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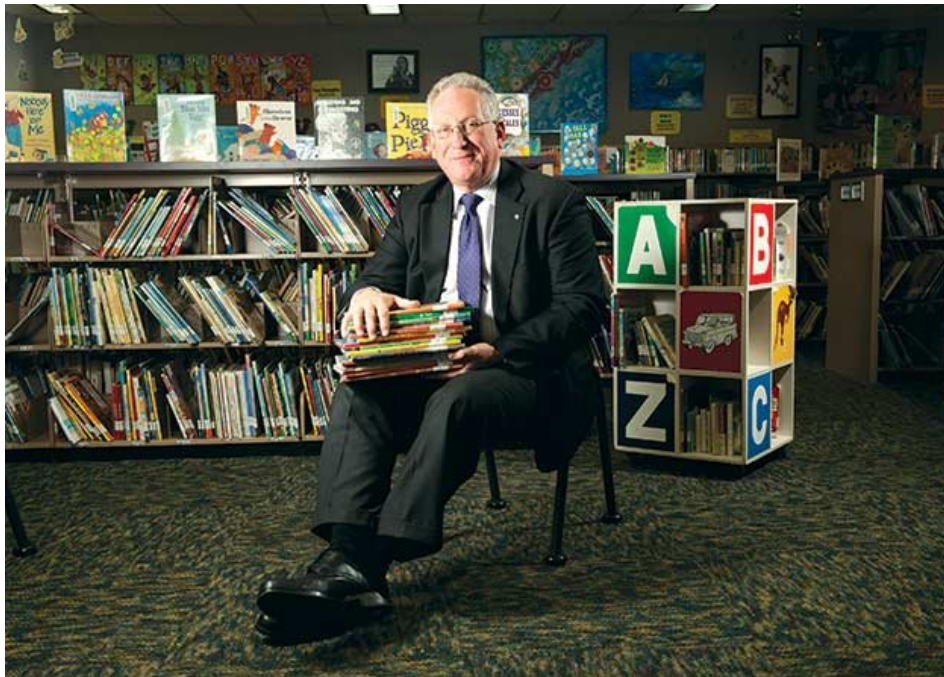
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CARROLL COUNTY: A FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Partnerships, programs, networks

Karen Rosen



Award-winning Initiatives: Daniel Jackson, president & CEO of the Carroll County Chamber of Commerce and Carroll Tomorrow

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Workforce education and development starting practically at birth characterize Carroll County, whose holistic approach helped make it the only county in the state invited to join the Harvard Graduate School of Education's 18-month-long Pathways to Prosperity project. The project teams employers and educators to help high school students find routes into the labor market.

A very happy Daniel Jackson, president and CEO of the Carroll County Chamber of Commerce and Carroll Tomorrow, was notified of the honor by a representative of the Georgia



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Department of Education. He recalls saying “Do y’all know what’s going on out here?” The response: “Why do you think we picked you?”

The West Georgia county bordering Alabama, just an hour outside Atlanta, already had partnerships in place at every stage of the learning process. Through the Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy and its local fund-raising arm, 3,000 books a month are mailed to children ages 5 and under. That’s the second-largest number of books going out in the state and ranks second in total percentage of eligible children who are taking advantage of the program, Jackson says.

“We’ve got to do a better job of helping young people at a much earlier age get on track, discover their gifts and their skill sets and be able to pursue them,” Jackson says. “Because there’s a disconnect between what they say they that want to do and the path they’re on to do it.”

Carroll County’s Literacy is for Today and Tomorrow (LIFT) program was named one of the state’s 80 Certified Literate Community Programs last year by the Technical College System of Georgia. The cooperative education program called 12 for Life, supported by Southwire Company, has graduated 430 at-risk kids. Last year, Southwire also partnered with the Carrollton city schools for a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) project for 24 high school students.

Tanner Health System has created a program for high school interns called Tanner Connections, and the Tanner ReadER program, launching earlier this year, provides age-appropriate books to every child visiting one of its emergency departments.

The West Georgia Youth Entrepreneur Academy, a teenage spinoff of The Burson Center, the region’s renowned business incubator, will begin its inaugural 14-week program this summer.

“We have a lot of young people that are telling us here locally that if they knew how, they’d start a business,” says Donna Armstrong-Lackey, vice president of business development and community relations at Carroll Tomorrow and executive director of The Burson Center.

Since opening in July 2006, The Burson Center has had 53 graduates, equating to about 400 jobs and pumping approximately \$30 million in private investment back into the region.

“If you look at our history,” Armstrong-Lackey adds, “we’ve always been a very entrepreneurial community.”

She cites the example of Southwire, the largest cable and wire manufacturer in the United States. Greenway Medical Technologies, Systems and Methods, Inc. (SMI) and Gold Kist (acquired in 2006 by Pilgrim’s Pride) are other successful businesses that got off the ground in Carroll County.

Higher Education

Dr. Beheruz N. Sethna, president of the University of West Georgia (UWG), says the Harvard educators associated with the Pathways to Progress endeavor may be surprised to see the groundwork already laid in Carroll County.

