

ECONOMIC BOON(E)

County Realizes Benefits, Faces Challenges of Growth

By Matt Ottinger



Whitestown has blossomed from a small town into the fastest-growing community in Indiana, serving as an attractive location for business hubs and corporate headquarters.

Much can change in an area in the course of 10 years. One of the prime examples of that in Indiana is Boone County.

Whitestown – located just 20 miles northwest of downtown Indianapolis – is now the fastest growing community in Indiana, surging from a population of under 3,000 in 2010 to its current total of over 5,000 residents (according to Indiana University’s STATS Indiana). Projections now yield a likelihood of 12,000 residents by the 2020 Census, says Town Manager Dax Norton, and the county’s population is projected to escalate from 62,000 to over 66,000 in 2020.

“Medco (Health Solutions) – now called Express Scripts – and Amazon were the major players in kicking the big growth off,” Norton offers. “When Meijer opened last year, it made a big difference on the retail end (in the south portion of the massive Anson development). The reason Meijer decided to build was because the neighborhoods were growing. So the residential development market saw this as a good place to invest; that’s the biggest contributor to this cycle and speed of growth in the last three or four years.”

Most recently, Vroom, an online pre-owned high-end car retailer, announced that it would open its second U.S. facility in Whitestown in December. The company anticipates creating more than 200 jobs (including mechanical, detailing and managerial) paying an average of \$34 per hour.

Road to success

Dissected by highly-traveled Interstate 65, Boone County has benefited from its proximity not just to Indianapolis but to Lafayette as well. In fact, automotive stamping, welding and manufacturing company Fukai Toyotetsu Indiana Corporation (FTIC) broke ground in September 2014 on a new facility in the rural community of Jamestown with plans to add up to 200 jobs by mid-2019. Being close to one of its primary customers, Subaru of Indiana Automotive in Lafayette, was integral to the decision.

“The distance to our customer was one of the critical reasons for our decision, but we also believe that being a part of a community is as important,” explains Satoru Fukai, FTIC president. “We wanted to feel the joy of co-growth with the community, and Jamestown was the

best fit to make our expectations come true out of all other candidate sites we’ve seen.”

Molly Whitehead, executive director of the Boone County Economic Development Corporation, believes FTIC could serve as an anchor to attract other large companies and retail opportunities to the Jamestown area.

Other notable business expansions in the county include Canadian specialty food manufacturer Skjodt-Barrett, which opened its U.S. headquarters in Lebanon in 2011. The company expanded its facility in 2014 (despite suffering severe tornado damage in 2013), with plans to add nearly 100 more jobs by 2017. Lebanon’s business parks also host notable employers including agricultural equipment manufacturer CNH Parts and Service, which recently opened a new facility, and Hachette Book Group.

Zionsville has also added commercial tenants, namely in the information technology field, in its Northwest Technology Center (near the Indianapolis-Marion County border). Tech-staffing firm Smart IT Staffing Inc. recently invested \$2 million in new headquarters in the park, and health IT firm hc1.com and Mobi Wireless are also tenants.

“In Zionsville, there’s been a shift in recognizing you need some industrial and commercial growth to balance (residential) growth,” Whitehead conveys. “There’s the tech park, and Zionsville has a new



Zionsville’s brick streets reflect the quaintness of its downtown, although more information technology and other companies are finding homes within its city limits as well.

Creekside Corporate Park, and they are developing plans for that right now. It's a low-impact design and will have access to the village so employees can walk there – more of a rustic feel than some industrial parks we normally see."

Additionally, FedEx opened a distribution center in Zionsville last year, and Hat World/LIDS Sports Group moved its headquarters there – with plans to bring up to 758 jobs by 2026.

Workforce: The good and bad

Boone County has the fourth lowest unemployment rate in the state and the second lowest in the Indianapolis metro area, which poses some challenges in attracting employers concerned about finding a suitable workforce.

Another concern is finding employees capable of living and working in the area.

"It's very much a focus of ours (to get more Boone County people working here), but some of the employers here don't pay wages that enable their employees to afford to live here," Whitehead notes. "That's more in Whitestown than Lebanon, but it is a challenge. So when we look at the sort of companies that we want to move here, I'm looking at companies that do employ people at slightly higher wages. It's something we do need to address."

Norton confirms that most of the workers at Whitestown's facilities are not Boone County residents.

"Our personal per capita income is around \$79,000, which is really high," he quantifies. "Our college attainment level is high too, so people aren't working at distribution centers for \$12-13 dollars an hour. They're driving to Marion and Hamilton counties for work. Therefore, a majority of the population of Boone County is leaving to work at a higher salary job, so that leaves distribution centers here to find those workers from somewhere else."

Norton estimates a majority of employees are from Marion County, and some "come from as far away as Madison and Putnam counties."

