The Way Back Up

Tennessee Economic Developer Capstone Project

Stacey Kidd
August 30, 2016
Tennessee has become a state to be envied in the realm of Economic Development being ranked #1 for foreign direct investment (FDI) job commitments in 2015 according to 2016 Global Location Trends report. Tennessee also found the ranking of #1 by the Brookings Institution among the U.S. States for advanced industry job growth. It is a state that displays much diversity in the terrain pertaining to Economic Development, from rural to metro, the hills of East Tennessee to flatter surface of the west. Tennessee is a right to work state and a retirement destination. This state also just gained the bragging rights of having an award winning team, the Department of Economic and Community Development, which helped obtain the statewide honor of being named two years in a roll as the “State of the Year” for economic development by Business Facilities. Tennessee, as it stands in 2016, is a favorable place to start and relocate your business/industry. That is the snapshot of Tennessee today, but in 2010, when the harsh halt from a crashing economy stalled a growing state-wide momentum, the state as a whole was able to sustain.

Regrouping quickly was not the case at the beginning of yet another deep dip for a small county in East Tennessee consisting of 536 square miles and 22,228 residents. On February 4, 2010, a rural eastern community, strategically sitting in the center of the Southeastern United States, received the devastating news that was an all too familiar backdrop of their Appalachian footprint. Scott County, one of Tennessee’s twenty-one distressed counties, already calloused by
the rise and falls of seasoned manufacturing and industries, is a community that thrived in the coal industry felt burdened as federal regulations increased in opposition to mining. It was then industries such as cut and sew that became the sustain industries and families began to learn a new trade. Just as the economy in Scott County adjusted to being an indoor industry- minded community, the county experienced the loss of our two biggest industries, employing about 1,000 citizens, moving to Mexico, and the community was once again forced into a new skill.

While many metro/urban areas were able to carry the load of a changing economic future, rural communities such as Scott County prepared for another hurdle. Although, being rural doesn’t always mean you are disadvantaged, especially in creating infrastructure. In many ways, although rural, Scott County seems advanced in some components. Scott County houses three city mayors, one county mayor, and three Industrial Development Boards. The Industrial Development Board of Scott County and the eight directors that echo the voice of guidance from a legal advisor is in fact very experienced on the detail and direction needed to make a community great. The Industrial Development Board of Scott County made up of a banker, an engineer, a workforce leader, small business leaders, and the watchful eye of the county mayor is responsible for all industry, business, and tourism. The Industrial Development Board works in close cooperation with the Scott County Chamber of Commerce, sharing the same Executive Director, but operating as two very independent entities. Through their partnership, the organizations can facilitate growth, education, and innovation for the whole of the county. Some of the responsibilities the organizations share are grant writing for the community, submitting the annual ThreeStar certification, and being the cohesive factor for industry and business to obtain incentives and funding to locate and grow in the community. Naturally, because of the services
these organizations provide to the county when February 4th ensued, it was to the Industrial Development Board of Scott County that the community turned.

What is it exactly that happened on February 4th in Scott County, TN? The economy had taken a horrible turn; families saw their homes foreclosed and companies were fleeing with negative bottom dollar lines. The rumors of an uncertain future were being felt throughout the country. As bad as it may have seemed in an urban setting, it seemed magnified in the center of one the most impoverished communities in the state. Scott County, on February 4th, lost 301 jobs, 260 of them being in the local flooring company that had once employed almost a thousand, and 41 being from the brutal caving of a government standing firmly against coal. That was the first blow in this sequence of events that crippled this beautiful place. Grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, they all lost their jobs. Whole families had become unemployed, and in the midst of what seemed a winter storm, the county appeared frozen in fear.

Scott County was no stranger to adversity; this is a community that qualifies for 100% free lunches in the county school system. Even though Scott County does know poverty intensely, it is a county that also knows prosperity. Being the place that a national leader called home, allowed us an advantage pertaining to positive growth. The leadership that called Scott County home worked mighty and hard to bring opportunity to rural Tennessee. Those leaders that worked united created an airport with a mile long runway that allows corporate jets to land, an airpark that planes can be taxi all the to the owner’s homes, and a $67 million broadband expansion offering fiber to every single home/business in the county. Scott County was able to
see the building of a community college and sustain two TCAT (Tennessee College of Applied Technology) locations, just to name a few key amenities. Scott County was no stranger to growth and prosperity but this time, the whole country was suffering; the state had hiccups, so who would be there to bring the guidance and help to this rural, Appalachian community?

