

On the Road to Success

Tech Park Just Part of Growth Plan

By Candace Gwaltney

When the first railroads roared through Daviess County in the mid-1800s, growth for the area was certain. The crowning moment came when the small town of Washington beat out competition for a massive railroad yard and repair facility in the 1880s. The county's economy reaped the benefits for decades, according to the Daviess County Visitor's Bureau.

Today Daviess County, a rural community about 50 miles north of Evansville, boasts a population of 30,220. Railroads are no longer the choice form of transportation and, like much of southwest Indiana, the area is void of major highways.

But community leaders are positioning for a boom that could rival the growth experienced more than a century ago.

A developing technology park looks to attract thousands of new jobs to the area and Interstate 69 is expected to cut through the county in coming years. Daviess County is positioning itself to become a major economic force once again.

Winning with WestGate

The county already reaps economic benefits from the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Crane Division, in neighboring Martin County. As the third largest naval base in the world, Crane pumps an estimated \$1.3 million a day into Indiana's economy, according to a 2003 study.

The same study pinpointed 1,146 Daviess County residents working at Crane or in Crane-related jobs — 8.8% of employed residents.

And even more jobs are on the horizon with the inception of the tri-county WestGate @ Crane Technology Park, which was certified by the state in 2005. Developers are estimating it could result in as many as 4,000 new positions.

While the concept for the park sprawls through 1,000 acres in Daviess, Greene and Martin counties, that's still a vision. So far the WestGate @ Crane Development Co. has acquired just over 300 acres — 220 in Daviess, 51 in Greene and 34 in Martin. Another 51 acres in Daviess County is now being optioned, says Dale Ankrom, architect and WestGate @ Crane Development Co. partner.

Dale Ankrom (left), WestGate @ Crane Development Co. partner, gives details of the technology park plans. Developers hope to attract retail shops, hotels and a conference center for WestGate Village in Daviess County. Gov. Mitch Daniels (right) has said WestGate @ Crane will be the flagship of the state's technology parks. He participated in a groundbreaking ceremony for Science Applications International Corporation (in Martin County) in July.



Open in Daviess County is defense contractor EG&G and Crane Federal Credit Union headquarters. EG&G, a subsidiary of Fortune 500 company URS Corp., already worked with Crane and the Daviess County location is expected to employ 125. Construction is underway on a 37,000-square-foot building for military contractor SAIC in Martin County.

The governor has said this will be the top tech park in Indiana, Ankrom points out. "We certainly are biased – we do too," he claims.

State and local government ardently support the project. Both Gov. Mitch Daniels and Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman have made appearances at ceremonious WestGate events, touting what the park could do for southwest Indiana.

While the three counties are working together to plan for the growth, Daviess County is positioned to get the lion's share of development.

On the right track

WestGate earned its name because it will serve as the west gate into Crane. While Crane is located primarily in Martin County, the Daviess County line is about a quarter of a mile west of the main entrance.

Daviess County is expected to hold the cornerstone of the park – WestGate Village. Universities and hotels (including a conference center) eyeing the project are expected to open first in the planned roundabout in Daviess County, Ankrom says.

WestGate @ Crane will "allow us to capitalize on the things that go on at the base," asserts Ron Arnold, director of the Daviess County Economic Development Corp. "The impact on Daviess County could be huge."

Take a walk through WestGate now. Instead of finding office buildings and manufacturing plants, you're greeted with open fields, some construction and a handful of businesses.

When Ankrom first visited the site, its potential was not immediately clear. "It was a tough sale at first," he admits. After meeting with Arnold, Crane officials and local government leaders, Ankrom saw the enthusiasm and prospects for the area.

"Without Crane we would not have even considered it," he says.



Crane Federal Credit Union's headquarters is among the first businesses to locate in WestGate @ Crane Technology Park.

Ankrom envisions adding 30 buildings in the next five years, totaling \$40 million to \$50 million investment in the park and creating as many as 700 to 1,000 jobs.

Conversations are ongoing with two major Indiana universities to locate in the park. When one or both of those sign on with WestGate, other businesses are expected to follow. A

hotel has already expressed interest, but is waiting for one of the universities to commit first.

"We are all posturing for somebody to make that move," Ankrom says.

Ankrom and the other developers plan to build WestGate slowly, adding buildings as new leases are signed. Once half a building is full, they will build – instead of filling the park with structures and hoping someone decides to locate there.