County officials hope enhanced training opportunities will further merge the county's employers and residents (see story on the Haas Training Center in Lebanon).

Fukai notes his company will hire welding equipment and press die maintenance engineers, as well as associates to work in production. The hope is that many of these candidates will have manufacturing backgrounds.

"We will use (Toyotetsu America, Inc. – the Kentucky-based stock holder of FTIC) for our training program, but local training programs can be a great help for us as well," he says. "We are looking to partner with local college institutions for recruitment in our

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Haas Training Center to Give Lebanon a Boost

Vincennes University (VU) has focused many of its recent efforts on being a leading resource in workforce training throughout Indiana. In January, the school plans to open the Gene Haas Training Center in Lebanon.

The center will feature computer numerical control (CNC) machinist training and is funded in part by a \$1.5 million grant from the Gene Haas Foundation, while the city owns the 20,000-square-foot building and will buy equipment for the training.

Lebanon Mayor Huck Lewis is enthusiastic about the project, asserting, "We have people who need this training that are underemployed or unemployed. Our unemployment rate is down, but I think this training can still give people a better life."

While offering certificates and two-year degrees, Lewis hopes the focus on machining and other specializations will help attract more machine shops to the city.

"We've talked about advanced manufacturing, but it's already expanded to metrology (measuring parts)," he adds. "(VU) has leased space in the business plaza next to where the building is, and has started industrial maintenance classes already."

Its Central Indiana location has already drawn the attention of one major Indiana automotive producer.

The new Gene Haas Training Center in Lebanon illustrates another way Vincennes University is helping battle the skills gap.



"Subaru of Indiana Automotive (in Lafayette) was sending people (to the Vincennes campus) to train for 16 weeks, and said, 'We just can't do that anymore,'" Lewis relays. "So we started here in Lebanon, and they have six or eight people over there now in that class. So when the building is finished, we'll move all of that over there."

According to Doug Bowman, director of VU's Haas Technical Education Center, Indiana will need thousands of new machinists over the next few years.

"Providing this high-quality training on state-of-the-art equipment will help bridge the advanced manufacturing skills gap," he comments. "These manufacturing training and credentialing programs will require a public-private partnership."

He also points to a 2013 study by the Indiana National Tooling and Machining Association that labeled the machinist skills gap a "catastrophic" problem.

Incorporating military veterans into the workforce will also be a focus at the facility, according to Lewis.

"(VU) has a very good veterans program, and they'll put a lot of emphasis on that here. It's not just Lebanon; we think this will be regional and help Lafayette, Indianapolis, Crawfordsville, Frankfort. ... Down at the VU campus, they've had great success with veterans and some have been hired even before they've gotten out of the 16-week program."

High school students will likely also ultimately benefit from the Haas facility as it will give Boone County youth an opportunity to jumpstart their careers.

"We're also working with the school corporation to develop an early college model," Lewis notes. "That will take some time. But we'd like for students to start around their sophomore years, and by the time they're done they'd have a high school diploma and either a lot of college credit or an associate degree."

RESOURCES: Doug Bowman, Vincennes University, at www.vinu.edu | Mayor Huck Lewis, City of Lebanon, at www.cityoflebanon.org

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FTIC and county officials anticipate growth for Jamestown with the addition of this automotive stamping, welding and manufacturing plant.



technical fields and use available training programs that can help enhance our workforce.”

Lebanon Community Schools has also hired a community work coordinator (former agriculture department chair Kristen Scott) – a position funded for two years by the Lebanon Redevelopment Commission.

“Her primary mission is to connect the schools with businesses to open doors for internships and make sure the businesses have an open door to relay their concerns to her, and ultimately help employ the students who are not going on to higher education,” Whitehead explains.

To each its own

As the county collectively grows, each community will deal with its own unique challenges, according to Whitehead.

“For Lebanon, one challenge is quality of life. It needs to be attractive so potential employees are choosing where to live first, and companies will follow,” she contends. “(Lebanon also) needs to look more at agribusiness, either companies that can assist current employers or those on the technology side. That’s our heritage and what we’re good at, so we should make a play for it.”

For Whitestown, it’s staying in front of the infrastructure and traffic flow demands placed on an area with such a booming population.

“We have to do a good job of putting those people in a variety of housing that is a little more dense, but (high) quality, and give them an opportunity to not have to use their car to do their recreation, shopping and working,” Norton concludes. “But we want to maintain some of that agricultural feel. There’s a lot of greenspace on the land use map in our (25-year) comprehensive plan.”

RESOURCES: Satoru Fukai, Fukai Toyotetsu Indiana Corporation, at www.fticna.com | Dax Norton, Town of Whitestown, at www.whitestown.in.gov | Molly Whitehead, Boone County Economic Development Corporation, at www.booneedc.org