“One does not generally associate this kind of activity with a small town,” Sethna says.

UWG’s academic debate team has already made an impression on Harvard, beating the Ivy League school twice, once in the 2011-12 season and once in 2012-13.

Sethna, who will step down as president on June 30, has transformed the campus in his 19 years. Once known as West Georgia College with fewer than 8,000 students, it adopted a new name more in keeping with its nearly 12,000 students and its expanded programs. Thanks to enhanced doctoral offerings, last fall UWG reached the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools’ highest level of accreditation, “quite a landmark in the history of West Georgia,” Sethna says.

A new nursing building, expected to be completed this fall, a new visual arts building, residence halls and a dining facility are the latest additions. Under Sethna’s tenure, the



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university more than doubled the square footage from its first 88 years, with a value of more than \$300 million.

“Our vision has been to create and to build a destination university,” says Sethna, who will be succeeded by Dr. Kyle Marrero. “That consists of four subparts: academics No. 1, student life/student activities No. 2, facilities to support both No. 1 and No. 2, and the fourth aspect is sharing our story with the world.”

Sethna says UWG is one of the leading schools in the country in undergraduate research, placing No. 1 at the national level eight times in the last 15 years. It is also a leader in online education, and its WebMBA program is ranked nationally.

The Southwire Sustainable Business Honors Program, funded by a \$1.1-million gift, will allow students to complete undergraduate business studies and earn MBA degrees in four years.

UWG’s early entrance program, the Advanced Academy of Georgia, attracts high school students from all over the world.

“We are an economic engine over here because of our growth in numbers and even really because of our growth in stature,” Sethna says. “It was always a nice place; it is now a great place.”

West Georgia Technical College, led by its president Dr. Skip Sullivan, also has a campus in Carroll County and brought its executive headquarters back to Carrollton in 2011, adding 22 jobs downtown.

The Southwire Center for Manufacturing Excellence on the Carroll Campus, funded by a \$1-million gift, opened in 2011.

On the Carroll Campus, the college’s hub for its School of Trade and Technology, a complete overhaul of the HVAC systems cost nearly \$2 million. New programs are being added – including a culinary program housed next door at the Carroll County School System’s College and Career Academy facility. New articulation agreements with UWG make it easier for students to transfer credit as they move toward a four-year degree, with 27 core classes that will directly transfer to the University System of Georgia.

Once students graduate, Carroll County can help them transition into the workforce. Kenny Edwards was hired as the chamber’s director of workforce development this year, furthering the mandate under Advantage Carroll, the five-year strategic plan – now in its second year – guiding Carroll Tomorrow.

Quality of Life

While Advantage Carroll’s three areas of focus are education and workforce development, economic development, and leadership and government relations, quality of life is no longer singled out in the master plan because it is so firmly in place.

The small-town atmosphere, combined with proximity to Atlanta and its international airport, has helped Loy Howard, president and CEO of Tanner Health System, attract employees. Howard, who is chairman of the Carroll Tomorrow Board of Directors, notes that Tanner, named one of the 15 top health systems in the nation in 2012 by Thomson Reuters, contributes to that prized quality of life.

When Tanner completed the \$61-million expansion and renovation of its emergency department and surgical service areas at its Carrollton medical center last August, it invited the public to tour the new facility. Two days before the event, a fire suppression line ruptured, flooding the place.

Employees showed up on their own time to push out the water. The fire department stuck around to help.

After extensive repairs, about 2,000 people came in January for the ribbon cutting and to see the new 1,100-gallon turtle habitat and aquarium.

“I think the adversity tested us, and it tested the community,” Howard says. “It just shows you what this community is made of. It was a very enriching experience for me to see the community’s response.”

To thank the fire department for staying beyond the call of duty, Tanner donated two Stryker evacuation chairs. These allow a single individual to safely move someone who is ill or disabled from a multi-story building.

Tanner has also expanded cardiac services into its Villa Rica hospital with the building and opening of a new endovascular lab.

The presence of Tanner and software developer Greenway Medical Technologies, which announced in late 2011 the addition of 400 jobs over three years and a \$12-million expansion, make the county more attractive to companies in medical fields.

Advantage Carroll cited a five-year goal of 2,000 jobs, including 500 in IT, and after two years already had attracted 2,700 jobs and 930 in IT.

Overall, Carroll County has made 32 announcements totaling \$373 million in new capital investment, exceeding its goal of \$175 million.

Room To Grow

There are prospects for the 116-acre Buffalo Creek Technology Park, which is a partnership between the county and city of Carrollton, as well as for Temple Industrial Park and other county properties.

“The strength of the community lies in our ability to deliver and to be honest with these prospects that we’re going to be able to deliver them a sustainable workforce – one that’s going to be with them long-term and not transient,” says Brian Dill, vice president of economic development and global commerce for Carroll Tomorrow and the chamber.

He says if deals come through on all fronts, “We’re going to have to take a very quick and serious look at new property identification.”

The challenge is that properties near the I-20 interchange are running out. “You have to get strategic,” Dill says. “How close can you get to one to two turns from an interchange?”

