The days of putting a sign out in front of an orange grove and saying ‘the new Pasco County Industrial Park’ and hoping that’s going to attract activity ... if that ever worked, it doesn’t work anymore.”

“What can you as a community do to be more attractive? Be prepared,” Sweeney said. “Your product is your community; everything about your community may be a factor that someone is considering and evaluating.”

Some readiness factors are leadership, available sites, infrastructure and quality-of-life issues such as entertainment, housing, parks and retail stores for employees, he said.

Sweeney said being ready means having a portfolio of ready, available sites and information available at a moment’s notice.

Beth Land of McCallum Sweeney, who works with the Duke program, presented a recently completed evaluation of the Zephyrhills Industrial Park area that borders Zephyrhills Municipal Airport.

The 442 acres are not entirely in the city, City Manager Steve Spina said. About two-thirds of the land is in unincorporated Pasco. Sysco and 4Rail LLC own the county acreage, and 5L Properties LLC owns the city land.

“We put your community though the ringer. They did a great job,” Land said. “We want to help you as you market the Zephyrhills airport industrial area. We hope the presentation will help you prioritize what action items you should be doing first and what you should be doing to get your property really marketable to site selection consultants and to the individual prospects.”

Land said the evaluation revealed strengths and weaknesses in the property’s marketability. For instance, the county land already is zoned light industrial but the city property is an agricultural district. The city should rezone the property or be ready to do so quickly to make it marketable, Land said.

A wetland in the central area of the industrial park land would make the property more suitable for multiple users rather than a single entity, Land advised. Height restrictions, because of the airport, also would influence what sort of buildings would be appropriate on the property.

The preliminary recommendations were that the area is suited for industries involving aerospace, light industrial work such as assembly, and plastics.

The Duke program reaches out to local economic development organizations to help identify and evaluate prospective locations for industrial development. Danielle Ruiz, a manager with the program, thanked Pasco and Zephyrhills leaders as well as property owners for their cooperation.