"This really could be one of the biggest success stories in southern Indiana," Ankrom says.

Planning for the boom

While Daviess County residents enjoy the solidarity of the rural area noted for its Amish community and small town feel, the lack of major highways and interstates has stunted development.

With plans to expand I-69 through southwest Indiana, the area could become a magnet for new commerce.

"We have had projects before that we have pursued that at the end of the day we don't even get looked at because of a lack of interstate," Arnold admits. When I-69 is built (construction is expected to begin in 2008), Daviess County will be a key point between Evansville and Indianapolis. Lower transportation costs for businesses locating in the

area "certainly is going to be a big benefit," he says.

Daviess County already earned notoriety as the median of the country's population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. If a company ships to a large part of the country, "it makes a lot of sense to do it from here," Arnold offers.

Once construction begins on the interstate, Arnold will start marketing the county as if it's already there.

"I-69 will be the icing on the cake, but the tech park sure is a heavy part of the batter," notes Robert Gregory, Advance Manufacturing Productivity Center director.



Military contractor EG&G, a subsidiary of \$2 billion URS Corp., opened in the technology park in September.



Robert Gregory, director of the Advance Manufacturing Productivity Center, explains how some of the automated manufacturing equipment works. Students receive hands-on training at the facility in Washington.

Preparing the workforce

Daviess County residents are not desperate for jobs. After all, the unemployment rate is among the lowest in the state (only one county fared better in 2006, according to the state Bureau of Labor Statistics). Instead it's a desire for more high-paying, high-skilled positions.

While most residents are employed, the challenge is training people for skilled jobs the county hopes to attract. Less than three-fourths of adult residents earned a high school diploma (ranked 88th in the state) and only 9.7% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

The Advance Manufacturing Productivity Center opened in September 2007 to offer training in automated technology.

"We are working to create 3,000 to 4,000 new technical jobs in that tech park alone," Gregory asserts. "It's our belief as many of those as possible should be growing from our region. As new technical companies come in there, we will have a workforce that is ready to go with them."

The center provides five different educational tracks based on a person's interests and skills: preparatory path, advance manufacturing I and II, design and advance manufacturing administration. Students can spend as little as eight weeks in a specific course or as long as three to four years earning certifications, Gregory explains.

He estimates the center will be able to educate about 60 adults and 60 to 80 school-age students.

"We're not just targeting folks who haven't had opportunities, but we're targeting our kids so they become aware of the global opportunities that are in front of them," he contends. "We, as a community, have to bring these opportunities here. We have to work together."

The center has received financial backing from the city of Washington, Daviess County and through an Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs workforce development grant.

In the center's first months, some students completed their initial certifications. Gregory also is working with a local manufacturer to set up a training class for new automated equipment.

Recent developments

When the Crane base survived the chopping block during the 2005 U.S. Department of Defense Base Realignment and Closure, attitudes in Daviess County changed.

"That kind of woke us up," Arnold says. "With the base surviving and I-69 being built, basically the attitude of elected officials is we can step back and allow things to happen to us, or we can get proactive in the process," he says.

Existing businesses have expanded in recent years and local government is actively courting new ones. The county council implemented an economic development income tax that generates a little more than \$1 million a year. Those revenues were bonded for Olon Industries and EG&G building projects, Arnold explains.

Arnold points out a few recent Daviess County successes:

- B-W Services, a railcar inspection and rail repair company, bought a vacated railroad shop in 2006 and is now open and rehabilitating at the historic site
- Grain Processing Corp. is in the midst of a \$50 million expansion after which it will grind more than 125,000 bushels of grain daily



About 37% of Daviess County residents live in Washington, the county seat.

- Olon Industries, manufacturer of drawers for furniture, expanded into a new 112,000-square-foot facility in 2007; Arnold notes Olon started with about eight employees and now has approximately 60
- Perdue Food's turkey processing facility continues to provide jobs, as well as economic opportunity to farmers in the area who raise turkeys and feed

Leaders know better than to wait for WestGate @ Crane and I-69 to draw in business. Next up: filling an empty manufacturing and warehouse building.

Arnold is hoping to find the right project to occupy the 87,500-square-foot facility in Washington that can help give the county another boost. The lease will be low to attract new business to the area, Arnold says.

INFORMATION LINK

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