

Banker: Faster we get in recession, faster we get out

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SANDESTIN - Thanks for all that information on investment capital, those attending a three-county leadership conference told investment banking expert Richard B. Jennings. Now can you tell us when the economy is going to improve?

"Greed has got to come back and overtake fear," said Jennings, who worked with Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson when both were at Goldman Sachs.

"Actually, I was hoping we'd go into a recession sooner," he added. "The faster we get into a recession, and I think we're in it, the faster we'll get out of it."

More than 100 business leaders were on hand at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa on Wednesday for "Stimulating the Economy with Transportation, NW Florida's Gulf Coast Cleared for Takeoff."

"He told us what we needed to hear, not what we wanted to hear," said Dawn Moliterno of the Walton Area Chamber of Commerce, which hosted the event.

The Q&A went like this:

What about the role the depressed housing market plays in the big picture?

"What is important is finally the country realizes we've got to stop the decline in housing prices." Jennings replied.

Any advice for small businesses?

"Banks and REITs (Real Estate Investment Trusts) are willing to ... help them through this," he answered. "As long as we feel they would do as good a job as could be done in this environment in that location, we'll keep them in there."

How about the top five recession-proof businesses?

"Big discounters like Walmart and grocery stores," Jennings said. "I don't know of any others."

Aside from tourism, how does this region attract more industry?

"It's kind of chicken and egg," Jennings said. "Tech and biotech tends to cluster where there are major hospitals and major universities where a lot of research is being done."

Finally, if the "Big Bailout" doesn't work, what do we do as a region?

"We're in for two to five years of some serious pain." Jennings answered. "I would agree that this area is not as well-known as others. You should get the word out more. You're much more attractive than other areas of the country. ... Retailers are aware this is a terrific place. You wouldn't have the retailers you do if they didn't know."

