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BUSINESS

Maury County sees \$1.8 billion in new investment in 2020

Mike Christen The Daily Herald

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The Maury County Chamber and Economic Alliance lauded another year of substantial growth for southern Middle Tennessee, despite unexpected and unprecedented obstacles due to the pandemic.

Despite the COVID-19 virus, the chamber's economic development team remained active throughout 2020 and is now celebrating the start of a new year with the arrival of more than 780 new jobs.

The growth from both established and incoming operations in Maury County represents \$1.8 billion in capital investment and \$28 million in new annual payroll, the chamber announced in an overview published on Tuesday.

While providing assistance to local small businesses during the height of Tennessee's statewide lockdown last spring, the chamber announced four major developments and expansions to the region's economy last year.

The year's major developments came from car maker General Motors, in what was considered the state's single largest investment by a company in the state's history, the silicone accessories maker Groove Life, freight railcar repair service True Rail and teeth straightening products producer Smile Direct Club.

The start of a new decade followed a relatively quiet 2019 that came to an end with a \$65 million investment from Mersen, a French company, which announced it would begin producing graphite at the former Union Carbide complex that has stood vacant for many years.

"Given what we anticipated in March 2020 and what we faced, this has been a very successful year. It sets the pace for what is still to come," said Wil Evans, the chamber's

president.

He said the county's pipeline for potential new investment continues to remain strong in the new year with 16 projects currently being pursued with the potential for thousands of new jobs and \$2 billion in capital investment.

"To be coming off such a big year, with a new pipeline that is exactly as large, is a very exciting position to be in," Evans said.

"There is still a lot out there, and we are doing well in capturing what we can."

Alongside the major announcements in 2020, the local chamber's economic development team followed 110 new leads, answered 64 requests for information and hosted 31 site visits amid the pandemic.

Chamber leaders also took part in their first international recruitment trip with the Transatlantic Business & Investment Council. Local representatives introduced Maury County and its offerings to seven new potential partners and companies in Austria and Germany.

Workforce study to 'fill the gap'

At home, the chamber began its "ALIGN Maury" workforce development initiative in an effort to begin forming essential connections between the region's employers, potential employees and the region's schools, colleges and training programs.

The results of the project will be used to identify workforce skill gaps in the region and develop potential solutions.

Evans said the study is now completed, and the chamber will spend the first quarter of the new year addressing its findings.

The study was conducted in partnership with Boyette Strategic Advisors, an Arkansas-based consulting firm that offers services in economic impact evaluation, negotiation services and feasibility studies as well as workforce solutions.

The effort included a two-day community outreach initiative that included participation from local high school and college students, educators, local employers and residents with a series of surveys and meetings.

More than 1,000 took part in the effort.

The Tennessee College of Applied Technology, Columbia State Community College, Maury County Public Schools and the South Central Tennessee Workforce Alliance all participated, providing direct engagement. The South Central Tennessee Development District, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce also took part.

The initiative also included more than 10 meetings with local employers.

The study is the first step in the chamber's Advance Maury 2024 initiative, a five-year, \$5.9 million development plan, announced at the beginning of the year to focus on sustainable growth from within the community, while putting a major emphasis on increasing the quality of life standards for the region.

Local projects to attract additional investors

In the new year, Maury County will continue to work on attracting new investors for county-funded Cherry Glen Industrial Park.

The soon-to-be constructed building at the park sits on the outskirts of Mt. Pleasant, bordering Columbia along U.S. 43.

The new project will provide prospective industries an incentive to move to the region with a ready-built facility. It will be the second county-funded facility at the site in an effort to attract future investors.

In recent years, three new companies have brought their operations to the park: Smalticeram USA, The Doug Jeffords Company and Fuel Total Systems, a supplier to Toyota's manufacturing facility in Alabama.

In Spring Hill, Charles Hawkins Co. is developing the region's first privately-owned industrial spec building in many years.

The completed building will provide 178,000 square feet of workspace in the northern portion of Maury County at 3350 Cleburne Rd. in Spring Hill.

The site will sit directly next to General Motors' Spring Hill Manufacturing Facility.

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