



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Continuing to Trend in This Upbeat Town

By GRETA SHARP

Don't tell Batesville the economy took a hit with the pandemic. They've been so busy, they haven't noticed. Panola Partnership Director of Economic Development Joe Azar reeled off a list of businesses opening in Batesville and creating jobs, as well as current businesses adding positions. "We're just having a fantastic year," he says.

The newest business is Lockers Manufacturing, a \$5.35 million corporate investment. "They've got orders now that they never imagined before COVID," said Azar. The company purchased a 62,000-square-foot building and anticipates

beginning production by fall. It plans to hire sixty workers.

"They do from A to Z," he says. "From the raw materials to the installation in schools, gyms, manufacturing companies and professional sports." The company has a seven-stage powder coat line, the only one within 100 miles, says Azar.

Blauer Manufacturing created 300 jobs. Health care and medical waste disposal service GreenServ is already looking to hire additional workers. Humic Growth Solutions plans to hire three shifts to work around the clock. The company also wants to buy ten more acres, construct another

building and add ten employees to the forty-five it already has in Sardis.

Crown Cork and Seal added another manufacturing line and created sixty jobs, with Panola Partnership assisting to arrange training. Toyoda Gosei's high-tech manufacturing processes employ 84 employees to produce steering wheels and plastic parts in windshields.

CITE Armored President and CEO Teresa Hubbard bought the 122,000-square-foot former Serta building to armor vans. The company received military contracts to armor specialized vehicles, so she plans to double the forty-five current employees.



Batesville's highway system and location, as well as the highly skilled workforce, draw new businesses, as does the Northwest Concourse. This partnership with Northwest Mississippi Community College creates a regional workforce development center.

It's been a big attraction to new businesses. "We did not recruit them," says Azar. "They came because of the Concourse." Azar reports thirty-eight industries in Panola County. "People know us as a manufacturing community," he explains. "We'd love to bring in more manufacturing here. We're only able to do this because of the Concourse."

NMCC President Dr. Michael Heindl said the Concourse kicks off this fall with the diesel technology program. "We don't have anything like that in our area; it's a brand new program," he says. The two-year program will likely have forty students in the first class.

The Concourse's construction falls in three phases. Phase one finishes this summer and provides for the diesel technology program, flexible training space in classrooms, administration and the Win Job Center. Heindl hopes to begin phase two soon, which includes welding and robotic welding, coding and cybersecurity, and

industrial electrical training. Phase three is the remainder of campus, serving construction trades training, forklift training, advanced manufacturing and entrepreneurial training.

"The Concourse allows us to continue to growth that began in the pandemic with career and technical training," says Heindl. "It's a great location, it's been years underutilized and we're about to utilize it to its fullest. This campus continues to be a game-changer for our college."

GreenServ considered locations in North Mississippi and West Tennessee. Founder and Principal Will Fountain said the actions



Azar



Heindl

of everyone from Mayor Jerry Autrey to the contractors and inspectors confirmed their decision. “Joe (Azar) did such a great job in putting together a package,” says John Alford, GreenServ’s other founder and principal. “The mayor, the board of supervisors, they follow Joe’s lead and trust Joe, and that made it such a business-friendly environment.”

Before making the leap to Batesville, Fountain and Alford spoke with other businesses that made that move. Blauer, in particular, spoke highly of the Concourse and the caliber of the Panola County

workforce. GreenServ purchased the 22,000-square-foot former Tucker Manufacturing building.

Alford reported they’ve hired ten employees since opening in Batesville last October, with plans to hire forty-five more over the next thirty-six months. “They do a great job: Joe and the city and Panola Partnership, and Panola County has a great workforce,” he states. “We’re extremely pleased with the new hires we have made.”

To meet the needs of all these businesses, the Concourse plans to offer non-credit workforce training. “It’s flexible training to

business and industry in Panola County and all the counties we serve,” says Heindl. “The Concourse allows us to have this type of training on campus.”

Employers can come to the college with a need and the college will design a training program to meet it, often subsidized by the state. “It’s an area that people probably don’t know as much about, but it’s vital for business and industry to avail themselves of low-cost or no-cost training. It gives them the ability to hire and retrain a skilled workforce, which is what they want.”

Partnerships make a difference here. Azar applauds Autrey’s leadership. “He’s done so much to bring all these projects to fruition,” he says. Autrey, who is running for reelection, explained the collaborative efforts. “I work with the supervisors well, I



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Alford



Fountain



Autrey



Cummins

work with my board well, I work with Joe (Azar) and Panola Partnership well,” he said.

Fountain said the relationships in the business community are strong, and he attributes much of that to Azar and Autrey. Businesses help each other, sharing information or supplies. “A rising tide raises all ships,” he says. “That they created that culture over here is a big deal.”

GreenServ’s business is good, thanks in part to COVID-19 and the volume of waste products. “We partner with our clients,” explains Alford. “Our job is to help them find a solution.” It’s also positioned them for growth over the next three to five years. They offer vendor consolidation for client convenience. “It’s an all-inclusive solution,” says Fountain. “Panola County helped make that a reality.”

In return, the company plans to be involved with the entrepreneurial incubator at the Concourse. It also plans to focus on the job force, helping build the economic development sector of Panola County, says Alford.

Existing businesses are just as important to the health of a community. That’s especially true when the business attracts national attention. The Caramel Factory was featured on Food Finds on the Food Network, as well as QVC. “That’s when it really hit with online sales and retail,” explains owner Deonna Cummins. “The phone literally rang as soon as you hung it up.”

