

A Shift in Collar

BY KATIE PORTERFIELD



Rutherford
County's
manufacturing
foundation
faces a
corporate
makeover

It's no secret Rutherford County is growing. Each year, the county just southeast of Nashville makes its mark on a slew of rankings related to job, real estate or population growth.

Most recently, Rutherford was named the 20th fastest-growing county in the nation based on the rate at which single-family houses, town homes and apartments are being built, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. But historically known as a manufacturing and distribution haven with hundreds of industrial facilities and big names like Nissan's Motor Manufacturing Plant, Rutherford isn't just growing. It's changing how it does business, or specifically, who does business there.

"For many years, we've worked to ensure a diversified employment base, so that we didn't have all of our eggs in one basket," says Rob Lyons, assistant manager for the city of Murfreesboro, Rutherford County's seat. "We continue to see manufacturing type jobs come to Rutherford County, but we are also encouraging the development of the office sector as part of the effort."

A Middle Tennessee State University study on Rutherford County's economy and future, commissioned by the county Industrial Development Board in June 2001, initiated the county's relatively new focus.

"The study brought to light the good, the bad and the ugly," says Holly Sears, director of economic development for the Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce. "There was a lot of growth, some good, some not as good, but the industrial sector wages weren't increasing, and Rutherford County's average weekly wages were decreasing."

In addition, says Rutherford County Chamber President Steve Benefield, from a national standpoint, manufacturing jobs were decreasing at an annual rate of five percent.

PHOTO BY HARRISON McCLARY

"In order to keep our community vibrant, we needed to begin competing for regional corporate or national headquarters type jobs," Benefield says.

In 2003, as a result of the study, the county, its cities and the business community launched Destination Rutherford, a \$2.8 million, four-year initiative to accelerate business and industry recruitment and bring new and better jobs to the community. Now, in Destination Rutherford's fourth and final year, county and city officials say Rutherford is reaping the benefits. Before the initiative, Benefield says Rutherford County's average weekly wage ranked fifth among Tennessee counties, but today, it ranks third behind Nashville and Memphis. Destination Rutherford also helped create 9,000 jobs and identify \$750 million in capital investments.

Since Destination Rutherford's inception, Verizon Wireless opened a customer call center in Murfreesboro that employs more than 1,200 people, and last year, Emerson Heating Products opened its division headquarters in Murfreesboro. In 2004, Tractor Supply Co., the largest retail

farm and ranch store in the United States, flirted with locating its headquarters in Murfreesboro's Gateway development, which was designed to attract corporate markets to the area, but settled on moving into a readily available facility in Brentwood.

foot retail center with restaurants and stores such as Bed, Bath and Beyond, HH Gregg and Marshall's. Local developer Mark Pirtle has developed a 92,000-square-foot, Class-A office building and has additional land under contract for more Class-A office buildings that will

Money magazine ranked Murfreesboro one of the 100 best places to live in 2006.

"At that point in time, all of the infrastructure in the Gateway was not in place, which was a factor that worked against us," Lyons says. "We have since completed the roadway network and other utility projects so that those are on the shelf for a company looking to locate here."

Lyons says the city sold, or has under contract, 215 acres, totaling \$35 million, of the 400-acre mixed used Gateway development. Less than two miles from I-24 via the Manson Pike/Medical Center Parkway Interchange, the Gateway includes Middle Tennessee Medical Center's 300-room hospital and the Oaks, a 250,000-square-

include offices for medical and financial institutions.

On Nov. 1, Missouri Developer John Q. Hammons will break ground on a 280-room Embassy Suites hotel and an adjacent 75,000-square-foot conference center along the Medical Center Parkway corridor.

"We have all the pieces of the pie ready for corporate clients," Sears says.

"The hotel and conference center is really the last piece."

Next to the Embassy Suites hotel and conference center, Cousin Properties and Faison Enterprises will build Avenue

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Murfreesboro, an 808,000-square-foot open-air retail center that officials believe will sweeten the kitty for corporations looking to locate in middle Tennessee. Consumer Insurance moved its corporate headquarters into the Gateway last year.

"Consumer Insurance was renting space in Murfreesboro and started evaluating sites for possible expansion," Lyons says. "They were considering sites in Williamson County and became aware of the Gateway project. As they began to research the vision of the city and commitment from the city council, they realized the Gateway was the right place for the company to build their own facility for their corporate headquarters."

Lyons says there are at least three reasons why corporations should consider locating their headquarters in Murfreesboro. First, *Money* magazine ranked the city one of the 100 best places to live in 2006.

"Secondly, the city has provided ready to build sites in an extremely attractive campus type setting, so that office sites are ready for permitting," Lyons says. "This enables a company to make their decision

and get under construction very quickly."

Finally, Lyons says, Murfreesboro is home to MTSU, the largest undergraduate university in Tennessee with more than 23,000 students.

"The presence of university in our community provides an outstanding workforce, as well as resources for the company in the way of faculty and expertise that can give them a competitive advantage," Lyons says.

Murfreesboro Mayor Tommy Bragg says Murfreesboro's outstanding education system, from pre-K programs to the doctoral programs at MTSU, coupled with the state of the art Middle Tennessee Medical Center, will play a big role in attracting corporations to Rutherford County.

"Those two factors will be very attractive to white collar jobs," he says. "Although Murfreesboro has a different demographic than the Cool Springs/Franklin area [in Williamson County], the unique character of our neighborhoods combined with economic value will be conducive to those who don't want to pay the high dollar needed in the Green Hills

or Cool Springs areas but may want to have the unique hometown flavor that Murfreesboro and Rutherford County offer."

While Rutherford's largest city is gearing up to host corporate headquarters, Sears says Smyrna also has a few projects aimed at bringing the corporate market to Rutherford. The Smyrna/Rutherford County Airport Authority Business Park development has business park property available with airfield access. Adjacent to the 27-hole Smyrna Municipal Golf Course and the Smyrna Town Fitness Center, the Airport Terminal and Business Center is designed to cater to the private/corporate aviation market.

Rutherford County and city officials have no doubt that they can compete with corporate character of Cool Springs or Brentwood, and they say Rutherford is poised to land a corporate relocation. They're just waiting for the big one.

"We've had several visits for corporate relocations from markets outside Tennessee in the last year," Sears says. "We are the next corporate market in middle Tennessee." **tn**

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