Global economy already present in the Upstate

By Hal Johnson

National pundits have spent the last decade talking about the global economy and how the world's business markets now occupy a modern flat world.

Well, that's a story the Upstate has known for quite some time. Our 10 counties include more than 250 international companies that represent 27 countries including Germany, Japan, China, Italy, Korea and France.

Those are big numbers, and they are supported by employee data. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, South Carolina is tied for fourth in the nation in the percentage of people employed by foreign-based companies.

While the three letters BMW are what most Upstate residents think about when it comes to foreign investment, here is just a smattering of what other companies are located here: Adidas, BASF, Electrolux, Freightliner, Fujifilm, Robert Bosch Group and Siemens.

This influx did not happen overnight nor did it happen without reason. One of the main goals of the Upstate SC Alliance is to tell the economic development story of our region to the rest of the world.

Infrastructure is the main ingredient to selling the story of the Upstate:

» Human: Our workforce is by far our most important asset. We must keep investing in our school systems and keeping our education standards high so that we can build the most talented workforce in the United States.

» Land: The Upstate is served by two interstates that stretch our transit capacity from Montgomery, Ala., to Richmond, Va., and from Charleston, S.C., to the West Virginia state line. The Upstate provides significant commercial rail service with both Class 1 and short line carriers. And sites — we have more than 18 certified sites in the Upstate to show prospects.

» Air: The region is served by Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport and smaller general aviation airports in Pickens, Anderson, Greenville and Spartanburg, as well as the SC Technical and Aviation Center, which handles major industrial aviation. GSP is a Southwest Airlines hub as well as home to a 120,000 square-foot air cargo processing facility operated by FedEx.

» Water: We have direct highway and rail access to the Port of Charleston, which is the most productive port on the East Coast, serving 150 nations with 36 different steamship lines, and is undergoing a $1.3 billion capital expansion and facilities upgrade. The Upstate is responsible for more than 60 percent of the good shipped through the port.

The Upstate does not stand alone on steel and concrete infrastructure. Upstate cities have "sister cities" in Bergamo in Italy; Carrickfergus in the United Kingdom, Kortrjik in Belgium, the Western Isles in the United Kingdom and the Tianjin Port Free Trade Zone in China. These sister cities help foster an international expansion of ideas and cultures.

In addition, the International Center of the Upstate was established in 1998 to offer a multitude of services designed to promote cross-cultural understanding among local and international residents of the Upstate. This includes language classes, an Upstate professional's network, newcomers groups and a relocation program.

Our region's international programming is aided by the Michelin French School, which is accredited by the French Ministry of Education and provides French-only classes for high school students; as well as weekend schools geared for educating Chinese, Korean, Japanese and German students.

All of these pieces combined have the Upstate poised to continue growing its international investments, strengthening our place in a global economy and creating a better region for everyone.

GUEST COLUMN



Hal Johnson is president and CEO of the Upstate SC Alliance, a public/private regional economic development organization designed to market the 10 counties in South Carolina's Upstate. Additional information is available at www.upstatescalliance.com.