Carroll is positioned in the automotive corridor that runs from Chattanooga to LaGrange. In November, Decostar Industries, a supplier of auto parts, announced plans to add 120 jobs and invest \$26 million.

The county is also moving more into aerospace. Last October, International Component Repair (ICR) of Villa Rica, a commercial aerospace airframe and engine component repair facility, created a joint venture with IHI Corporation of Japan that brought 25 new jobs and \$10 million in economic impact in its first phases.

Dill also hinted at interest by a French company in the aerospace sector. Carroll Tomorrow is aggressively courting companies in other countries including Japan, Korea, Mexico, Canada and Germany. Food processing will also remain a staple in the county.

Gary Leftwich, manager of media and community relations for Southwire and chairman of the board of the chamber of commerce, is a Beatles fan who has made “Here Comes the Sun” the chamber’s theme for the year.

“We want to see our hometown grow, and we want to see the diversity in businesses,” Leftwich says, adding that diversification into new markets kept Southwire healthy during the economic downturn. The company is steadily hiring in Carrollton.

“During the construction boom, we relied heavily on residential construction,” Leftwich says. “Fortunately, the leadership saw that bust coming, and we started to diversify into things like mining cable and transit cable so we were able to weather that quite well, and now we’re growing into those markets.”

20 Added, 20 Saved

In Villa Rica, Printpack, Inc., a packaging conversion company, announced in February a \$66-million expansion and a 46,000-square-foot addition. There will be 20 new jobs, and 20 more will be retained.

Villa Rica Mayor J. Collins says industrial recyclers have also found a home in Villa Rica, where residential recycling is popular. “We had one of the first recycling programs, free of charge to our citizens,” he says.

The city, which nearly tripled in size in 10 years from 5,000 in 2000 to about 14,000 now, also invested about \$30 million in a state-of-the-art water reclamation facility. “It was not only because we needed the plant, but because we want to be a good steward of the environment as well,” Collins says.

Tourism is pure gold in the city with the rich name.

“We have a gold mine museum,” Collins says. “We have proven to the state and to the nation that our gold rush here in Georgia was the forgotten gold rush. It predated that of Dahlonega.”

The history of textiles, once the main industry in the region, unspools on five interpretative signs in Carrollton. They’re part of the West Georgia Textile Heritage trail, which is being developed between Columbus and Dalton. A West Georgia Music Trail is also in the works.

The heart of Carrollton has seen new features and improvements. The \$17-million, 127,000-square foot Judicial Center opened its doors in March 2012, keeping the wheels of justice turning downtown.

The AMP at Adamson Square is a \$1.1-million amphitheater that opened in May 2012 and hosts free concerts and movies. “We haven’t had anything yet that hasn’t been full,” says Phoebe Ericson, Carrollton Main Street director.

Nearby, the Southeastern Quilt & Textile Museum (see sidebar, page 74) launched in September, while the renovated train depot on Bradley Street reopened in January.

“That’s just a quantum leap for tourism attractions downtown,” says Jonathan Dorsey, executive director of the Carrollton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau.

It’s too soon to know how much they’ll add to the county coffers, but there should be an increase from the \$122 million in tourism expenditures in 2011. That same year, tourism supported 1,160 jobs throughout the county.

The Roop House, a historic house museum and event facility, and Udderly Cool Dairy bring tourists to Roopville. Historic Banning Mills near Whitesburg has a global clientele, thanks to offering the tallest freestanding climbing wall and longest and largest zip-line canopy tour in the world, according to Guinness World Records.

The county has been accumulating greenspace, such as the Little Tallapoosa Park that opened last year. It is also developing a park at Moore’s Bridge.

Meanwhile, Carrollton has its GreenBelt. The 16-mile circuit, which is actually concrete, is a bike, running and walking trail that will encircle Carrollton when it is completed.

Marty Smith, chair of the Carroll County Board of Commissioners, says that maintaining quality of life sometimes requires the seven individual municipalities to act as one community.

“I want to attempt to help preserve some of the things I thought Carroll County had, and that’s the dynamics of coming together,” Smith says. “How this community operates is if they believe in it, they’ll get on board.”

And nowhere is that more evident than in education.

“Quality of life,” the chamber’s Jackson says, “is just off the chart here.”

Community Snapshot

Local Leaders

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Population (2012)

County, 111,580 (2011)
 Carrollton (county seat), 24,512; Bowdon, 2,040; Mount Zion, 1,696; Roopville, 218; Temple, 4,228; Villa Rica, 14,047; Whitesburg, 588

Median Household Income (2011)

County, \$45,752
 Georgia, \$46,007

Unemployment (February 2013)

County, 10.6 percent
 Georgia, 8.6 percent

Top Industry Employers

Southwire, Pilgrim's Pride, Decostar Industries, Greenway Medical Technologies, Printpack, Inc.

Sources

Carroll County Chamber of Commerce, Georgia Department of Labor, U.S. Census Bureau

*This article appears in the **June 2013** issue of Georgia Trend*

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