



BY CANDACE MOONSHOWER

# Cookeville-

## PUTNAM COUNTY

PHOTOS COURTESY OF COOKEVILLE/PUTNAM COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

## Putnam County finds itself the focal point of an ambitious regional branding initiative

**B**efore it branded itself with a recognizable identity, the three counties that comprise “The Highlands of Tennessee,” might as well have been the Scottish Highlands for all that anyone was aware of its exact location. “For years, no one knew much about the Upper Cumberland region—14 counties with 325,000 folks,” says George Halford, president and CEO of the Cookeville-Putnam County Chamber of Commerce. “It was one of the best-kept secrets in Tennessee and in the South.”

While much has been made of Tennessee’s three divisions—West, Middle and East—the people living in the Upper Cumberland region would argue that the state is comprised of four distinct regions. Putnam County sits squarely within that “4<sup>th</sup> State of Tennessee,” with the intersection of U.S. Highway 111, a major north-south corridor, and Interstate 40, running

east-west, located within Cookeville, the county seat.

In addition to Cookeville, Algood, Baxter, Monterey and the rest of Putnam County, The Highlands of Tennessee is comprised of the governments and chambers of the city of Livingston and Overton County, and the city of Sparta and White County, and is a subset of the 14 counties designated by the state of Tennessee as the Upper Cumberland Development District. The state-designated moniker in no way conveys the breathtaking natural beauty of the region, however, where waterfalls, forests and gorges abound, all set against a mountainous backdrop. There are seven state parks, all within a 40-mile radius of Cookeville, the hub city of the 14 counties. “We are the pulse of the Upper Cumberland,” Halford says, “and we decided that we needed to brand ourselves and develop a kind of corporate identity that would bring awareness to our region.”

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The Highlands Initiative, the result of this push for corporate identity, is a tri-county, four-year economic and community development program. Its mission is to improve the economic outlook for the area; maximize the regional benefits of tourism, medical, retail and retiree development; and

to serve as an advocate for improvements to infrastructure, transportation, education and recreational enhancements for the Highlands of Tennessee.

Spearheaded by the Cookeville-Putnam County Chamber of Commerce, the Highlands Initiative began

with a plan in 2003, followed by a strategic planning meeting in 2004. The Initiative, an ambitious economic and community development plan, was launched in 2005. Halford was working in Clarksville when he was interviewed about putting together a strategic plan for marketing the region. “We put together a four-year, \$2 million superfund with a vision of an economic future we can see today,” says Halford, who has been managing chambers for years and has worked in all three regions of Tennessee.

The “Highlands of Tennessee” name speaks to both the literal elevation of the area as well as the high-level goals of the Initiative, and, according to Halford, “is meant to describe a sense of place and a heightened interest in raising economic development to a higher level.”

Central to the plan has always been recruiting new businesses and industries to the area, while retaining and growing existing businesses. “We’re a partnership united by our unified goal of bringing jobs to all three counties,” Halford says. “We’re not creating anything new in terms of our abundant natural resources,” he says, “but we’re creating jobs—21<sup>st</sup> century niche manufacturing jobs, and we’re packaging and marketing what we have in a new way to best reach that goal.”

An important element of the Highlands Initiative that works directly

# Highlands Initiative

## OVERTON, PUTNAM AND WHITE COUNTIES

Highlands Initiative is a four-year economic and community development program for Overton, Putnam and White counties. It began in 2006. The Cookeville-Putnam Chamber of Commerce administers the program. To date, public and private sector leaders have invested more than \$2 million for the program's operation. Highlands Initiative recently released the economic impact forecasts below:

▶ New Jobs Announced Year-End 2006		Personal Income Increases	
960 Direct Jobs		\$23 million	
348 Indirect and Induced Jobs*		\$12 million	
1,308 Total New Jobs		\$35 million	

\* Derived by companies producing goods and services for either the relocating and expanding companies or the new direct employees of those companies.

