



# Florida

## Citrus County Program Succeeds in Giving Businesses a Stronger Voice

### Above Average

At first glance, Citrus County, Fla., seems like any other Southern county. Nestled near the center of the Sunshine State's western coast, Citrus County has experienced heavy population growth, rapidly changing economies and the common challenge of making sure its communities have the resources they need to promote entrepreneurship and help businesses not only survive but flourish.

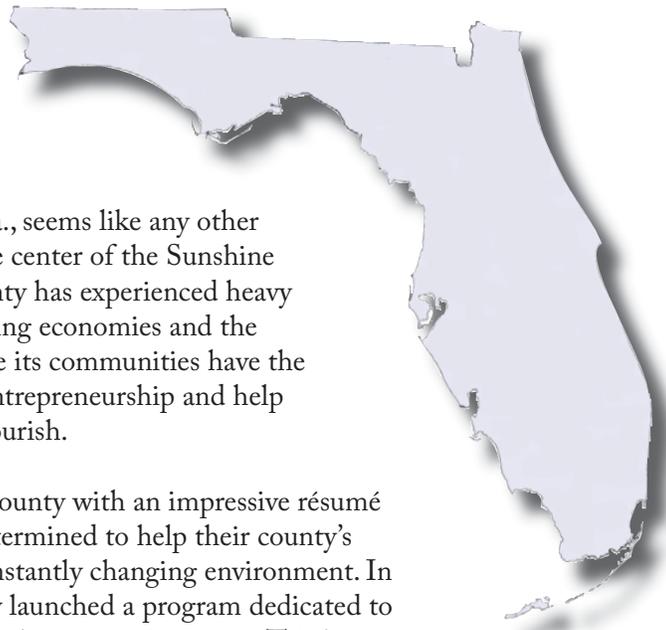
A closer look, however, reveals a county with an impressive résumé – an area teeming with people determined to help their county's businesses make the most of a constantly changing environment. In 2002 the people of Citrus County launched a program dedicated to creating extensive support for their business community. This business retention and expansion, or BR&E, program soon became successful enough to garner international recognition.

### Learning to Listen

Though the county's BR&E program was instigated by outside forces – the program was born when a Florida regional planning council decided to conduct business retention studies in three of its counties – it didn't take long for the people of Citrus County to fully embrace the BR&E program and catapult it into success.

Business retention and expansion is not a new concept. Essentially, the function of a BR&E program is to retain businesses by giving them a way to voice their problems and helping them find solutions. BR&E programs also help convince local government to address these problems. Many states and counties conduct these programs. Few do so with as much dedication as Citrus County.

Hank Cothran, extension specialist in community resource development for the University of Florida, was the man called upon to get things underway. He got his start in business retention and expansion after attending the Community Development Institute hosted by the Southern Rural Development Center in 2000 in Canton, Miss.



### Quick Facts:

Ten business retention and expansion trainings were conducted in 2002 in Citrus County, with more than 55 people trained to implement a BR&E program.

The initial 2002 survey included 104 Citrus County businesses.

A 2006 follow-up survey indicated a high level of success with the county's business climate.

Citrus County was given an "Outstanding Multi-State Community Program" award in 2003 by Business Retention & Expansion International.

**"I would never have known about business retention had I not gone to the Southern Rural Development Center's Community Development Institute. It was a very good presentation on a program that is easy to take into the community."**

- Hank Cothran  
Extension Specialist  
University of Florida

At the time, the CDI training was a way for Cothran to get a solid foundation in the field. Before long, he was fully immersed in business retention and began hosting his own trainings. His passion extended to the 55 people he trained in Citrus County.

"The role that I played was to simply go in and teach people a process then help them at each stage," Cothran said. "The community does all the work."

Cothran conducted 10 trainings in which community members were taught to fill out lengthy surveys garnering information from businesses about what problems they were facing and how familiar they were with the programs and services they could use to address those problems.

"A good business retention program tries to identify all the resources that can be offered to help businesses – resources that will help them stay in business, grow if they want to and remain part of the community," Cothran said. "It's a very proactive approach and it's an ongoing program. It's not about a specialist going in, dealing with the problems and leaving the community with no way to address them in the future."

Citrus County's community members rose to the challenge. They spent a year and half in the planning phase to ensure that they could respond immediately to any problems revealed in the initial surveys. Various issues were addressed and many remedied. One man, for instance, couldn't get the Internet service he needed for his business because of his remote location. He could have moved his business a short distance into another county and his problem would have been solved. Because of his participation in the survey, though, Citrus County was able to identify the problem and provide the services he needed to keep him from relocating.

### **The Smell of Success**

In 2003, the Citrus County BR&E program was named an "Outstanding Multi-Community Program" by Business Retention & Expansion International. It was one of only two programs in the world awarded such an honor in that category.

In 2006, Citrus County conducted a follow-up survey with the original businesses to better understand how the program had benefited the county's business community. That follow-up indicated a high level of satisfaction with Citrus County's business climate and with the results of what the program did for individual businesses.

"Success is like art," Cothran said. "You may not know exactly how to define it, but you know it when you see it. The Citrus County program was certainly a success."

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