



Job Growth: Ed Moon, West Point city manager, at the Hyundai TRANSYS powertrain facility

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Urban and Rural Gamechangers

BY TOM ODER

So many great things are happening in Columbus, the city is sharing them with the world. Uptown Columbus is partnering with 20 business leaders who are expressing their passion for Georgia's second-largest city on YouTube. Even before all videos were live, the audience exceeded the million-view goal. What people are seeing in a dozen-plus countries, including India, Brazil and Egypt, are flattering testimonials about a city on the move.

"We are coming off a massively consequential year, probably the most consequential year Uptown has seen, maybe ever," says Ed Wolverton, president and CEO of Uptown Columbus, which also manages the Columbus Business and Improvement District and Whitewater Management.

The economic epicenter is Riverfront Place, a 7.5-acre, \$260 million mixed-use development

by hometown cornerstone W.C. Bradley Real Estate. The project, being built in phases, features more than 1.6 million square feet of residential, office, retail, hotel and restaurant space. Apartments and a park opened in 2019, and Hotel Indigo opened in 2021. Construction on the final piece, the 230,000-square-foot Riverfront Place office building, started last year and is scheduled for completion in 2024. It will become the headquarters of anchor tenant Synovus Bank.

"I believe this is the largest single development ever in Columbus and defines what the new Columbus is about," says Wolverton.

"Columbus has seen considerable advancement during the last ten years," says Pace M. Halter, W.C. Bradley Real Estate president and COO. "We expect extraordinary development in 2023, 2024 and beyond for the Columbus region."

The pending move by Synovus, housed now in nine buildings, solves a major problem for the city. It clears the way to replace a city-county government center that houses court



REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

W.C. Bradley Real Estate has begun construction of the final piece of the \$260 million multiuse Riverfront Place development, a 230,000-square-foot office building in Uptown Columbus.

Georgia Ports Authority has purchased 211 acres in the Jim Hamilton section of LaGrange's Georgia International Business Park to build a West Georgia inland port.

Hyundai completed a \$240 million, 620,000-square-foot expansion of its Hyundai TRANSYS power-train plant at the Kia plant in West Point.

Hardee Fresh, a vertical-grow company based in Wauchula, Florida, broke ground on a new 338,000-square-foot facility on 73 acres in Americus.

and city hall operations with a \$200 million court-functions-only judicial center. The city bought the Synovus buildings and will move city workers into them when Synovus transfers employees to Riverfront Place. The judicial center is in preliminary stages, with completion expected in 2026.

In another major development, the Mercer University School of Medicine opened a new six-acre, 88,000-square-foot Columbus campus in Uptown in December. The medical school admits only in-state residents and will enroll 240 students by 2026. "This is an example of Mercer's mission to educate physicians to meet the primary care and healthcare needs of rural and medically underserved areas of Georgia," says Dr. Don Nakayama, senior associate dean of the Columbus campus. "Mercer's strategic focus is to have these students train and practice in Georgia."

As an encore to the 2022 International Canoe Federation (ICF) World Cup, Columbus will host the ICF freestyle World Championships in October. "We are expecting 300 athletes from 30 countries," says Wolverton, adding that "our Convention and Visitors Bureau estimates the events will have a \$9.2 million economic impact."

As part of the ongoing effort to build an almost-60-mile trail network, Uptown deeded land to extend one trail to the 20-mile River Walk. The popular promenade has a new seated concrete embankment featuring a wall proclaiming in eight-foot letters, COLUMBUS GEORGIA. Wolverton chuckles and says, "It can be seen across the river in Phenix City, Ala."

An Altered Landscape

Troup County is experiencing its own economic boom. In the last seven years there have been more than 30 projects valued at \$2 billion. The biggest one yet is waiting to rise from the ground. That's the \$40 million-plus inland port facility that the Georgia Ports Authority will build on 211 acres it purchased last year in LaGrange's Georgia International Business Park. "For the next 20 years, it's probably one of the biggest projects we'll look back on as changing the region's landscape," says Scott Malone,



Economic Boom: Pace Halter, W.C. Bradley Real Estate president and COO, left; Scott Malone, president of the Development Authority of LaGrange, above; and Ed Wolverton, president and CEO of Uptown Columbus, below





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Expansion Mode: Mercer University School of Medicine's new Uptown campus in Columbus, above, and Craig Greenhaw, chair of the Harris County Development Authority, right

president of the Development Authority of LaGrange. With completion anticipated in 36 to 48 months, it will help alleviate truck traffic across Georgia from ports in Savannah and Brunswick.

The inland port and Remington Firearms' \$100 million entry into the market have spurred a speculative commercial and residential building boom. "We have more than a million square feet of industrial buildings under construction, another 1.4 million square feet getting ready to start, and thousands of housing units being built," says Malone.

An expansion in West Point is helping to drive the building boom. "A \$240 million Hyundai TRANSYS power-train [plant] expansion is complete, and they are hiring to fill 678 new jobs," says Ed Moon, West Point city manager. The 620,000-square-foot facility will make transmissions. A second expansion by another Korean manufacturer has just been announced, adds Moon. "MOBIS, which makes and installs bumpers and other parts for Kia vehicles, is investing \$94 million in a 250,000-square-foot facility that will create 60 jobs."

