

What's in 'development' for Cherokee County

Written by Gerry Yandel

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The U.S. economy may have rolled over and played dead during 2009, but the Development Authority of Cherokee County (DACC) is still very much alive.

Speaking to the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners at its Nov. 17 meeting, DACC Executive Director Misti Martin actually managed to put a positive local spin on what has been one of the worst recessions in 50 years.

Among the highlights: ProCom, a manufacturer and distributor of gas space heaters, gas fireplace systems and gas log sets, is moving its operations from 25,000 square feet in Cobb County to 84,000 square feet in Canton; two companies, aerospace manufacturer Universal Alloy Corporation, and automotive parts supplier Piolax Corporation, invested a combined \$5 million in the county's Existing Industry Incentive Program; the Cherokee Commerce Center has five speculative buildings and work on the Development Authority's 53-acre business park on Ga. 92 near Interstate 75 is proceeding; the authority is courting two prospective companies that would bring in \$30 million worth of investment; and the DACC has hired a new project manager, Heath Tippens, to help bring more new companies to the county.



Martin

Still, there's much work to be done.

"Now more than ever, we need employment opportunities for our residents," Martin said. "My hope is that we will continue to see indicators of a stronger economy for our community as well as nationally and internationally. The authority is continuing to think and plan creatively as the old way of doing things does not exist anymore."

The DACC's efforts also are instrumental to the missions of other organizations focused on the county's economic development, such as the Cherokee Chamber of Commerce.

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“The Chamber’s mission of promoting business and the community while expanding the economy and enhancing the quality of life continues, especially as new businesses, like Procom, and existing industry, like Piolax and Universal Alloy Corporation, invest in Cherokee County,” said Chamber President Pam Carnes. “Business growth continues to allow Cherokee County to promote itself as an economically viable community in which to live and conduct business.



Carnes

Being economically viable is what brought ProCom, which supplies gas fireplaces, heaters and logs to the Lowe’s chain, to Cherokee County.

“The business environment is pretty favorable there,” said ProCom Vice Chairman Blaine Chickering. “I think there’s a tax free zone, which helps on inventory and the demographic of the people is favorable to manufacturing.”

Chickering also said the county’s proximity to the metro Atlanta transportation hub and its freight lanes lends itself to easy access for the company’s Southeast distribution and servicing its national business.

ProCom hopes to have its sales, marketing, assembly and distribution operations up and running in Cherokee County in early 2010.

“We’ve started renovation,” he said. “I think we’ll be in full operation in mid- to late January.”

Initially, the company will bring 20 employees, but Chickering said he anticipates expanding the workforce to about 50 through the rest of next year.

Expanding the local workforce is also the idea behind the existing executive incentive program, which gives companies tax incentives for investing in their own business through machinery upgrades, building renovations and other business-growing initiatives.

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“The Existing Industry Incentive Program was created to encourage Cherokee County companies to expand and hire in our community. This not only grows their overall investment, it also retains jobs,” Martin said. “Once they have been operating for three or more years, they are eligible. We want them to add investment and jobs here rather than jumping county lines to obtain incentives from other communities.”

That program has served Piolax well since 2000, when the company became one of the first to apply, according to Chief Financial Officer Paul Erlandson.

“We have, in other years, expanded one of our facilities,” he said. “This past year, we actually made investments in machinery and tooling to produce new parts for customers.”

Erlandson said the program was essential to helping Piolax weather the economy, which had a large impact on the automotive parts industry.

“We’ve been able to continue growing,” he said. “2009 and 2008 were really abnormal years for us. What the program has allowed us to do is continue our growth in our production and sales over that time period.”

Sustaining growth means Piolax is able to employ, depending on fluctuations in the industry, about 100 temporary workers for production and manufacturing, in addition to about 180 permanent employees.

“If we hadn’t made the investment (in the incentive program), then, obviously, we wouldn’t have enjoyed higher production and sales level, which means we would have had to cut back on work force,” Erlandson said.

As the economy affects businesses, it also affects the efforts of the development authority.

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To that end, Martin says the DACC is pursuing a re-branding effort, looking into a catchier name for itself and enhancing the county's allure to prospective businesses with efforts such as the video the county commission is overseeing.

Part of the rebranding strategy that is high on the list of DACC priorities for 2010 is its White Collar Recruitment Strategy, aimed at luring white collar industry here.

"The approach to recruiting white collar businesses will be wide-ranged, combining new key messages, Web site marketing, familiarization tours for site location consultants, etc., into a new marketing strategy," Martin said. "Our board of commissioners is very supportive, as are the cities in our community. With everyone working as a team, we are bound to see positive results."

And, the DACC has other things in the works to push economic development at all levels.

"We are also researching the possibility of a small business incubator for our community," Martin said. "Pat Comeaux, one of our board members and a small business owner in Woodstock, is heading up that initiative."

While it may seem that there's enough on Martin's plate to promote the DACC's goals through 2010, the authority has already adopted a set of specific goals for three years out.

"We have to constantly adapt to the market, as no one can be sure of what our 'new economy' will look like when this recession has finally run its course," she said.