

An outbreak of leadership

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Potential. I can think of few words that are used more often to describe Ocala/Marion County. Whether talking about our ecotourism potential, or our logistics-friendly location, or our proximity to three major research universities, or our abundance of natural beauty, we hear time and again about our community's "great potential" to be more than it is.

Achieving said potential, though, requires vision and leadership. On Friday, a group of a couple hundred people gathered at the College of Central Florida and decided it was time they try to provide more of both.

After being largely dormant since 2007, the Leadership Ocala/Marion Alumni got together for lunch and laid out a plan to become not only relevant, but engaged and, hopefully, influential.

For those who aren't familiar with Leadership Ocala/Marion, it is a program that has been sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce (now officially the Chamber and Economic Partnership) for the past 29 years. It's goal is to provide up-and-coming business, governmental and civic leaders with an inside-out look at how our community works, from business and government to politics and nonprofits. The CEP describes it as "a nine-month immersion into all sectors of Ocala/Marion County," and as a graduate of LOM Class XV, I can tell you the description is an accurate one.

In short, the goal of Leadership Ocala/Marion is to groom a steady stream of new leaders for our community. And many, if not most, of LOM's graduates have indeed become leaders at some level.

The LOM graduates, and there have been nearly 2,000 of them over nearly three decades, believe they have something to offer, something that the community needs. In a word, leadership.

Talk about potential. This is an extraordinarily diverse group of people from all segments of our community. They are not only typically successful and supportive of Ocala/Marion County, they are engaged and effective, too. And that is as individuals. Imagine what they can accomplish as a unified group with a strategic approach to addressing issues of community import.

The goals of the group are simple: increase LOMA's influence in the community by getting involved in groups and issues; develop its members into "engaged community leaders;" and make membership in LOMA mean more than something that, well, has great potential.

Every community can benefit from fresh, new leadership, and ours probably more than most. Because we have so much potential — and that is outsiders who say that — that remains untapped, fresh perspectives and energy should be enthusiastically welcomed.

Our education level is below state and national average. Our pay scale is below state and national averages. We have some of the most spectacular outdoors in the world, yet we have not figured out a way to make it work fully to our benefit. Our

governments have more than their share of unresolved challenges, and we are seeing far too many of our best and brightest leave and never come back. We are told we are a business hot spot, yet we do not see the kinds of jobs we all would want for our children coming with any frequency.

Yes, there is all kinds of potential here in Ocala/Marion County, but potential is not success.

We could use an infusion of new leadership insight and energy, and who better to provide it than those who have been through Leadership Ocala/Marion. They are informed, engaged and, maybe most important, ready and willing.

Good luck, LOMA. We need your leadership. Potential is no longer enough.

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