West Point, which straddles the Troup and Harris county lines, works with Harris County to develop sites and provide services to existing industry in Northwest Harris County Business Park. "Harris County received a \$500,000 One Georgia Grant from the state last year and is using that as part of a larger funding plan to prepare a 35-acre tract

for occupancy in the park," says Craig Greenhaw, chair of the Harris County Development Authority. "It should be ready by spring or summer."

In neighboring Meriwether County, 2022 growth was so strong it caused unexpected headaches. "We sold 175 acres to several commercial businesses," says Jane Fryer, executive director of the Meriwether County Industrial Development Authority. "We are very proud of that. But our problem now is we don't have a lot of land left, just one good 50-acre site." Officials met earlier this year to begin addressing the issue.

This spring, KB AutoSys, a Korean brake pads and linings supplier, is planning to open a 100,000-square-foot operation in Meriwether Park, eventually hiring 100 employees. The company will supply brake pads for the park's largest occupant, Korea's Mando America Corporation. "Mando's Meriwether operations provide parts to GM, Chrysler, Honda, Tesla and other automotive companies" says Fryer.

Eight expansions drove development in Sumter County in 2022, with some company footprints almost doubling, says Rusty Warner, executive director



ROBIEGERSCH

Worldwide Fame: Columbus hosted the International Canoe Federation (ICF) World Cup in 2022 and will bring 300 athletes to the venue for the ICF freestyle World Championships in October.



LEE CATHEY / MULTI-IMAGE STUDIO INC.

Addressing Issues: Jane Fryer, executive director of the Meriwether County Industrial Development Authority

of the Sumter County Development Authority. “This is the second expansion in three years for Southern Wholesale Glass,” he says. Other companies with notable expansions included Tamarack Foods (frozen foods), Austin Urethane (polyurethane foam) and Golden Gourmet (meal solutions). Total expansions, valued at \$69 million, added 472 jobs, Warner says.

Earlier this year, Hardee Fresh, a vertical-grow company based in Wauchula, Florida, broke ground on a new 338,000-square-foot facility on 73 acres in Americus. “They are telling us this is going to be the largest vertical-grow company in the United States,” says Warner.

In Upson County, a new Workforce Development Task Force composed of secondary schools, Southern Crescent Technical College and business and elected officials is seeking to ensure a worker pipeline for existing and new industries. “We are working hard to change how students think of manufacturing,” says Kyle Fletcher, executive director of the Thomaston-Upson Industrial Development Authority. “With innovations in robotics and mechatronics, it’s not your grandparents’ manufacturing anymore.” Her goal is to attract sectors showing momentum, such as EV and the film in-

dustry, to the county’s GRAD-certified Central Georgia Business and Technology Park.

Broadband Arriving

The state has awarded grants to a combination of EMCs, telecommunications companies and county government-private provider partnerships that will bring access to faster and more reliable broadband to underserved or unserved rural areas in the region. These grants are through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Broadband Infrastructure Grant Program – \$373.5 million in awards and 48 grant awards to 66 counties in 2022 – and the Capital Projects Fund Grant Program – \$234 million in preliminary awards and 29 grant awards to 28 counties so far this year.

Among the EMCs, Flint Energies received a \$25 million grant for a project, of which a portion will be used to provide service to 7,600 customers in Marion, Muscogee, Talbot and Taylor counties in the West Central Georgia portion of its service area. Portions of Pike and Upson counties will benefit from a \$15.4 million grant to Southern Rivers Energy for a project, announced in February 2021, with a service area that also includes counties outside West Central Georgia. The projects are in partnership with Conexon Connect.

The Upson County Commission also received \$4.4 million in grants. In addition, Sumter EMC supported multiple grants in its service territory. One of those was a \$6.6 million grant awarded to the Stewart County Commission, in collaboration with Windstream Georgia Communication, with a \$13.7 million total investment impacting 2,729 unserved members.

Grants totaling \$16.4 million for

Windstream projects were directed to Schley County and Randolph County in the Southwest Region. The largest grant within Sumter EMC’s service area was an application by the One Sumter Economic Development Foundation for a \$25.3 million grant with a \$33 million total investment affecting 5,726 customers.

“These funds are truly game-changing,” says Alex Saratsiotis, chair of the One Sumter Economic Development Foundation, which received the region’s largest award. “This project will improve access and success among students enrolled in local educational institutions and expand distance-work opportunities for our local workforce.”

High-speed internet is coming to Meriwether County’s Roosevelt Memorial Airport outside Warm Springs. Broadband, which is being provided by Diverse Power, and airport improvements are expected later this year, says Phil Eberly, president of Woodstock-based Lead Edge Design Group, which is managing the upgrades. “Broadband will improve aviation operations and allow businesses to operate from the airport where they can be nimble and competitive,” says Eberly.

Two other counties are also benefitting from ARPA grants: Chattahoochee with \$248,000, and Harris County with \$25 million as part of a multicounty grant. Throughout the region, the grants are being enthusiastically welcomed. “The whole county will end up having broadband!” says Fletcher of the Thomaston-Upson Industrial Development Authority.

In Pike County, “We pleaded and begged for internet for years,” says county Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Meredith Maddox. Now that Southern Rivers Energy is rolling out broadband to its customers, her reaction to the good news no doubt sums up the feelings of many others in West Central Georgia. “I’ll shout it from the rooftops!”



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Workforce Needs: Kyle Fletcher, executive director of the Thomaston-Upson Industrial Development Authority



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Faster Connections: Alex Saratsiotis, chair of the One Sumter Economic Development Foundation