



**SARASOTA TOMORROW**  
The Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce



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**Local Leaders Return from Best Practices Trip to Asheville**  
*confirm many Sarasota County initiatives are on the right track*

SARASOTA, Fla. (May 1, 2009) – A delegation of 18 business, elected and civic leaders recently returned from an intercity visit to Asheville, N.C. During the three-day visit, organized by the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) of Sarasota County and The Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce (GSCC), leaders shared best practices in economic and workforce development.

“The success of our intercity visit to Asheville was two-fold,” said Del Borgsdorf, executive vice president of The GSCC. “On one hand, we were able to gain insight in to a similar community that has capitalized on its cultural, environmental and community assets. On the other hand and perhaps more importantly, we were able to strengthen relations amongst our travel squad. The trip presented an opportunity for extensive discussion and interaction around our common interest – improving greater Sarasota’s economy.”

Asheville and Sarasota share similar demographics and industry composition. Both cities’ economies include heavy reliance on tourism and service-based businesses. Strong cultural assets, an aging population and other economic issues make the two areas appropriate for comparison.

In a review of various community facets, including downtown revitalization, workforce innovation, regional collaboration and partnerships with universities, Sarasota County leaders learned that Asheville has successfully capitalized on its assets to work towards a stronger economy.

“Rather than trying to compete with much larger regional cities for targeted industries, Asheville has taken an organic approach to economic development,” said Sarasota County Commissioner Jon Thaxton. “They’ve built upon their city’s defining assets – scenic beauty, folk art and a music scene and they have successfully developed industry around those factors.”

Tourism in Asheville, like Sarasota, is a major economic driver. “Asheville exemplifies a tourism-driven system of project development that leverages its tourism development funds to provide facilities and attractions that benefit the tourism industry, overall economic development and the

community,” said Virginia Haley, president of the Sarasota County Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Perhaps the strongest take away from the trip was the importance of community cohesion, a shared vision and collaboration to building a successful economy.

It was noted that regardless of which Asheville public or private entity achieves something, the achievement is celebrated by all community groups and is viewed as a win for Asheville as a whole. The city benefits from a shared vision and is working to strengthen relationships regionally.

Workforce collaborations also stood out to the delegation. “A high-level of collaboration among businesses and educational institutions has allowed the Asheville area to meet the needs of its local businesses,” said Kathleen Baylis, president & CEO of the EDC. “A similar level of collaboration needs to be continued in Sarasota County to advance our workforce initiatives and ultimately, a more diversified economy.”

City of Sarasota Mayor Richard Clapp thinks the trip confirmed that many of Sarasota County’s economic development and tourism initiatives are on the right track. “Asheville clearly shares some of the same challenges as our area,” he said. “We are working on similar solutions, and though there is still room for a lot of improvement, in some cases our local initiatives are further along.”

Leaders will meet next week to discuss findings from the trip and next steps.

#### **About the Economic Development Corporation of Sarasota County**

The EDC of Sarasota County is the private, not-for-profit corporation leading the community’s economic development strategy to add high-wage jobs and diversify the local economy. The EDC provides business assistance to companies in Sarasota County and helps forge solutions to community challenges that affect quality of life. The EDC works in partnership with chambers of commerce, local governments and other organizations throughout the county and the region. For more information, visit [www.edcsarasotacounty.com](http://www.edcsarasotacounty.com).

#### **About The Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce**

The Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce is a 2,000-member, not-for-profit organization representing greater Sarasota County businesses. Incorporated in 1920, it is the largest Chamber of Commerce in the county. Growing at a rapid pace to serve the educational, social, governmental, and economic and leadership development needs of greater Sarasota, The GSCC is the bridge that links businesses, organizations and residents together with innovative programs that strengthen long-term economic vitality, business success, job creation and quality of life. As a major force in the area’s economic prosperity and the community’s outstanding lifestyle, The Chamber strives to keep its programs current and responds to the demands of Sarasota’s modern business climate. The Chamber’s mission is to provide leadership to achieve a diverse, well-balanced economy to improve the quality of living and working in greater Sarasota, and it exists to maximize its members’ success, the community’s competitiveness, and the area’s economic strength.