

Exceptionally Attractive Manufacturing Location in Exceptional Economy

When one slide popped up at the Health of Lee County luncheon last year, you could almost hear the surprise. Despite national trends and a struggling economy, 37 percent of the local workforce was still employed in manufacturing.

Guests are used to getting unexpected news at the candid annual assessment of how the City of Sanford, North Carolina, and surrounding county stack up on important issues like the economy, labor, education and quality of life. But, the area's continued strength in manufacturing generated some puzzled looks.

One person who wasn't surprised was Bob Heuts, the county's economic development director. "One reason we have so much manufacturing here is that we have a strong business climate and the infrastructure that companies need," says Heuts. "Even during these difficult months, we've had people visit the county looking for a place to expand or locate their business and we hear the same thing: This is a very attractive place."

The most important reason may be "location, location, location." The real estate axiom is true for business, and being part of the world-renowned Research Triangle region attracts plenty of attention. The Research Triangle Regional Partnership, the economic development agency serving a region including Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, lists more than 500 regional accolades on its web site for the area's business climate, quality of life and industrial innovation.

What Sanford has going for it that most other Research Triangle communities don't is equally-easy access to Fayetteville and Fort Bragg. When the federal government announced its military Base Realignment and Closing plan a few years ago, Fort Bragg was a big winner, absorbing the U.S. Army Forces and U.S. Army Reserve commands from Fort McPherson, GA.

Tim Moore, a program manager working for the BRAC Regional Task Force planning group, compares the overall economic impact to what would happen if two Fortune 500 companies suddenly relocated nearby. Population in an 11-county region, including Lee, is expected to swell — by nearly 41,000 people — as will the number of jobs generated by

companies relocating to pursue contracts from more than \$30 billion controlled by the U.S. Army Forces command alone.

Heuts also points to other strengths — including the strong network of highways, rail lines, airports and shipping ports running through the county and available nearby. U.S. 1, a free-flowing, four-lane divided highway, links Sanford with Raleigh and Interstate 40, a major east-west corridor. And, Interstate 95, a north-south route providing access to Northeastern markets, is not far away.



A quality control technician conducts tests for Static Control Components, an innovative company founded and based in Sanford.

Then, there's the high quality of local workers with all kinds of expertise, many trained by Central Carolina Community College, one of the state's larger, and researchers being educated at Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University — all world-renowned institutions less than an hour's drive from Sanford.

Even the local schools have been on the cutting edge of innovation. East Lee Middle School was North Carolina's first middle school STEM academy, offering a curriculum enriched with science, technology, engineering and math.

The initiative is now being expanded to all public middle schools and the curriculum's publisher is relocating its Global Learning Center from Michigan to Sanford.

Ironically, one unpleasant result of the worldwide economic turmoil could end up being a blessing in disguise. As manufacturers and retail businesses have reorganized, some prime facilities have become available, creating an immediate opportunity for new and expanding companies.

Buildings from 2,000 to 325,000 square feet are available, Heuts says, and that includes the 260,000-square-foot former GKN Driveline facility and 24,380-square-foot Trans-Matic building, both located in the Lee County Industrial Park, not far from major operations for Caterpillar and Wyeth.

Moen, Tyson, Coty, 3M and Static Control also thrive in and around Sanford, helping the city become a force of its own. For the last six years, Sanford has been listed by POLICOM among the nation's top "micropolitans" in economic strength, finishing 40th among 574 cities earlier this year.

Sanford also has appeared in Site Selection magazine's list of the top 25 small towns for business and was recognized earlier this year as one of the nation's 93 "Playful City USA" communities by KaBOOM!, a nonprofit dedicated to increasing play opportunities for children.

Quality of life, Heuts says, continues to be an important component in Sanford's success. The Temple Theatre, its crown jewel, is a professional theater featuring an annual season of plays and musicals, along with a conservatory offering a range of programs for youth. The Lee County Community Orchestra, Heart of Carolina Jazz Ensemble, Sanford Pottery Festival, pottery and art studios and renowned Tobacco Road Golf Club also contribute to the local lifestyle.

Economic clouds have had an effect on everyone, but business and industry continue to drive the Sanford and Lee County economy. And, with its attractive Research Triangle location, able workforce, strong educational system and favorable quality of life, nobody will be shocked to see even more growth ahead. 🏠