

## Hardin takes over as EDA president

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PANAMA CITY — Bay County Economic Development Alliance (EDA) official Becca Hardin dropped “interim” from her title Wednesday to become the organization’s new president, after a vote by the organization’s executive committee at its first gathering of 2015.

During the meeting, Hardin presented an overview of the EDA’s goals for the coming year, which includes plans to heavily market Bay County’s offerings to companies across the globe. She cited the Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport, Port Panama City, and programs through Haney Technical Center and the area’s colleges as just a few assets that help Bay County stand out from the competition.

“We’re in the process of generating a buzz around Bay County as we head into 2015,” Hardin said. “We’re ready to show Bay County to the world.”

Hardin stepped in as interim president of the EDA after former president Neal Wade resigned in November to take on a position at the University of Alabama, where he is working to establish a new economic development academy.

EDA executive committee member and former Florida House Speaker Allan Bense said he was impressed by Hardin’s enthusiasm about Bay County’s potential and made the motion to appoint her the new EDA president. Bense’s motion passed unanimously.

Hardin relayed a list of ongoing EDA projects, which included a handful she reported were moving forward to the next step. The list included three new projects, including an aviation and aerospace project from Enterprise Florida proposing 248 new jobs for the area.

But while Bay County still may be waiting for that “home run” project, Hardin said those situations are very rare.

“Economic development is a marathon, not a sprint,” she said. “We have to focus on what’s right for Bay County. We want to set those realistic expectations.”

During Wednesday’s meeting, the board also approved a new slate of officers for the coming year. John Juchniewicz was elected chairman for 2015 and will take over for former Chairman John Ed McDanal. Other officers for this year include Vice Chairman Clint Mizell, Treasurer Wayne Stubbs and Secretary Jorge Gonzalez.

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