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Dynamic Duo

BY CANDACE MOONSHOWER

A new era of cooperation between sister cities promotes a united front in the battle for brand identity

From the outside looking in, the sibling-cities of Kingsport and Johnson City, widely recognized, along with Bristol, Tenn., as the Tri-Cities region of East Tennessee, are united in their regionalism. Yet, individual city leaders might tell a different story—a story of regionalism, yes, but of a friendly and longstanding rivalry, too, as the cities have striven to maintain their separate and unique identities.

Last summer, the rivalry began to unravel when Kingsport Mayor Dennis Phillips, along with Kingsport’s city manager, John Campbell, attended a swearing-in ceremony of city officials in Johnson City, and Johnson City officials later watched as Phillips took his oath of office in Kingsport. As the *Kingsport Times-News* reported at the time, it appeared that city leaders in both Kingsport and Johnson City were making efforts to usher in a new era of “communication and cooperation.”

Campbell, a Kingsport native, is in a unique position to comment on previous rivalries and the current push toward teamwork. He spent a quarter of a century in positions with Johnson City, with close to 17 years of that as city manager. Why not Kingsport, his home town? “I had just finished graduate school when Johnson City called,” Campbell says. “With other offers, I would have had to move five or six hours away from Neyland Stadium [at

UT-Knoxville], so I took Johnson City up on their offer!”

Campbell is quick to acknowledge that Kingsport was long considered the economic “star” of the region, anchored by the Eastman Chemical Co. “While I was working in Johnson City, the citizens of Kingsport had found it easy to become complacent about their town’s economy because Eastman employed about 15,000 people, and there were other strong manufacturing concerns in the area, too,” he says. Johnson City, without an economic anchor like Eastman, was working to maximize its potential and grow its economy.

In the 1990s, with cutbacks in manufacturing mirroring the weakening national economy, the bottom dropped out of Kingsport’s economy. Eastman underwent a massive downsizing in its employee base, and a number of other manufacturers closed up shop and left the area.

“The Kingsport leaders recognized that the city needed



John Campbell
Kingsport City Manager

to diversify and make its economy more broad-based," Campbell says. Johnson City, without an Eastman of its own, had been doing this all along, working, slowly and steadily, toward developing a strong economic foundation, with the medical school at East Tennessee State University as its underpinning, and the medical community as a whole—in the private sector and with the nonprofit hospital—working together.

Continuity of leadership helped. "In Johnson City, I had my core professional team together for at least ten years, which really helped us strategize and do long-range planning for our town," Campbell says.

Now, in his position as city manager of Kingsport, Campbell is proud to be helping his hometown implement plans and move the economic growth along—plans, he says, that were already being put into place when he came on board in October 2006. "Things have stabilized with Eastman holding steady at about 7,200 employees, and Kingsport Tomorrow, a civic community-improvement organization with 17 different taskforces, working all along to build the economy, improve the quality of life, and make

Kingsport more diverse and more attractive to business," Campbell says.

Kingsport's Mayor Phillips agrees that it is a plus that Campbell has worked in Johnson City and sees the pitfalls inherent in any kind of rivalry between the two cities. "He realizes more than anyone what cooperation really means," Phillips says. "I give him a lot of credit for helping Kingsport and Johnson City move forward for the good of the region."

In the global marketplace of the new millennium, it is important for cities and their regions to put forth the idea of a "brand"—and banish any resistance to change that inhibits forward-thinking. At a recent annual meeting of the Tri-Cities Regional Business Alliance, featured speaker Dennis J. Donovan, responsible for worldwide site selection with Wadley-Donovan-Gutshaw Consulting, offered a comprehensive look at the basics for future economic development in the region. Among his points was a reiteration of why it is imperative to adopt a regional approach to marketing, pointing out how corporate prospects often identify a region first, and prefer to deal with one entity as they consider an area for startup or relocation.



David Roe
Johnson City Mayor

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“[Mayor Roe and I] both agree that while we have individual cities with individual personalities—and we should have—that what is good for this area, industry-wise, is good for everyone.”

**—Mayor Dennis Phillips
Kingsport**

In keeping with that, Phillips and Johnson City’s mayor, David P. Roe, have been meeting regularly to discuss things the two city leaders can do together. “Mayor Roe is a man that reaches out to do the right thing,” Phillips says, “and we both agree that while we have individual cities with individual personalities—and we should have—that what is good for this area, industry-wise, is good for everyone.”

In early January, key people involved in government relations in Kingsport, Johnson City and Bristol gathered for an annual legislative luncheon, during which a common legislative package was developed for the upcoming legislative session. “We’ve been doing this for years,” Campbell says, “but this year, we really focused on more common issues for the region that would help our legislators feel they aren’t pitted against or competing with each other.”

The key issue this year is the Tri-Cities Regional Airport, owned by Kingsport, Johnson City, and Sullivan and Washington counties (20% each), and Bristol, Tenn., and Bristol, Va. (10% each). The airport has been run by a commission since the 1930s, and not surprisingly, there have been inefficiencies from having to consult with each of the owners individually to get anything accomplished. According to Campbell, all the owners want the airport to have “airport authority” status, which will make the airport more efficient and progressive.

Other common regional issues include the need to correct design flaws at the I-81 and I-26 interchange in Sullivan County; the need to finish State Route 75 from I-26 through Johnson City and to the airport; and the implementation of standardized building codes for the region.


“It’s a 20-minute drive from Kingsport to Johnson City, but

we’re closer than we realize,” Phillips says. “Together, we can do more than we ever could individually—for our towns and for the region as a whole.” **tn**

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