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Summit: Keep businesses tied to UF inventions in the area

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Alachua and Marion counties are often overlooked in a state with so many large cities.

But combined, leaders from both areas said they can build political and business clout to tackle issues such as water shortages and job creation in high-tech and green industries.

The joint effort has already begun through the Heart of Florida, a coalition of education, economic development, government and business leaders from Alachua and Marion counties and surrounding communities.

They pledged to build on that effort at the first regional summit for the coalition Monday at the University of Florida.

Members said the key to growing and diversifying the local economy is to keep more businesses built around UF research inventions in the area instead of licensing them to out-of-state firms.

David Day, director of UF's Office of Technology Licensing, said UF inventions are generating between \$1 billion and \$2 billion in product sales a year, but most of the companies — and jobs — are in the Northeast or California.

He said the coalition could help lobby for startup funding — calling the state's offerings "terrible" — and find the management needed to keep such businesses local at double or triple the current rate.

UF President Bernie Machen said the economy is shifting from tourism in Florida and auto manufacturing in the U.S. to a green economy with Gov. Charlie Crist and the state Public Service Commission advocating 20 percent renewable energy sources for Florida utilities by 2020 and the federal stimulus including \$10 billion for clean energy and green jobs.

He pointed to UF's cellulol plant research to make ethanol from things such as citrus pulp or yard waste.

Others mentioned the opportunities that could come from Gainesville's new feed-in tariff on solar energy production as a model for renewable energy.

Marion County Commissioner Barbara Fitos said now is the time for the region to prepare for green industry so it is ready when the economy rebounds.

Asked about expanding job training education, state Rep. Kurt Kelly, R-Ocala, pointed out that the state budget is down about \$15 billion in the past two years and no area would likely go uncut in the upcoming session, including education.

He said the area has a great opportunity to have clout in Tallahassee with his fellow Ocala Republican Larry Cretul recently becoming House speaker.

Gainesville Mayor Pegen Hanrahan said Cretul has been a tremendous supporter of local efforts.

The coalition previously identified regional water issues as a priority and is advocating that the state Legislature protect local sources and not allow other areas to pipe water from local waterways.
