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Moore County: Drawing New Business By Emphasizing A Satisfying Lifestyle

By Mary Elle Hunter

Moore County, which saw a significant loss of jobs from the outsourcing of the furniture and textile industries during the last decade, has been focusing on attracting new businesses by emphasizing its quality of life. The combination of a small town feeling and a level of sophistication provided by a resort-inspired lifestyle with over 43 prestigious golf courses, is enhanced by a pro-business climate, excellent health care facilities, as well as a top-rated educational system.

According to Ray Ogden, Executive Director of Partners in Progress, the county's economic development arm, "Our primary competitive edge is Moore County's lifestyle." Ogden, who joined Partners in Progress five years ago brought with him a philosophy of attracting an entrepreneurial and small to mid-size industry base, one that would provide quality jobs and employee benefits and bring new investment to broaden the county's tax base.

The desirable lifestyle of Moore County persuaded Tom Cirigliano, owner of MetChem, a processor of nickel and cobalt-based chemicals, to relocate its headquarters to Moore County's Aberdeen from Atlanta, and part of its manufacturing operations from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to avoid increasing congestion and rising costs of doing business. Cirigliano, an avid golfer, was impressed with the stability of the area, having come to Pinehurst to play golf with his father since the 1970's. And Ray Ogden comments that MetChem is exactly the type of industry that Partners in Progress is trying to recruit and that it fits in well in Moore County.

The availability of vacant industrial buildings throughout the county that can be renovated and retrofitted for new uses was an added advantage for the current economic development efforts. Such was the case with MetChem, and other new and expanding industries have followed suit.

An Aberdeen industrial building that had been vacant for more than four years has a new owner. Southeastern Tool & Die, a local company, is moving its base of operations into the 105,600 square foot building in order to accommodate rapid growth, now and in the future. Jimmy Thompson, owner and president of Southeastern Tool & Die, who started the business in 1984, has shifted the company's focus from tool and die to primarily steel fabrication, now accounting for about 90% of the company's operations, and has enlarged its client base to include Caterpillar and John Deere plants, and the US Army.

In another section of the county, the small town of Robbins was one of the hardest hit areas in terms of loss of jobs due to plant closures, but there are three recent additions to the workforce. Situs Outsourcing Solutions, established by a global commercial real estate consulting and services firm, located in Robbins as a result of New York-based Managing Director Steven Bean growing up in northern Moore County.

The lower cost of doing business, coupled with the availability of a capable under-employed work force, however, were the compelling reasons for deciding on Moore County. The availability of a building renovated into professional office space with partial funding by the North Carolina Rural Training Center, and grants for employee training through the state's

community college system and the North Carolina Workforce Development Board were other determining factors in the Situs location.

A former 50,000 square foot textile manufacturing plant in Robbins became the home of American Growler, a company producing tactical vehicles used by the military. Interaction with Sandhills Community College's continuing education division for on-the-job retraining of workers proved to be a key to developing a well-qualified workforce in Robbins. And as an adjunct to the American Growler operation, one of the company's suppliers, Marion Precision Tool, has relocated to the area and is in the process of building a 10,000 square foot building.

As it has been in so many cases, Sandhills Community College was a valuable collaborator in the economic development efforts of Partners in Progress in the Situs and American Growler relocations. The college, the first community college in the state, is recognized as one of the premier community colleges in the nation, and besides helping companies to take advantage of any one of several state-funded worker-training programs, it also offers an innovative Entrepreneurship Certificate Program.

In addition, a private organization called Angels for Moore acts as a prospective source of capital for local entrepreneurs. A network of accredited investors, Angels for Moore is not a fund, but individuals willing to invest in a company capable of growth and development.

Moore County's proximity to Fort Bragg makes it a logical site for military contractors and businesses related to the defense and security sectors. However, aside from its location, it was the quality of the workforce that led BRS Fabrication, a manufacturer of personnel and cargo parachutes for the military, to select Pinebluff in Moore County for its facility.

