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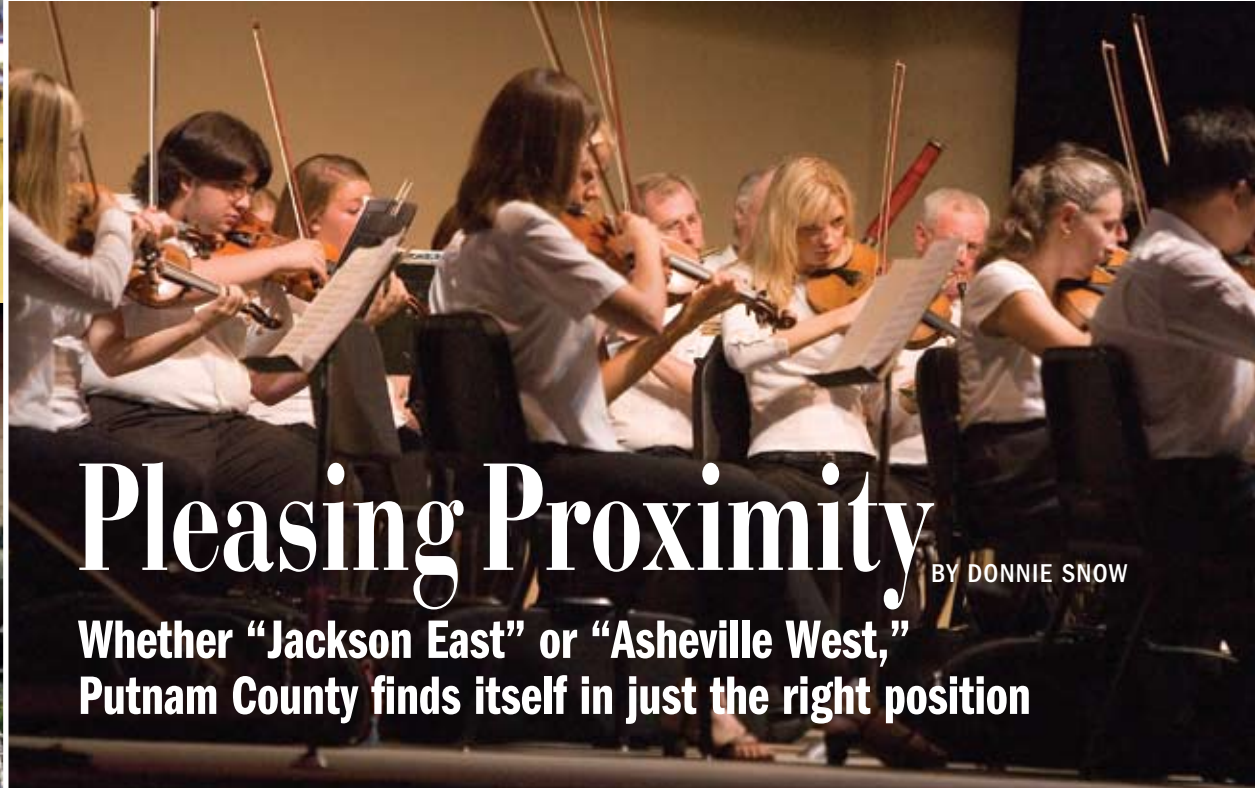
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Pleasing Proximity

BY DONNIE SNOW

Whether “Jackson East” or “Asheville West,” Putnam County finds itself in just the right position

As cities like Nashville bubble over into nearby communities, spurring the growth of towns into small cities, the premium on bedroom communities ever farther outside the reach of sprawl grows, too. Just look at property values in bucolic boomtowns like Madison, Ga., about 60 miles from Atlanta; or Stephens City, Va., about 90 miles from Washington, D.C.; or, for that matter, the state of Connecticut.

In the race to attract business development, budding communities that offer small-town living with metropolitan trimmings wield an advantage over congested suburbs in today’s hyper cyber-connected business environment. Putnam County’s communities, approximately 80 miles east of Nashville on Interstate 40, seem primed to become more than bedroom communities for Music City moguls that miss mountain air.

“We truly are the Jackson [Tennessee] of I-40 East,” says George Halford, current president of the Cookeville chamber of commerce and past president of the Jackson chamber.

While it might be premature to crown Cookeville the upper-Cumberland Jackson, Tenn., the area has enough going for it that positioning itself as the new “it” spot, or gateway-getaway rural community in Tennessee, is not an outlandish proposition.

With 40,000 cars passing through each day contributing to Cookeville’s billion-dollar-plus retail sales revenue, most of Tennessee still doesn’t know where it is. But that’s changing, and in no small part because of Tennessee Technological University.

The university represented itself well again this year in *U.S. News and World Report’s* annual ranking of the country’s top schools, ranking 25th on the publication’s list of University - Master’s (South).