▶ Cost of Recruiting 960 New Jobs		Highlands	National Average
Direct Jobs		\$213 per job	\$1,600 per job
Indirect and Induced Jobs		\$157 per job	\$730 per job

▶ Economic Impact of New Jobs:	
Direct Jobs	\$ 83 million
Indirect and Induced Jobs	\$ 35 million
Total Return on Investment	\$118.8 million

▶ Additional Direct Job Announcements Pending or Proposed	
Pending Announcements	448 jobs
Proposed Workforce Increases*	500 jobs

\* Increases identified through surveys of existing business and industry.

▶ Total spent by Highlands Initiative to generate new jobs	■	\$204,732
▶ Capital investment created per dollar spent by Highlands	■	\$151
▶ Total earnings injected per dollar spent by Highlands	■	\$169

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towards meeting this goal is the recent purchase of 380 acres of land adjacent to I-40 that will be developed as a mixed-use business park. The city of Cookeville and Putnam County governments joined together to purchase the land, which will be known as the Highlands Mixed-Use Business Park. "The use of the land will be strictly governed as to types of buildings, available greenspace and other amenities," says Joe Albrecht, vice chairman for the economic development division of the Chamber of Commerce. "This will be a Class-A business park," he adds. "That the city and county governments are working together towards this goal is a tribute to the wonderful cooperative spirit that exists between our local governments."

A target opportunity analysis helped identify "best fit" opportunities for the region and determined infrastructure requirements for targeted



Oreck Corp.'s David Oreck announces the moving of all manufacturing to Cookeville's plant.

businesses. Although more than 100 manufacturing facilities are located in Putnam County alone, with approximately 23% of the county's workforce employed in manufacturing, job one was defined as recruiting 1,200 new, direct jobs to the area, and 300 new, indirect jobs, while increasing the per capita income at a rate higher than the state of Tennessee.

The goal of 1,200 new, direct jobs will be reached soon, helped along by the Oreck Corp.'s recent move to the area. Oreck was the first manufacturer to reopen a plant on the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The company decided to open a second American manufacturing plant in Cookeville, but soon closed the Mississippi plant and moved manufacturing to Cookeville.

Oreck's move to Cookeville filled the facility that formerly housed automotive bag maker, TRW, which moved its production to Mexico last year. Oreck is also looking at additional space in the area, so jobs gained from the Oreck move may rise to 700 total, from one company alone. Albrecht lauds Oreck as an important addition to the county's manufacturing base. "The Oreck family is a fine one—

# The bar has been raised.

For the fifth time, U.S. News & World Report Magazine ranked Tennessee Tech University one of the Top Public Universities in the South — Master's category ('02, '03, '05, '06 and '07 editions of America's Best Colleges).

For the third year running, TTU has earned The Princeton Review's designation as a "Best Southern College" ('05, '06 and '07). And TTU was named a "Best Value College" by The Princeton Review for 2007 and 2008, and one of "America's 100 Best College Buys" in 2008 and 2007.

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## The Putnam County School System ranks as the top performer in the Midstate based on scores from the state's Value Added Assessment System.

they've taken to us and us to them," he says.

Other direct jobs were created by expansions of the workforce at Averitt, DACCO and Fixtur World, and by relocations to the Highlands of Filter-Fab and TACO metals, in addition to Oreck.

In Sparta, in White County, Hillsman Modular Molding Inc. (HMMI) purchased the former Emerson Appliance Controls building. In 2004, Emerson Appliance Controls, the largest employer in Sparta at the time, announced plans to phase out production at its factory, eliminating 492 jobs. HMMI is a full tooling and production company with more than 30 years of experience specializing in the production of small precision thermoplastic parts. HMMI's move to Sparta will create 70 new jobs.

Overton County will see the creation of approximately 400 jobs with the opening of Hydroserre Tennessee's new production facility. Using hydroponics technology, the company will grow "Clean and Natural" lettuces and greens within a controlled atmosphere. Hydroserre will invest in excess

of \$40 million into the community.

"Based on a recent economic impact study, the Highlands Initiative has been the catalyst for a return of nearly \$119 million on investments by Highlands Initiative investors and partners," Halford says.