Defense-related businesses may be attracted to the recently launched Southern Pines Corporate Park, with its campus-like setting, just minutes from Fort Bragg, and only an hour to Research Triangle Park and RDU International Airport. 5,000 to 62,700 square feet of flex space is available at the Park that can be subdivided as needed for multiple tenants, and the Park has industrial zoning in an Urban Progress Zone for enhanced incentives.

Military suppliers, seeking to relocate to Moore County, also have the option of space in the Iron Horse Industrial Park, with its rail access provided by the Aberdeen & Rockfish Railroad with twice daily switching available, and convenient connections with CSX and Northern Southern. The 125-acre park in Aberdeen is the county's first certified site designated by the North Carolina Department of Commerce.

The Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) recommendations that are in the process of being implemented over the course of the next three to five years will have a positive effect on the economy of the counties immediately surrounding Fort Bragg, including Moore County. As Caleb Miles, President and CEO of the Pinehurst-Southern Pines-Aberdeen Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, points out, right now a study is underway on various elements of the economic impact, and tourism is one of the elements, i.e. the effect on the demand for hotel rooms and meeting space, for instance.

At present, and for some years, tourism has played a major role in the economic development of Moore County. Over \$364 million was spent by visitors in the latest year for which figures are available (2006). This places the county 11th out of the 100 counties in North Carolina, and reflects a positive trend. "We are either at or above where the state is in terms of growth," Miles says.

Direct employment from tourism was just over 4,700, and the taxes generated from tourism are estimated at more than \$25 million. Miles expects the 2007 figures that should be released within the next month will show it was a record year. He bases his expectations on the numbers the Bureau deals with on the local level - local taxes, hotel occupancy, etc.

“This summer looks very good because of all the group business that was booked some time ago. With a number of golfing and other events that have taken place already or are scheduled to run throughout the rest of the summer, we should have a fairly strong period.”

Most of the events take place at the world-renowned and award-winning Pinehurst Resort, a 2,000-acre property that is one of the major employers in the county. The North Carolina Tennis Association had their state championship in June. The USKids Golf brought 5,000 people including players and parents in late July and early August, and Pinehurst will host the 2008 U. S. Amateur Championship in August, as well as being chosen as the site for the 2014 U. S. Open Championship for the third time in fifteen years.

Still, the CVB is carefully tracking the advance leisure travel bookings for this fall. Overall, at least for the present, Miles says that Moore County has fared a lot better than many other areas of the country. “Traditionally, we don’t experience the big highs or the deep lows. But we are watching it very closely.”

What appears to be happening, according to Miles, is that people are scaling back their plans, rather than changing them altogether. A trip to Pinehurst rather than a trip to Pebble Beach, waiting for seasonal rates to kick in, or cutting a trip back by one or two days. “These are the adjustments that will carry us through.”

In keeping with the national economic slowdown, the Partners in Progress staff is seeing a softening of the business activity. The unemployment rate inched up in May, and there is a noticeable decrease in residential and commercial building permits being issued. According to Melanie Thompson, administrator of PIP, “We are seeing slower client activity, as many companies are uncertain about pursuing relocations and/or expansions. The most significant challenge for the immediate future will be to generate leads for companies wishing to relocate or expand, making it harder to attract new jobs and investment.”

Offsetting the slowdown in business activity, an independent economic research firm, POLICOM, recently published the results of an annual ranking of what is termed “micropolitan” areas, defined by the Federal Office of Management and Budget as having a city of at least 10,000 but fewer than 50,000 residents. For the fourth year in a row, the research firm’s 2008 Economic Strength Ratings ranked the Southern Pines-Pinehurst area 27th out of 577 micropolitan areas in the nation.

“Policom’s ranking simply confirms what we’ve been emphasizing to prospective clients all along,” observes Ray Ogden of Partners in Progress. “Thanks to a strong local economy, we have an exceptional standard of living in Moore County, and it’s a great place to start, relocate or expand a business.”

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