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Governor Upbeat On Economy At Breakfast

by Beth Velliquette

PITTSBORO -- With the blessings of Gov. Bev Perdue, the Chatham County Economic Development Corp., kicked off its five-year Opportunity Chatham Campaign on Friday at Fearington Village.

The campaign seemed to be off to a good start when Ricardo Hillman, site manager for one of Chatham's new businesses, Uniboard, announced that the group has already raised \$525,000 of its \$1 million private-sector fundraising goal from the business community.

Perdue was the guest speaker at the breakfast, which attracted elected officials business leaders and government staffers. Perdue said she's recently seen signs that North Carolina is coming out of the recession, especially in her monthly check of sales tax receipts. "People are shopping in North Carolina for the first time in 18 months," she said.

But Chatham County and the rest of the state need to put people back to work, she said. "We lost a lot of jobs we traditionally had," Perdue said. Since December 2007, Chatham County, especially in the areas of Siler City and Moncure, has lost 1,400 jobs. Siler City lost one of its major employers in 2008, when Pilgrim's Pride, a chicken processing plant, closed down and laid off more than 1,000 employees.

Dianne Reid, president of the Economic Development Corp., said the group will use the money to begin marketing campaigns to help attract new businesses to Chatham County as well as encouraging local businesses to grow. "We're basically focusing on entrepreneurship, attracting and retaining businesses and community development," she said.

The five-year, \$3 million public/private initiative hopes to create 2,000 new jobs, generate more than \$72 million in new payroll and facilitate more than \$211 million in capital investment.

For example, the county would like to attract another food-processing facility or manufacturing plant to Siler City. The town has 1 million square feet of space available. "That's a good match," she said. "I think manufacturing in general is a good prospect because of the type of buildings they have and the type of work force that is there."

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The initiative hopes to engage Chatham County business people to work together to find, attract and recruit businesses to move to Chatham County, especially in the areas of architectural and engineering services, technical and research services, basic health services, pharmaceuticals, information services, higher education and hospitals and renewable energy.