And while there are plenty of goodies and gift items, The Caramel Factory is known for its caramel cakes and icing.

PANOLA COUNTY FAST FACTS

Top Employers*

1. South Panola School District	658
2. GE Aviation	450
3. MS Department of Transportation	450
4. Panola Medical Center	385
5. North Panola School District	301
6. Wal-Mart	265
7. Crown Brand Beverage Co	225
8. ACI Building Systems, LLC	201
9. Panola County	236
10. City of Batesville	209

*Information compiled by the Panola County Economic Council on April 2021
*Numbers are approximate

Cummins sells the cakes wholesale to four locations in Cleveland, Indianola, Greenwood and near Memphis. Icing is the only items they ship and it’s gone across the U.S. and as far as Guam.

As for the caramel cakes’ popularity, Cummins said the first reason is they are

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delicious. “Number two, I think it’s mostly a Southern thing,” she says. “People in the South love good food, and caramel cake, when it’s done well, is really good.”

Many people remember a family member who made the cake, but the recipe is now lost. “People don’t cook like they used to,” says Cummins. “That’s one reason our cakes are so popular. They take you back in time. And you didn’t have to do it.”

At The Co-op, Kay and Steve Nickle serve customers throughout North Mississippi. They took over when the store was going out of business six years ago and with their years of retail experience, she said the business is thriving. “When you come in, someone is going to meet you, greet you and take care of you,” she says. “If I don’t have it, I’ll sure try to get it for you. We’re bringing something of value to Batesville. This is a store you don’t just find anywhere.”

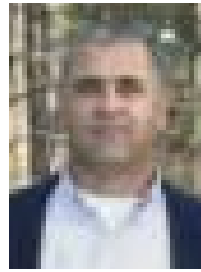
COVID brought trying times. “It took lots of hard work; it took lots of dedication,” says Nickle. “Steve and I work hard at this, but our employees work just as hard. We’re grateful to have the support of the community and the surrounding area.”



Nickle



Blackwood



Robertson

The store carries a wide range of popular hunting and fishing apparel and footwear, grills and accessories, as well as large safes and Big Tex Trailers. They also have a whole room for boots, including work boots for the factory workers. Nickle recently added women’s and children’s apparel. “We did that to bring in the ladies,” she explains. “That’s been a big hit.”

While she makes sure the departments are stocked to meet customers’ needs, she’s looking to add new lines. “We hope to even broaden our selection and customer base due to the things we’re trying to do,” says Nickle. “We stepped out of the box and brought in lines people want. We try to bring great things to our little community. You don’t have to go anywhere else to shop.”

Health care is also an important part of

economic development and Charleston’s Tallahatchie General Hospital, the extended care facility and its clinics meet the needs of area communities. “We’ve tried to offer new services to fill in the gaps that COVID has created,” says CEO Jim Blackwood. Particularly during the pandemic, these needs were new and different.

“During a time when people are facing so many uncertainties, we’ve opened up telehealth capabilities at our clinics, built a special care facility so that nursing home residents can visit with family members and started a home delivery service at our retail pharmacy,” he reports.

Autrey is aware that good city services also attract new businesses. He’s building a new firehouse, and creating a new streets department and a new gas and water department. He also upgraded Batesville’s low-income housing. “I really like this job, being mayor,” says Autrey. “You help people. It’s rewarding.”

In addition to a planned multi-purpose building with a basketball court and classrooms, he likes the idea of a tennis facility and a sports complex. “That’s the thing now,” says Autrey. “You’ve got to give these kids something to do.”

Education is another major factor of economic development and North Delta School is welcoming Sledge native Eric Robertson as the new head of school. “It’s a wonderful school; it always has been,” he says. “I’m grateful for the opportunity they gave me.”

After the shutdowns of 2020, Robertson feels being in the classroom is the best place for students. “Any time kids are not in person in classrooms with a teacher, we lose a little bit,” he explains. He commended North Delta’s dedication to in-person learning. “I’m committed to keeping our kids in the classroom, (and) making sure they’re safe. We want them in the classroom and we want them learning.”

He looks forward to finding his role in Batesville. “It’s a community where people come together and contribute what they have,” says Robertson. “We want to get there as quick a we can and build relationships with the families of the community. It’s an exciting time to be at North Delta. I’m as glad to be a part of it as I am to be leading it.” **DBJ**

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spring CLEANING checklist

- kitchen**
 - clean out fridge & freezer
 - clean oven
 - remove & clean stove burners & knobs
 - clean out & wipe down drawers & cupboards
 - discard old spices
 - mop floor & baseboards on hands & knees
 - wipe down top of fridge
 - clean behind fridge, if possible
- bedrooms**
 - wash all bedding, including mattress pads, bedskirts, and comforters
 - replace or wash pillows
 - go through closets, switch out seasonal clothing
 - rotate & flip mattresses, if necessary
- laundry room**
 - clean behind washer & dryer
 - remove front lint plate and clean thoroughly
- general**
 - dust ceiling fans
 - dust ceilings and corners of walls
 - dust/clean vents & fans
 - clean blinds
 - wash windows, inside & out
 - vacuum out windowsills, mesh screens
 - dust/clean all light fixtures
 - wash walls & baseboards
 - vacuum or wash draperies & curtains
 - wash or beat rugs
 - wash down doors & light switch plates
 - clean/shampoo carpets
 - change air filter
 - safety inspection: smoke & carbon monoxide detectors, fire extinguishers
 - vacuum out couches & chairs
 - vacuum/lint roller on lamps
 - vacuum out sliding glass door tracks
 - clean out medicine cabinets, safely discard old prescriptions

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