One thing about a forecast, it can’t give you with all surety that the storm will end on a certain date, and for Scott County that was complete truth. It was only months later that the only hospital in a 30-mile radius closed, and hundreds more of Scott County citizens lost their jobs. At almost 24% unemployment, completely frustrated, Scott County had become the best at being the State of Tennessee’s worst. A community so full of life now stood completely frozen from a storm that seemed to have no ending. At that moment, community leaders got angry.

Anger, if used in the right format can be a prod to move danger from an unshielded community. The Industrial Development Board, with the approval of the four mayors and support of the Scott County Chamber of Commerce, made a call to Nashville; the call was to ask state leaders to rally the troops and help develop a strategic plan of action. The call worked in attracting economic development leaders. In a board room filled to maximum capacity, leaders from all across the state and different organizations listened to woes of Scott County. Many valuable suggestions were made to us, but what community leaders took from the table were the words, grow your own. In a country that was feeling the pressure of a shaky economy; how could those state leaders give a community something they were struggling to find a way to produce? It was after the room emptied a single individual stayed waiting to meet with us, a representative from the
Department of Economic Development for the State of Tennessee. Scott County leaders were not promised anything except the dedication of that individual, teaching us what it exactly meant to grow our own and where to find seeds to plant.

Every rural community if they are not bragging, appreciating, and loving on the existing businesses, organizations, or industries are performing a terrible injustice to the current and future of the county. It is from the companies who can operate in a down economy that the community leaders needed to be seeking advice. After all, they were here surviving when a whole country seemed to flail. With the aid of TVA and ECD, regular and routine visits were made to local companies. As a county, there was not much to offer them, state incentives and TVA funding opportunities are mainly geared for those growing, but as a team, with the backing and guidance from the local mayors, IDB and Chamber of Commerce, listening sessions were initiated. It was hard to hear the frustrations and the negativity that spewed from a hopeless community because Scott County had been better that what it had become. It was then ThreeStar came. State leaders may never fully understand what the now Assistant Commissioner of Rural Development for the State of Tennessee accomplished in the role as ThreeStar Coordinator, but to this community who was absolutely sick of being named the worst, that ThreeStar coordinator authorized a purchase that may have been the saving of the 74th county in the State of Tennessee.

Enter Tennessee ThreeStar, a ThreeStar program that was revamped from a very complicated past that was full of regulations and rules. The new improved ThreeStar began a new focus based
on strengthening the areas in; Jobs & Economic Development, Fiscal Strength & Efficient Government, Public Safety, Education & Workforce Development, and Health & Welfare.

Communities that participate in the program work on an annual evaluation of their community and submit an activity plan. The county and city mayors, along with a few key community leaders meet quarterly through the Joint Economic & Community Development group. It is in those meetings; they network and unite to better the infrastructure and growth of the county as a whole. Communities that work with the ThreeStar program are eligible for a discount on business development and community development ability to pay calculations each year that the county participating fulfills activities defined by the state. In return, in addition to having a stronger community that is more business friendly, the Tier 2 & 3 counties may receive a grant to plant seeds in a field to improve one of the pillars of defined sustainability determined by the State of Tennessee. In that newly revamped program, as Scott County leaders listened to guidelines and the rules to roll out to their communities and strategically, leaders formulated a plan.

There is no recorded date when the life-changing phone call to then ThreeStar Coordinator, happened, but it did happen. This community led again by business leaders and mayors, designated a spokesperson to find a way to spend the money from the seed grant, it was then the call was made to Nashville.

So what does hope buy? In Scott County, the leaders knew what was desperately needed because the teams had been listening. This community had heard local industries wanted to stay here and
grow, but the people had lost their desire to work. The Scott County School system reported that students in 2010 began wearing pajamas to school because unemployed parents were struggling with documented cases of depression and lack of hope about returning to work. Local lenders told the horror stories of foreclosing and repossessing possessions of a once dependable, financially-strong workforce. The community watched that graph of unemployment inch its way higher year after year. Leaders became skilled at finding a place to hide from the media as the unemployment numbers were announced monthly by the State, handing Scott County the Highest Unemployment County for Scott County. Community Leaders had been listening for almost three years, trying to be supportive and then the leadership realized; Scott County was her own worst enemy.

