Pickens growth: The focus factor

This is the first of a two-part series on the economic development recruitment success of Pickens County.

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PICKENS COUNTY — It seems like only yesterday when Pickens County leaders were feverishly seeking to jumpstart economic development while looking over their shoulders at successful neighboring counties.

The loss of long-time textile plants was driving unemployment rates higher, making a bad situation worse.

But today, Pickens County takes a back seat to no one when it comes to economic development. Whether through its commerce park that welcomed the first occupant in 2004 and now has five firms, to three industries that said just this year that they will expand into Pickens County, things have never looked better.

Last month, KP Components Inc., a precision computer numeric control machining company that began in 1969 in Denmark, selected Pickens to house its first North American facility. It will ultimately generate more than 50 new jobs. The previous week saw JR Automation Technologies LLC — a maker of automation equipment for the automotive, pharmaceutical, food and general industries — announce plans to expand and locate its new sales, engineering and manufacturing facility in the county. This will create 54 new high-tech jobs in Pickens County over the next five years.

In June, VCI-SC Inc., a metal working firm, announced plans to locate its operations in Pickens County and generate 50 more jobs in the process.

REASONS FOR SUCCESS

Alliance Pickens Executive Director Ray Farley is quick to defer any success the county has had to other key players.

"We have a county council that is very pro business and they truly have the interests of business and economic development at heart," Farley said.

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"The policies they develop are intended to help foster economic development and provide assistance to the private sector."

The School District of Pickens County, Farley says, also does a very good job educating and training young people who will be tomorrow's work force.

"We have those two overriding factors — good government and good schools — as well as members from the business and education community who serve on our Alliance Pickens Board," he said. "We have a staff that runs very lean, whose work day and work week are guided by its plan of work during the day and during the week. The clock doesn't tell us when our day is done, but our accomplishment and our plan of work does that instead."

According to Farley, the development of the 310-acre Pickens County Commerce Park, which housed its first business in 2005, has been "the lynchpin in helping us aggressively market the county to the larger market, such as Reliable (Automotive Sprinkler Co), St. Jude Medical and so forth."

While the PCCP and the five industries that occupy the site are a testament to how far the county has come regarding economic development, Farley said close attention is also paid to existing buildings. In fact, the most recent announcements all involve industries moving into existing buildings.

"We have an inventory of existing buildings and market the socks off of them," Farley said.

Former Pickens County Council chairman Neil Smith, who now serves as vice chairman, agrees, adding that county council has also worked to assist the growth of existing industry.

"The county's consistent flexibility and support of our existing industry, along with our commitment to keep taxes and regulations low, is a large part of our success," Smith said. "This, coupled with a great work force and Tri-County Technical College's assistance in training, has been very helpful in our recruitment efforts."

Farley said the county's effort to save TTI in Pickens, when it appeared to be headed to Mississippi, and Fluid Routing Solutions in Easley, when it was seemingly Canada-bound, are prime examples.

"We believe very strongly in helping our own, those who are already here employing our family and friends, helping them access capital, real estate, anything we can to help them stay, expand and invest more in our community," Farley said.

Tomorrow: Almost a no go but now, nothing but a bright future.

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The 310-acre Pickens County Commerce Park, which opened in 2005, features five industries with room for more.