

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Survey takes the pulse of local business

More than half of the companies surveyed by the Beacon Council said they plan to add workers in the coming year, but that's still a smaller number than in years past.

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Miami-Dade businesses like having easy access to customers throughout the nation and world, but they don't like getting to those places through Miami International Airport, according to a new survey by the county economic development agency.

The survey, commissioned by the Miami-Dade Beacon Council, asked companies about their expansion plans and satisfaction with the business environment in the county.

Respondents gave Miami-Dade high marks for quality of higher education and "image as a business center," both of which respondents considered important. They also praised the local sports and cultural arts opportunities, but they didn't consider those particularly important.

The survey found concern about the cost and availability of commercial real estate and insurance, the quality of "transportation infrastructure" (read: traffic) and the affordability of housing for their workers.

Despite the slow economy, 56 percent of respondents said they plan to add employees in the coming year. That's good news, but it's a lower percentage than in years past, said Beacon Council president Frank Nero.

"There's still growth but it's going to be slower," he said.

The survey was conducted for the Beacon Council, a county-funded economic development agency, by the Doug Williams Group.

One hundred seventeen companies responded to the survey, down from 216 companies last year and 313 in 2006. However, the results of the survey have been more or less consistent.

In fact, many of the survey results will sound familiar to anyone who has done business in Miami in recent years.

"I would say there are no great surprises here," said Greg Swienton, CEO of Miami-Dade-based Ryder System, the international trucking giant.

Although the survey found concerns about traffic congestion, Swienton noted that Miami's traffic is still better than many other cities he visits, such as New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Houston.

"In Miami, outside of rush hour, you can get around pretty quickly," he said.

Nevertheless, the need to stay off the road during rush hour is a problem for many outside salespeople, like Andrea Cologgi, an account executive with Innovative Office Furnishings in Dania Beach.

Her sales territory includes Miami-Dade, and Cologgi says it's impractical to make sales calls before 10 a.m. or after 3 p.m. because of traffic.

"You've got that little window of opportunity," she said.

MIA also has been a long-standing target of gripes from business travelers for reasons ranging from the shabby condition of the older terminals to endless construction projects to long lines at customs.

But MIA spokesman Greg Chin said the airport is improving. He pointed to a recent J.D. Power and Associates survey, which showed MIA jumping from 14th to sixth place in ratings of major airports.

The opening of the airport's South Terminal in August 2007 contributed to the boosted ratings, offering passengers 168 new ticket locations, more curbside space and a new short-term parking lot. Passengers at Miami International can drop into the Jetsetter Spa to catnap in one of two futuristic sleep pods or grab a more ordinary pedicure, manicure or massage.

Nero said the Beacon Council is working with the county mayor's office, American Airlines and the airport to organize tours to show the new facilities to staff from multinational companies with Miami offices.

The message is that the airport is getting better.

"We want to keep the multinationals that are here," Nero said, "and we want them to expand here."