With just a small amount, $15,000.00 from the State of Tennessee, the IDB and Scott County Chamber of Commerce united with local utility boards and a talented editor of the local paper came up with a plan. Why could Scott County not tell their story? Not the story of failure, the metro areas were faithful to capture the negative, but the story of the county’s greatest assets, the people. The people of Scott County are unbelievable. They are resourceful and innovative; they had proven that through numerous winter storms, and it was high time that their leaders jumped started their generator of ingenuity. The mayors, the Industrial Development Board of Directors, the thirty-three (33) Directors of the Scott County Chamber of Commerce hired the local editor to write our story (See attachment). Each and every month, leaders took two full pages out in our local newspaper to tell the story of individuals like a local citizen, who was a Vietnam Veteran, and also a pilot. A citizen who one day just decided to quit flying and invented a mower attachment. That Scott County citizen with no help from anyone outside of the county, created
such a great product, that the company is now ranked 4th in the nation for mower attachments.

Scott County needed to hear the story of our local rubber manufacturing plant owners, who started their dream with two employees, themselves. In the beginning, the couple would schedule meetings with potential customers around the lunch hour, excusing the fact their team and receptionist were gone to lunch so the customers would never realize that the company they were entrusting to make their product was being solely run by two individuals. Today that company is dipped into five different arenas, at any given hiccup of the economy, no more than 1/5 of the 150+ employees would have to endure a layoff at once.

Community leaders stormed social media; all thirty-three Chamber of Commerce directors joined Facebook, and were challenged to respond with a positive post to every negative one that was seen. The leaders told the citizens every single day that baby steps were being made. As advised, the county was precisely doing what the experts, the leaders of this state and country had instructed them to do and that was to grow Scott County. The leaders stood tall and told residents they mattered using the local radio station. Citizens were challenged to become better and support the stores and business that supported the sports teams, educational grants, and donations to local organizations. Small businesses were highlighted monthly in one of the newspaper ads which told of how each and every program worked within our community. The ground was saturated, along with the air, the ears, and the heart of Scott County with positive news. It was in an email on the report of our first year of spending the grant dollars from ThreeStar that leaders realized the community was stirring; the economy was thawing, and now, what to do with a workforce that needed to be retrained to be ready for the next boom of economic growth. So, what is to be done? Scott County would educate their citizens. Scott
County, if not already mentioned is home to three postsecondary training centers in the State of Tennessee. Located inside the county boundaries are, TCAT (Tennessee College of Applied Technology), Roane State Community College, and housed inside of Roane State, Tennessee Tech University. Training dollars were needed to get the adults retrained that had been receiving unemployment for several years, and the Director of TCAT and Roane State started working. Letters and calls were made to the Senators and Congressman. The directors even reached out to the Governor, asking for money to be made available for retraining. The Scott County workforce had been from the coal mines to the flooring companies and with the approval of funding was now back in the classroom. This unemployed workforce was learning how to work on cars, care for patients, become certified in heating & air, or getting a teaching degree. Our workforce was now attending classes with their children.

Community excitement started building, the economy finally started steadying from a shaky environment, and Tennessee’s ECD team along with others went aggressively into the charge of recruitment. What seemed almost instantaneous once started, resulted in local companies growing. Scott County started seeing expansions, and team players along with the community were ready to welcome growth with incentives and a growing workforce ready for the challenge. Neighboring carried some of our workforce until Scott County was stable enough to employ the unemployed workforce. Hope was coming back.

What happened to next, after sixty months of finding a path in the unstable economic conditions was the end of the storm. As the team from Economic & Community Development made monthly visits to video the rise of a struggling community and talk with our industries, leaders
watched every month anticipating that the blue ribbon that was hated would be passed off to another community. March 26, 2015, the storm ended, and the long named, worst community had fallen to #2 in the rankings. It was finally over, five years later, Scott County had overcome, and the seed money from the ThreeStar grant had taken root! Scott County was harvesting the bounty. In June of 2016 what was once a county with an unemployment rate of almost 24% was leveling at a rate of about 6%.

Looking back, standing in a field of harvest, finds days where it still seems unbelievable that economic development planning could be so effective, but such is the story of this Appalachian Region. Recapping to leaders and news media what had been the strategic plan that brought a whole community from hardship, this was said… Scott County’s success was because a team of people worked together and because community leaders would not quit. It was a team of state and federal leaders, a coaching team from ECD, and a ThreeStar Coordinator that approved the original purchase of hope to a beautiful, rural Tennessee county. This community listened to the experts, and planted a garden in the midst of the darkest winter night. Baby steps were taken daily to take our community back and the Scott County people, found the way back up.
This chart is to show the stiff rise of a struggling economy from 2008 and the hard work and effort of a community working together with the strategic plan of positive words.

