

Cities, county join to attract jobs, improve quality of life for residents

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> MARTIN, Tenn. - A newly established board in Weakley County is getting aggressive about finding quality jobs for local residents.

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> Dresden, Gleason, Greenfield, Martin and Sharon and Weakley County governments created Weakley County Economic Development Board to pool assets and pursue commercial and industrial growth and expansion of existing firms.

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> "This effort can and will bring together Weakley Countians working toward a common goal," said Andy Page, board member.

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> Jimmy Westbrook, board chairman, agreed, "All cities and the county will benefit from new industries or businesses locating anywhere in the county."

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> Martin Mayor Randy Brundige, who also serves as a board member, added, "Another objective of the board is to secure regional partnerships in order to make our entire region attractive to prospective business and industry."

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> New board members representing the county and cities "have diverse skills, education and resources," said Dresden Mayor Danny Forrester. "We have a university chancellor, a chief executive officer of a multi-county bank, a manager of Northwest Tennessee Development District, a certified public accountant, a retired government financial manager and manufacturing managers," added Page. "The strength this board brings to the table is a vast amount of knowledge regarding jobs."

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> Currently, the board is drafting a budget with the governmental entities to contribute funding based on percentage of county population.

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> "If the governments fund their share to secure long-term stability, and we lead with the proper attitude, funding will be in place," said Forrester. He noted that in a rural county it makes good sense to combine financial and other assets to have a greater impact on economic development.

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> One of the first tasks facing the board in the next several months is to hire a professional recruiter with the skills to create a more aggressive economic development program. In turn, creating that program will key on finding the county's "niche" in industrial recruitment.

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> "Job recruitment is very competitive. We must find a niche and put  
> together a good marketing plan to promote our assets, starting with  
> our greatest asset - the University of Tennessee at Martin," said  
> Page.  
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> Westbrook agreed that defining the county's strengths and going after  
> industries that are a good fit, are crucial elements to the county's  
> future. "The shotgun approach, trying to be all things to all  
> industries, is probably not a good idea," he said.  
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> "The last major industry to locate in Weakley County was in 1995,"  
> said Page. "The population decreased an estimated 687, or 2 percent,  
> from 2000-2002, and we've lost more than 3,000 industrial jobs since  
> 1991." He added that school enrollment has been impacted, with the  
> county losing 158 students, or 3 percent, in the 1990s. "What we've  
> been doing isn't working. It's time to change our approach and start  
> working collectively as a county."  
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> John Bucy, board vice chairman, echoed that defining priorities will  
> be an early task. "Overall, attracting new investment will be an  
> important component . . . but such factors as graduation rates,  
> education and skill levels of the workforce, a competitive business  
> environment (including incentives) and availability of sites with  
> infrastructure . . . each play a key part, and, on any given day, may  
> be the highest priority (of a prospective industry)."  
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> As the board members define, prioritize and fund economic development  
> in the county, Westbrook is quick to point out there are no quick  
> fixes. "This is not something that will happen overnight."  
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> Page added, "Leaders throughout Weakley County are working hard to  
> pursue economic growth. Now, a vehicle is in place to market our  
> assets with a realistic, effective and centralized approach."  
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> Explaining the groundwork for the interlocal agreement, Brundige said,  
> "In early 2003, all the mayors began regular meetings to discuss  
> bringing each city and the county together in a unified effort.  
> Unifying our county was apparent if we were to move forward. The old  
> saying "us against them" must be a thing of the past. The new thought  
> that must be instilled is that we are in this together for our  
> future."  
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> The board's next meeting is May 31 at 7 a.m. at the Weakley County  
> Detention Center.  
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- > Sidebar to main release:
- > Business, industry, university leaders tapped for new countywide board.
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- > Weakley County Economic Development Board members recently selected
- > for varied terms of service include the following: Jim Westbrook,
- > chairman, Dresden; John Bucy, vice chairman, Martin; Hollie Holt,
- > secretary-treasurer, Martin; Larry Alexander, Martin; Wendell
- > Alexander, Dresden; Monte Bowers, Gleason; Jerry Brigance, Sharon;
- > Mayor Randy Brundige, Martin; John Clark, Sharon; Dr. Nick Dunagan,
- > Martin; Mayor Jack Dunning, Gleason; and Mike Forchione, Dresden.
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- > Others include: Mayor Danny Forrester, Dresden; Weakley County Mayor
- > Ron Gifford; Mayor Ed McKelvey, Greenfield; Junior Moore, Dresden;
- > Andy Page, Greenfield; Dr. Tom Payne, Martin; Mayor James Gary
- > Roberts, Sharon; and Greg Usery, Greenfield. Weakley County Chamber of
- > Commerce Executive Director Barbara Virgin is an exofficio member of
- > the board.