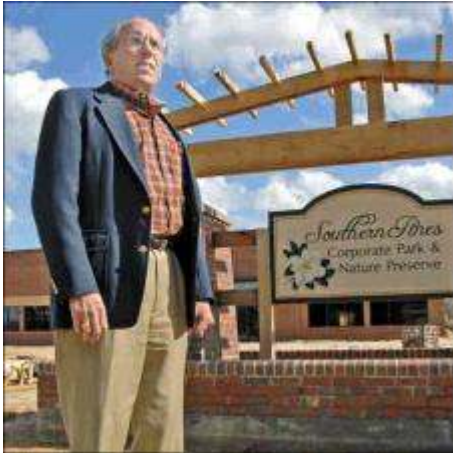


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## 'Personal' Mission: Ray Ogden Works to Bring Jobs to Moore

By: Tom Embrey, Staff Writer



Nearly six years ago, Ray Ogden stood in front of 150 employees and delivered a difficult message.

"I had to get up in front of hundreds of people and tell them they no longer had jobs," Ogden says. "It was the worst day of my career."

Ogden was a manager at Intech, a textile plant in Aberdeen, at the time.

He left the job soon after the announcement, but he never let that feeling go. It motivates him in his current job as executive director of Partners in Progress.

Partners is the economic development organization for Moore County. Ogden works to create jobs and economic opportunities by bringing new business to Moore County, as well as retaining and expanding current businesses.

He became executive director of the organization in 2003. In less than five years, it has helped create or bring more than 900 jobs to Moore County.

Ogden, 61, moved to Moore County from Wisconsin in 1989 to take the job with the Intech plant in Aberdeen. The business, which started with 50,000 feet of space and 18 employees in Aberdeen, grew to 106,000 feet and 150 people by 2002.

The company was purchased by Interface Inc. in 1996 and was eventually consolidated with another business and relocated to Elkin, NC.

The purchase led to the layoffs, and ultimately to Ogden's parting ways with the company.

"It wasn't a good fit for me or them," Ogden says.

After leaving the company, he pursued a job with Partners in Progress.

"If I could get into this position, I could help get those jobs back," Ogden says. "It becomes personal. I felt an obligation to those folks."

He worried that his lack of economic development background would hurt his chances.

"I clearly didn't know what I was doing from an economic development standpoint," he said.

But Ogden had plenty of business experience and had a feel and familiarity for Moore County -- both pluses in the eyes of Partners in Progress board members, says current Chairman Fred Hobbs.

"We felt like his great blend of community-mindedness and business acumen was a perfect fit for us," Hobbs says.

'Tuned Into Businesses'

Hobbs uses words like tenacious, competitive and hard-working to describe Ogden. But Hobbs says Ogden also is tuned into businesses and what they need in terms of facilities, location and workers to succeed.

"He understands business and what owners are looking for," Hobbs says.

Melanie Thompson, who works with Ogden, says his calm demeanor and creative problem-solving skills are huge assets.

"When a client has an issue to be resolved, Ray always seems to know who to call to solve that problem," Thompson says. "Things that might rattle other folks never seem to bother Ray. He has a great ability to cut through the emotion surrounding an issue and deal with the situation."

Thompson recalled a recent situation in which Ogden was able to help two Robbins businesses with one creative decision.

Marion Precision Tool in Robbins needed land to expand. Southern Floor Covering had extra land but had a deed of trust on that land. Ogden worked out a deal between the two companies that resulted in Southern Floor Covering giving land to Marion Precision Tool in exchange for their assuming the deed of trust.

"He was able to help two clients with one transaction," Thompson says.

Thompson, who was hired two months before Ogden, says she knew he would be a good fit even before he took the job.

"Everybody who had something to say about Ray was positive," Thompson says. "Everybody I talked to, they were like, 'Ray is a great guy,' or 'you'll love working with Ray.' I was pretty much thinking he could walk on water before I ever met him or started working with him."

### 'Improving Quality of Life'

Ogden developed his economic development philosophy for the area by speaking one-on-one with board members, asking them for their vision.

The board has 25 members from the public and private sector. Ogden calls the board a "big asset" to his success.

"Through our board, I can pretty much reach any area of the county, and that is critical," Ogden says.

As a result of his conversations, Ogden decided to focus on small to mid-sized businesses that "want to be in Moore County for what Moore County has."

He also talked extensively with leaders of existing industries in Moore County. He peppered them with questions like, "Why were they here?," "What are their needs?" "Are you going to grow your business?" and "How can we help?"

"The existing businesses have always been our first priority," Ogden says.

When he first took over nearly five years ago, Ogden says his first priority was lowering the unemployment rate, which had been hovering near 6 percent.

"Our goal was to get some folks back to work at something," he said.

As the unemployment rate dropped to the current 4 to 5 percent range, the focus of Partners in Progress shifted, too.

"We changed our emphasis from just jobs to jobs that will improve life for our citizens, and by that I mean, pay a higher wage," he said.

The average wage in Moore County has gone up, but it still lags 16 to 17 percent below the state average -- a fact that Ogden says is just "plain wrong."

As the percent of unemployment has gone down, so has the number of available buildings.

"We used to have a fair number of empty, vacant buildings," he says. "But most of those have been filled up."

### The 'Pinehurst' Advantage

Now to attract new business, Ogden says, it's imperative for Moore County to construct new buildings.

"The key question now is, where do you do that," he says. "Competitively, we have to look for businesses that can afford and want to build new buildings."

Ogden says the two prime locations for industry are the Southern Pines Corporate Park and the Iron Horse Industrial Park in Aberdeen.

Ogden says businesses that are the easiest to recruit to Moore County are those with upper or senior management who know the area. He says he wants it to be a lifestyle decision, not one of dollars and cents.

"Quality of life is definitely a distinct advantage for us," he says.

Most people know three things about North Carolina, Ogden says.

"They know Michael Jordan, and from a business standpoint, they know the Research Triangle Park, and they know Pinehurst," he says.

That knowledge or familiarity with Pinehurst is a huge recruiting edge for Ogden.

"It gives us an opening, a start, and we can use it to talk about the strengths of the area," Ogden says. "Pinehurst helps our image as a place to be. A lot of opportunities have opened up because of Pinehurst. It's a very strong conversation starter.

"Sometimes, however, the trick is to get them from thinking, 'Pinehurst, Oh, that's where they play the U.S. Open,' to 'Why don't you locate your business here?'"

Ogden says the best part of the job is seeing local companies succeed.

An example is Pace Manufacturing in Aberdeen, which recently relocated to the new Southern Pines Corporate Park and now has 90-plus employees.

Love of Golf, Travel

Ogden is the married father of two. Both children are grown. They attended The O'Neal School. His daughter Maggie is a married mother of one. His son Andrew is in graduate school at the University of Georgia.

When he isn't recruiting new businesses and jobs to Moore county, he is working to bring his golf score down.

"I play lousy golf," Ogden says. "I enjoy it, but I would like to be better."

Ogden also enjoys traveling. To celebrate their 60th birthdays, he and his wife drove cross country in an RV -- 11,000 miles in seven weeks. Visiting local monuments, parks etc.

"It was quite a trip," Ogden says. "I have flown over a lot of those places but never been to them. A lot of it made me appreciate Moore County even more."

"After 18, almost 19 years, this is our home, and while we like to travel we really like to get back here."