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## Economic Forum speakers optimistic about 2014

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WEST PALM BEACH —

Even after U.S. stocks turned in their best year since the 1990s, two investment strategists say the economy and stock market are primed to keep rising this year. Tepid consumer confidence, cautious banks and weak hiring have all created “room to run,” said Charles White, an executive managing director at investment bank Sterne, Agee & Leach of Birmingham, Ala.

“There’s a lot of what we call dry powder in the economy right now,” White said Tuesday during a presentation to the **Economic Forum of Palm Beach County.**

As consumers become more optimistic, banks loosen lending and hiring continues to improve, the U.S. economy is likely to expand by more than 3 percent this year, White said.

Jeff Saut, chief investment strategist at Raymond James & Associates in St. Petersburg, likewise predicts 2014 will bring rising stock prices and an improving economy. “There’s a lot that could go right this year,” Saut said last week during a presentation in West Palm Beach.

Following last year’s 29 percent spike, Saut said the Standard & Poor’s 500 will jump 10 percent to 13 percent this year. In fact, he said, the stock market seems to have started another yearslong upswing like the one that enriched investors in the 1980s and 1990s. Saut said he sees little to worry about for the near future, even though “They pay me to be skeptical.”

Not that the news is all good. White pointed to a lackluster recovery for the job market. While U.S. unemployment has dipped below 7 percent, that’s largely because many Americans who normally would be working have disappeared from the official numbers.

“The labor force participation is terrible,” White said. Like Saut, White offers an optimistic outlook. He said fears about the economic effects of President Barack Obama’s health-care reform have been overblown. “My guess is it’s a slight negative and not a big negative,” White said.