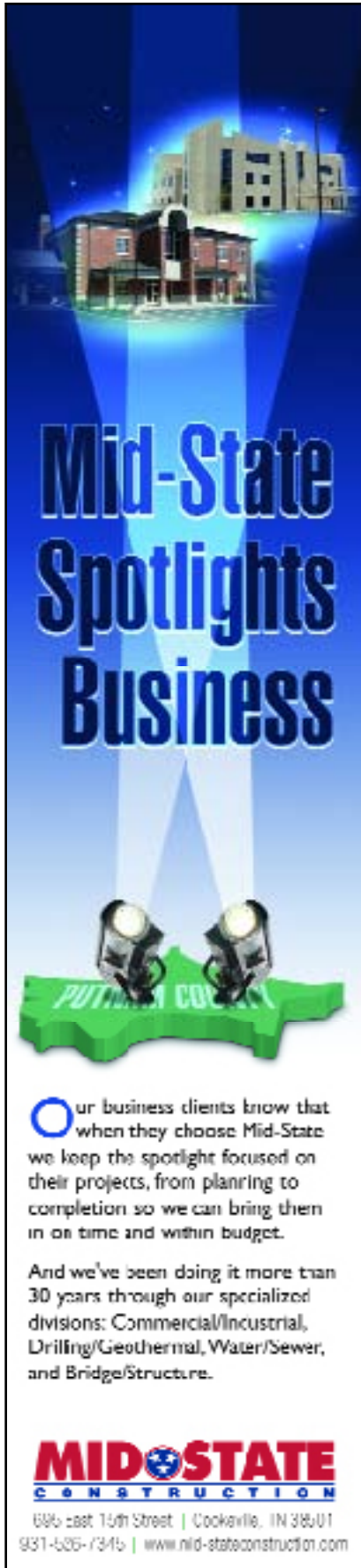
The school’s growing reputation will undoubtedly lend communities like Cookeville, Sparta or Livingston an intellectual air that Halford expects will invite the upper-income relocaters (read: white collar).

And it makes sense. Businesses have been so eager to export administrative divisions to India that the subcontinent has needed to export some technical call-center work back to the United States. So, why not just open up an administrative division in one of the most business-friendly, lowest-taxing communities in the country?

Also in Halford’s sights are the younger generations of business men and women, those likely to earn an MBA online or negotiate their contract to include a cyber-commuting option in lieu of a signing bonus.

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Thus Cookeville is ramping up business initiatives with TTU in step in hopes of building a business climate decidedly more cosmopolitan than country. Anchorinmg development will be Cookeville's 400-acre Highland Business Park built around a new state-approved highway interchange that TVA is working to develop.

"We expect to have a branch of the center for manufacturing research out in this new industrial park that will be the premier location for the next 10-15 years," explains TTU President Bob Bell.

Cookeville was dubbed "Asheville West" by New Jersey's Wadley-Donovan Group during last year's commissioned community assessment. In that assessment, Wadley-Donovan targeted the region's nascent aesthetic and culture endeavors as primary attractive features worth promoting. Top of the list was the Bryan Symphony Orchestra, which sets the community apart by being one of the few small towns in the country boasting such an ensemble.

Such micropolitan sophistication will help draw what Halford calls the "creative class"—artists and artisans who would prefer a pastoral and collegial setting over rural boondocks. But these aren't retirees looking for a cheap place to launch a mail-order porcelain doll company. When the chamber's public relations arm touts Cookeville's arts-and-crafts commu-

PHOTO COURTESY OF WIDSTONE & ASSOCIATES

nity as world class, it's talking about a community of downtown art galleries that feature people like Brad Sells, whose carved bowls are featured in Smithsonian exhibits and sold in Neiman Marcus.

So is Putnam County really within a decade of becoming the next big spot for white-collar relocation?

"You're on to something pretty good," says economic development consultant Mark Sweeney, senior principal of Greenville, S.C.-based McCallum Sweeney Consulting (MSC).

"Clearly we thought on the manufacturing side, Putnam was strong," says Sweeney, who advised Oreck Vacuum to relocate manufacturing operations to Cookeville from the Mississippi coast in 2007.

But the man that helped relocate Nissan's corporate headquarters to the Nashville area likes the Upper-Cumberland region for mid- and upper-management relocations, as

PHOTO COURTESY OF TENNESSEE TECH UNIVERSITY



well.

"For the most part, when you look back ten years from now, you will see a staged expansion of white-collar jobs," Sweeney predicts.

But Sweeney admits Cookeville still has work to do. "The downtown has a ways to go," he says. But Putnam County's biggest problem is not downtown development—or even its distance from Nashville.

"The challenge for Cookeville and Putnam is that there are a lot of closer choices to Nashville." **tn**

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