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# Economy not all doom & gloom

Expert: Santa Rosa prime for recovery

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Santa Rosa County is still the best place to live in the country during the current recession and will recover from the economic slowdown faster than the rest of the country.

That's what Dr. Rick Harper of the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development at University of West Florida told Santa Rosa County Commissioners at their 2009 goal-setting workshop.

Haas said the recession is affecting the county and all of northwest Florida, but it won't last as long or be as deep as in most areas of the country.

"The three-and-a-half-percent growth we have become accustomed to here will be slowing to about two-and-a-half percent growth over the next year, but we will come out of the slowdown much faster than the rest of the country," Harper predicted. "And we will come out of the slowdown both in the housing market and the general economy, as well as jobs markets, much faster than south Florida."

Commissioners recently held the first of two workshops to establish goals for the tight 2009 budget. Commission Chair Don Salter said with the cutbacks still coming in revenue from the state, the county wants to take an overall view of what is needed here before setting or cutting the upcoming budget.

"We want to try to set a road map so we can stay focused for the new year on what we need to prioritize," he said. "In the

current environment in the state of revenue losses and the revenue stream we are dealing with, we need to have in place some definite goals for this next budget year."

The first speaker on the workshop agenda was Harper, to give the commissioners an overview of where he believes the economy is going in Santa Rosa County.

Commissioner Gordon Goodin of Navarre asked Harper how the commission could better track the impact of the new military personnel expected to enter Santa Rosa County due to the military adding personnel to Eglin and Hurlburt Air Force bases.

"I know the military doesn't like to let anyone know exactly what they are doing ahead of time, but I wonder if there is some better way for us to track the needs and the amount of people coming into the county from new military moves?" Goodin said. "Like we just heard about the \$238 million released to bring the Special Operations from Fort Bragg to Hurlburt. That is done and cannot be reversed even by an act of Congress. And there have already been people from Fort Bragg here looking for housing."

Goodin said there are other military plans being put in place for this area that will directly impact Santa Rosa County.

"There is also the \$250 million coming to Hurlburt soon to prepare for the new fighter wing and

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"There is also the \$250 million coming to Hurlburt soon to prepare for the new fighter wing and mini-gunship," he said. "Then the F-35 decision will be made sometime in January, and that would free up another \$500 million to be spent here with a strike wing fighter force."

"Those people coming in here with special operations or fighter wings don't go through the planning department or building department. They suddenly show up, and it affects many aspects of the county, from schools to contractors to housing."

Harper believes the military spending for these new wings will keep the contractors in Santa Rosa County busy for a few years.

"I believe the overall impact on the new military moves for Santa Rosa County will be a pleasurable one. The contractors in the county will be busy, and it will add jobs in that area," Harper said.

He said that is one reason Santa Rosa will emerge from the economic slowdown faster than some other parts of the state and country.

"The military influence and spending will help the county come out of the recession much faster," he said. "I do have some concern that with the Obama administration the military may see some budget cuts."

"For example, the automatic military pay raises we have seen for the last six to eight years like clockwork may fall behind. And I am concerned about major weapons procurement programs, which affect our area. But overall, with things already in place and moving with the military for this area, I see favorable impacts on the economy of the entire county."

Harper said when there is growth in any county, the first jobs to be created naturally are retail jobs, which are usually lower-paying jobs.

