Dalton-Whitfield Archway Partnership: Laying the Foundation for Economic Development

As the Carpet Capital of the World, Dalton, Georgia has always been a leader in innovation and manufacturing. Not too many years ago, the carpet industry was booming as the housing market continued to grow. But when the economy took a nosedive in 2008, it hit the community hard—manufacturing companies started reducing production and shuttering plants that caused hundreds of employees to lose their jobs. The high unemployment rate took its toll on other local businesses in the area, and soon vacant storefronts and empty warehouses became commonplace.

When the Archway Executive Committee commissioned a community visioning process in 2010, issues around the state of the economy and its impact on local industry topped the chart as the greatest concern in the area. It was apparent that the major issues in Dalton included sustaining and supporting existing industry, diversifying the current economic base, and becoming a hub for knowledge-based innovation. To accomplish these goals, two Archway work groups were established in 2010-2011: the Successful, Sustainable Industries Issue Work Group and the Diverse, Forward-Thinking Economy Issue Work Group.

With the help of University System of Georgia resources and under the leadership of Dalton-Whitfield Joint Development Authority Director Elyse Cochran, Dalton Utilities CEO Don Cope, and Mohawk Engineer James Gordy, devoted community members have made the following accomplishments:

Rebranding the Floorcovering Industry

To support existing industry, UGA MBA student Charles Simpson teamed up with the Leadership Dalton Whitfield leadership program, community leaders, and existing industry representatives to develop a comprehensive rebranding campaign for the floorcovering industry. Charles’s task was to measure existing perceptions of the industry and develop a comprehensive plan for attacking misperceptions in the minds of tomorrow’s workforce. In December 2011, Charles presented his work to the community. Local leaders are currently working to implement his suggestions and tactics.
Enhancing the Carbondale Business Park Entrance

One of the community’s greatest assets from an economic development standpoint is the designation of 187 acres of land in south Whitfield County as the Carbondale Business Park. To ensure that the park is as inviting as possible to industrial prospects, the Archway Partnership sponsored two undergraduate students from UGA’s College of Environment and Design in 2010 to work with Whitfield County to develop a landscaping plan and new entrance for the Carbondale Business Park. The students presented plans to Whitfield County at the conclusion of their internship. Currently, the Dalton-Whitfield Joint Development Authority is implementing those plans.

Market Street Inspiration

To make Dalton’s “front door” more attractive to visitors, prospects, and residents, Archway commissioned a graduate UGA Environment and Design student to develop plans for a formerly thriving outlet mall near Dalton’s most popular interstate exit. Student Sam Keller, working under the direction of community leadership, developed a three phase concept for the area that enhances green space, provides housing options for students and the elderly, and capitalizes upon the area’s interstate access. The Joint Development Authority is currently sharing these plans with existing property owners and developers.

Creating a new Dalton-Whitfield Brand

UGA MBA student Charles Simpson spent 11 months working closely with the Dalton-Whitfield community to develop a rebranding campaign for the carpet industry. Following his work with the industry, the Dalton-Whitfield Joint Development Authority commissioned Charles to help it rejuvenate its economic development message. Using research gathered by the Archway Diverse, Forward-Thinking Economy Issue Work Group, Charles helped create the slogan “Dalton: Tomorrow’s Innovations. Daily,” to be featured on marketing and advertising materials to recruit businesses. Charles designed a Georgia Trend magazine advertisement highlighting the low cost of doing business, available infrastructure, and amenities in Dalton. Charles also created an ad that was featured in the Dalton Daily Citizen News 2012 Progress Edition.

Developing Innovative Messaging to Site Location Consultants
UGA MBA student Charles Simpson also developed a Valentine’s Day direct mail piece for consultants who handle site acquisitions for companies looking to relocate or expand. The piece featured a heart-shaped box that contained a sample of Godiva chocolates and “Valentines” that shared the benefits of locating a business in Dalton-Whitfield County. The Joint Development Authority reports they have already had inquiries from consultants as a result of the mailer.

**Developing a Small Business Network Website**

With the help of UGA Masters in Non-Profit Administration and Masters in Public Administration students, the Dalton-Whitfield Joint Development Authority was able to develop a framework for a website designed to provide information for small businesses and potential small businesses. The website provides simple, basic information for businesses starting up, relocating or expanding. Also available is a list of mentors in areas like banking or accounting who can provide support to new or expanding businesses.

**Georgia Tech Incubator Study**

The idea of developing a business incubator to help start-ups successfully get off the ground evolved from discussions in the Diverse Forward-Thinking Economy Issue Workgroup. After touring the business incubator in Chattanooga and entertaining guest speakers on the topic, the issue work group recommended to the Archway Executive Committee that it pursue a three-phase study by Georgia Tech to determine whether the community is ready for a business incubator. With funding provided by the Archway Partnership, the Joint Development Authority entered into a contract in April with Georgia Tech to collaborate on the initial stages of this study.

**Angel Investors**

Leaders in the Diverse, Forward-Thinking Economy Issue Work Group repeatedly heard that potential companies thinking of moving or expanding to Dalton-Whitfield County needed assistance with capital investment because of stringent banking regulations. As a result of these discussions, the concept for Angel Investors—local individuals who can provide investment capital to bring new businesses to the area—was developed and
potential candidates identified. The Joint Development Authority is currently working with these Angel Investors to prepare applicants.

Economic development is an arduous, competitive process that does not always show immediate results. Prior to 2008, Dalton-Whitfield County was not actively involved in recruiting businesses to the area. Today, thanks to the support of the Archway Partnership and its higher education resources, the Greater Dalton Chamber of Commerce, and local government and business entities, the Dalton-Whitfield Joint Development Authority is making progress on creating awareness and promoting the benefits of our local area. All of the effort is starting to pay off. The number of inquiries into available properties in Dalton and Whitfield County has significantly increased. It is only a matter of time until all the focus and dedication is rewarded with new developments and additional jobs.