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TREASURE COAST SUMMIT STOKES FIRE FOR INNOVATION

by Eve Samples

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FORT PIERCE — To promote regional economic development, instead of county-by-county business recruitment, Indian River Community College plans to head an "Innovation Council" for the Treasure Coast, modeling it after the public-private group Joint Venture in Silicon Valley.

Edwin Massey, president of IRCC, volunteered the college to lead the council during an economic summit Wednesday, where leaders from the four-county area said they were tired of just talking about collaboration. They said they are ready to take the plunge.

"We have done enough studying, folks, and we need to start doing. That's the bottom line," Massey told a group of about 120 at IRCC's Kight Center for Emerging Technologies.

Representatives from St. Lucie, Martin, Indian River and Okeechobee counties pledged their support for the council. The locales have talked for years about marketing themselves as Florida's Research Coast, but economic development has remained a largely local affair.

Wednesday's summit marked a shift.

"In the three years I've been in office, this is the most excited I've been," said St. Lucie County Commissioner Chris Craft, who spearheaded plans for the meeting.

Massey suggested that IRCC oversee the council after Silicon Valley-based consultant Doug Henton told the group about what Joint Venture has accomplished in California. Formed in 1993, the organization has tackled issues ranging from business recruitment to Internet access in schools.

The key to success on the Research Coast is developing a network of connections like Joint Venture did, Henton said. That means linking entrepreneurs with the biotechnology industry expected to sprout around the new campus of the Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies in Port St. Lucie, for example.

"From everything I've seen, you're poised for greatness," Henton said.

Massey also said he would like to see the four counties combine some of their tax money to create an economic-development pool.

Such close-knit collaboration could face obstacles. As several people at the summit pointed out, job-hungry St. Lucie County is sandwiched by the more typically slow-growing, laissez-faire Martin and Indian River counties.

"We define ourselves by county, and that's what we're trying to break the boundaries of today," said Peter Kemp, president of the Business Development Board of Martin County.