POSTED ON: TUESDAY - JUN 9, 2015
HTTP://WWW.TNECD.COM/BLOG/26/SCOTT-COUNTY-THE-WAY-BACK-UP/

Above is the video link that State Leaders worked on to encourage our efforts of positive reinforcement.
Profiles of a 3-Star Community

By Ben Garrett
Independent News Letter

Huntville — The Hunt Valley Technical Center is a further addition to the expanding educational opportunities available to students in the area. The center offers a variety of programs in technical fields, including welding, trades, and automotive repair. Students have the opportunity to learn in a hands-on environment, preparing them for careers in these fields. The center is located within the Montgomery County Public School system, providing a diverse range of educational options for residents. 

WINNING GOLD WITH STEEL

What started as an in-house competition among students at the Tennessee College of Applied Technology's Huntsville campus ended with a national championship for the school's welding program. The TCAT Huntsville campus was one of the first to participate in the annual Skills USA competition, which has since grown to include students from throughout the nation. TCAT Huntsville staff members voted for the winner.

The competition included a variety of events designed to test students' skills and abilities in welding. Participants were judged on their ability to complete projects within a set time frame, demonstrating their proficiency in techniques such as arc welding, gas welding, and brazing. The students were also evaluated on their ability to work efficiently and safely, as well as their attention to detail.

Winning gold with steel...

The school's cosmetology program, which has a strong reputation in the community, also had a notable presence at the competition. Students from TCAT Huntsville competed against students from other schools in the region, showcasing their skills in areas such as hair styling, skin care, and makeup application. The cosmetology program at TCAT Huntsville offers a variety of courses for students interested in pursuing careers in the beauty industry.

Overall, the day was a success, with TCAT Huntsville students demonstrating their skills and abilities in a variety of technical fields. The competition was a testament to the quality of education and training provided at the school, and served as a platform for students to showcase their talents and compete with others from across the state and nation. The event was a great opportunity for students to network and learn from one another, preparing them for future success in their chosen fields.

PHOTOGRAPHIC DETAILS

Casey Allen was a hard-hatted grader working on steel sculptures at a Nashville sculpture park. He was using a machine to weld metal beams together, creating a large, intricate structure. The sculpture was part of an art installation that was attracting visitors to the park.

The park itself was nestled in a wooded area, with trees and shrubs surrounding the sculptures. The day was sunny, with clear blue skies and a gentle breeze. The sound of birds singing and leaves rustling added to the tranquil atmosphere.

Casey Allen and his fellow welders were working diligently on the sculptures, using a variety of tools and techniques to create the final product. The sculptures would be displayed in public spaces, adding beauty and interest to the surrounding areas.

The event was a success, with TCAT Huntsville students demonstrating their skills and abilities in a variety of technical fields. The competition was a testament to the quality of education and training provided at the school, and served as a platform for students to showcase their talents and compete with others from across the state and nation. The event was a great opportunity for students to network and learn from one another, preparing them for future success in their chosen fields.
Continued from page 81

"now" he said. "We're no longer relying on their husbands to be the family's primary breadwinner."

In addition to the right areas of study currently offered by TCAT, Cherokee, these new programs are slated to be in place by February. Industrial Maintenance and Mechanic will build students on much of the same writing and math instruction. A new three-year Industrial Maintenance and Power Line Construction technology will train men for utility companies and contractors.

The new programs will further diversify the student body that TCAT's instructors are turning out.

"There's no reason why we can't have an educational work force that's skilled to meet the demands of new industry," Field said.

Seeking to place students

In order to keep programs open, TCAT must place 70 percent of the students who complete its programs. That isn't always easy, Field said, but instructors derive a lot of satisfaction from the results.

"We're in a really good spot with Rodney Stephens' Computer Information Technology program. There, students have the best of both worlds," Field said. "We have a very good entry-level program, and technical school that will allow them to be on the cutting edge of someone's high-tech, computerized systems.

Gold

Continued from page 81

time. Allen's sculpture was detailed right down to tiny whickers on the lion's face.

"The main thing I usually try to do in three hours, in the face of a lion, is it's not good enough, and it has to be done again," Chambers said.

"Most of the times so far that have been yes have done good." Allen's sculpture wasn't the only gold winner in Kansas City.

"We've sculpted in 70 hours, the process of applying for financial aid.

"Not every school has that," Field said. "And that's a big plus for our students."