The analysis by National Community Development Services of Atlanta measured the resulting indirect jobs, as well—those created when the workforce demand changes for companies producing goods and services for companies generating the direct jobs. The results project the impact on personal incomes in the region from the direct jobs created to be approximately \$34 million. The analysis also reports that for every dollar spent by the Highlands Initiative to recruit new direct jobs in 2006, the direct benefit realized was \$111, far exceeding the \$46 listed as the national average.

Cookeville and Putnam County have always had a strong base of manufacturing with a diversified demographic. "We peaked in 1990 with about 9,000 people in the county employed in manufacturing," Albrecht

says, "and we still have well over 8,000 manufacturing employees, which is remarkable for a county our size." The strength of Putnam County's industrial base is one of the stabilizing factors that has helped it weather the ups and downs of the national economy.

Central to any county or region's economic development vision—and implementation of that vision—is an available talented workforce. Tennessee Technological University (TTU), the region's flagship institution, is located in Cookeville and leads the state in engineering education as Tennessee's only comprehensive technological university. Bob Bell, president of TTU, has been a central member of the Highlands Initiative team as one of the four vice-chairs for the program. "Having lived in Putnam County for the last 31 years, I can say that the future of this region is a great one," Bell says. "The past has been wonderful, but the future looks brighter than ever."

*U.S. News & World Report* ranked Tennessee Tech among the South's best public universities in its 2006 *America's Best Colleges* guidebook. TTU offers 44 undergraduate degrees and 23 graduate degrees including the M.B.A., the Ed.S., and Ph.D. programs in engineering, education and environmental science. "There is a plethora of available research and resources happening right in the region," Bell says, "offering a range of opportunities for companies looking at our area. Our centers of excellence are perfect for continuing economic development opportunities—a real asset."

As a technological university, Tennessee Tech is an important part of the region's advancement in the information age, where economies will be increasingly linked to information technology and science.

The Putnam County School System ranks as the top performer in the mid-state based on scores from the state's Value Added Assessment System. Eighteen schools are located in the four cities of the county—

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Cookeville, Monterey, Baxter and Algood—and county leaders continue to plan for the future growth of the community with the addition of two to three new schools within the next few years. Through its collaboration with Tennessee Tech, there is no evidence of the “digital divide” between metropolitan area schools and rural schools that similar counties across the state and the country experience. The community is com-



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mitted to providing technology in the classrooms. Putnam County has received the Governor's A+ Award for Excellence in Education for six consecutive years.

Quality of life in Cookeville and Putnam County not only keeps its residents living and working in the area, it is an important component in Cookeville's escalating number of newcomers, particularly retirees. Cookeville has ranked as one of America's Top 10 places to retire, and its mild weather, low cost of living and wide variety of recreational events and activities are integral to its ranking. The three lakes in the area—Dale Hollow, Center Hill and Cordell Hull—offer activities popular with retirees and vacationers. In addition, Cookeville has a variety of museums, drama centers, craft fairs, home shows fairs and festivals.

In 1990, "Operation CitySpace: a Mainstreet Program" was implemented as a process for revitalizing downtown Cookeville. "CityScape has gone from a dream to a reality—and that reality is a dynamic downtown showspace," Albrecht says. "Downtown Cookeville is now a model for many towns in our state."

Tennessee Tech offers a diversity of cultural activities and entertainment venues that patrons cite as rivaling those offered in larger, metropolitan cities. The Cookeville Drama Center is a 458-seat performing arts center boasting professional equipment. It serves as the home of the Cookeville Children's Theatre. The facility puts on plays and series of plays all year and offers drama workshops to children.

"Just as Jackson is the 'capital' of West Tennessee, Cookeville is the capital of The Highlands," Halford says. "Our area does a billion dollars in retail sales each year, boasts 15 banks, and has 120 companies employing 8,500 people. We're the pulse of the Upper Cumberland Region, with its shared history, work ethic and geography. Our slogan says it all—Come on Up!" **tn**



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