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Thomasville stands out

Residents' proactive attitude boosts city's economy

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THOMASVILLE - It's 90 miles from the nearest large city, 70 miles from an interstate and barely outside the poverty-riddled Black Belt.

But Thomasville is thriving, according to economic developers, business leaders and residents in the southwest Alabama city of about 5,000.

Townhouses and apartments are under construction in the old downtown. Louisiana-Pacific is building a \$215 million plant to make roof decking. Construction starts next year on a \$30 million hospital. And the city plans to spend \$26 million on a new water treatment plant and sewer system improvements as well as \$4 million to convert the old high school into a civic center.

Thomasville's vitality is striking in contrast to much of rural Alabama.

Forty of Alabama's 67 counties are losing population. Median incomes in many rural counties lag 20 percent to 45 percent below the state median.

Finding a way to shore up the sluggish economy that marks rural Alabama will be among the tasks facing whichever candidate - Republican Bob Riley or Democrat Lucy Baxley - wins the governor's race Nov. 7.

Thomasville is held up as a model of what can be accomplished in those areas.

"What Thomasville says to us is, just because you don't have an interstate and just because you're on the back side of the moon doesn't mean you can't do better," said Larry Lee, an economic developer and advocate for rural Alabama.

"They have turned over every stone possible to make sure they would be competitive for programs that looked in their area," said Alabama Development Office Director Neal Wade.

Thomasville Mayor Sheldon Day said other cities could follow the same path.

"It's not rocket science," said Day, who still wears his Thomasville High School ring, Class of '78, and passes out lapel pins bearing the city seal.

Thomasville's courtship of Louisiana-Pacific was a turning point.

Soon after Day became mayor in 1996, the city lost in its pursuit of a roof truss plant, which chose Evergreen. "We looked at everything and basically tried to learn why we came in second," Day said.

Taking note of an Auburn University study that identified young-growth timber as an underused resource in the region, Thomasville joined other municipalities to recruit plants that make oriented strand board, decking material made from young-growth pine that is a rising alternative to plywood.

"It was a perfect niche," Day said.

The Clarke County Commission, with the backing of five municipal governments but vocal opposition from some residents, passed a \$25 vehicle license plate tax to pay for the 1,200-acre site, infrastructure and grant matches that landed Louisiana-Pacific.

The plant, which anchors an industrial park, will employ 150 people. The city also is securing ties with five pulp and paper plants within 40 miles.

Emphasis on schools:

Under a new dual enrollment program, students in the Thomasville city school system can study pulp and paper technology at Alabama Southern Community College with city-paid scholarships. Students get a head start on a two-year degree and on entry-level jobs that pay an average salary of \$45,000.

The dual enrollment program is a way to serve students not among the 35 percent to 40 percent who plan to seek a four-year degree.

"Those (college-bound) kids are already motivated," Day said. "We feel like where most rural communities do a poor job is tracking the needs of the other 60 to 65 percent."

The program could help Thomasville prevent the population drain that is hurting many rural areas. Five counties in the Black Belt lost more than 20 percent of their school-age populations from 1990 to 2003.

"If people don't come back, eventually it's just going to be a slow decline over three or four generations," said Scott Lewis, 45, who grew up in Thomasville and stayed to run the pest control business his father started in 1963. "If you stick around, it can make a difference. I don't believe there's any place better to raise a family than a small town in Alabama."

Adequately funded schools are an asset, too.

Thomasville collects a combination of school taxes equivalent to the amount 47.9 mills of property tax would raise. That earned the city an A in local funding on its 2005-06 report card from the state Department of Education. The statewide average is the equivalent of 31.4 mills.

"We put our money where our mouth is," Day said.

Can't go it alone:

Lee, the advocate for rural economic development, said the state should set up regional development centers to form more alliances like the one in Clarke County and to extend those across county lines. "We really, really need to be taking a regional approach and looking at the state, not as 67 counties, but as the eight or so economic regions that it is," Lee said.

Day supports the idea of regional centers. He said small-town mayors need all the help they can get. He found signs of complacency when he left his job as a Wal-Mart store manager and was elected mayor 10 years ago.

The city's industrial board had not met for a 1½ years. A 30,000-square-foot building built speculatively in the industrial park had sat empty for six years.

"We had the old adage of, build it and they will come, so to speak," Day said.

Day sought advice from ADO, Alabama Power Co. and others with expertise in development. They said to start with simple things, such as trimming grass on the side of the curbs.

Day learned what resources were available and how to obtain them. During the past 10 years, Thomasville has received at least 14 grants totaling \$11.15 million, not including \$7.4 million in grants for the Louisiana-Pacific project.

Thompson Tractor moved into the former speculative building and has expanded twice. The industrial park is filled to capacity.

Development doesn't always involve pursuit of giant companies. Thomasville upgraded its youth baseball fields and has hosted the Dixie Pre-Majors World Series two of the past three years. The tournament brings in teams from 11 states and is returning next year.

"July used to be our slowest sales tax month," Day said. "Now it's in the top five."

Day expects more new projects and growth because most people in Thomasville share his philosophy.

"Instead of standing around and belly-aching 'I wish somebody would clean up that corner,' become somebody and clean that corner up," he said.

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