

Cities urged to grow together

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MINNEOLA - Minneola hosted the third Growth Summit, where more than 75 city officials, residents, school board members, activist group leaders and residents from throughout Lake County got together to share their views. The third meeting, however, was held in a different fashion, with a guest speaker instead of the open-forum discussions that marked the first two meetings.

Jacob Stuart, president of the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce and founder of *myregion.org*, was invited to share his organizations' findings on growth issues affecting not only Lake County, but also the entire region, and on how cities can work together to find solutions.

"He's gonna be our flight instructor," said Ray San Fratello, executive director of the South Lake Chamber of Commerce, upon introducing Stuart. "He's going to take us into the clouds a little bit and help us see the region from a different perspective than what we have seen."

Beginning with a request for open-mindedness and mixing in insight he's come across during the course of his research, Stuart set out on an information-filled 75 minutes that seemed to inspire moments of laughter and looks of excitement and awareness.

"This is not about America, not about Florida, but about our region," Stuart said. "Whether you are growth or anti-growth, I want you to suspend your feelings for just about an hour."

"We're all in this together, so I want to talk about our future," he said.

Stuart used a quote from George Washington - "At this auspicious time, the U.S. has come into existence as a nation and if the citizens are not completely free, the fault will be their own" - to encourage attendees to take responsibility for making necessary changes and compromises.

Stuart also used the example of a once widely held belief that transcontinental rail travel would be impossible - since passengers would surely perish at speeds greater than 60 mph - to remind attendees not to be held back by limitations.

"Are there any limitations holding us back that in 100 years, they will laugh at?" he said.

He spoke indirectly to mayors, city and state commissioners, activist groups and leaders and residents of different communities, urging them not to let their own pride become a barrier to the positive work that can be done for the benefit of the entire region.

He encouraged talking to each other and getting connected to find out what is needed and where.

Stuart then cited the research done by *myregion.org*, a four-year-old program that addresses

growth issues for a seven-county area - Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola, Polk, Seminole and Volusia - that contains 86 cities and 500 elected officials.

Stuart said *myregion.org's* research has shown that communities, leaders and residents prioritize economic leadership, education, the environment and fragmentation.

Lake County, he said, must focus on attracting better business opportunities, because more Lake residents commute out-of-county than work in the county.

He also urged changes to prevent the loss of environmentally sensitive areas such as the Green Swamp, St. John's Mosaic and the Indian River Lagoon.

Stuart spoke his group's "Central Florida Values Study," which found that people are looking to their own communities for nature and outdoors, safe and secure communities and educational pride and opportunities for their children.

"Growth is going to happen; we can't help that," said Stuart. "But we can go about it more carefully."

Stuart then switched gears to discuss what he said is the only common trait of all heroes - as explored by author Joseph Campbell in "The Hero with 1,000 Faces." That trait, Stuart said, is a "moment of transformation."

"This is a moment of transformation in our community - 2006," Stuart said. "We're in that moment of transformation as a region.

"If individuals can transform themselves, so can communities, so let's transform ourselves."

After Stuart spoke, the forum was open to the public for comments.

"I agree with almost everything you say, but am filled with emptiness, because I don't hear any 'hows'," said Nancy Fullerton of the Alliance to Protect Water Resources. "And although I heard what you said about the fault being our own, I would like to say that I don't think it's my fault that the state has turned down a valiant fight to save the Green Swamp.

"We are trying," Fullerton said.

VOICE activist Cindy Barrow, however, declared her excitement about Stuart's presentation.

"Wouldn't it be great that if at the next growth summit we all mixed into different groups and talked about resolution?" asked Barrow. "Coming out of the groups we're used to, dropping the labels and start talking about schools, security, environment, growth.

"We need to talk about what we are going to do and how we are going to solve it."