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Expansions: The Harris County Chamber's Lynda Dawson at Johnson Controls

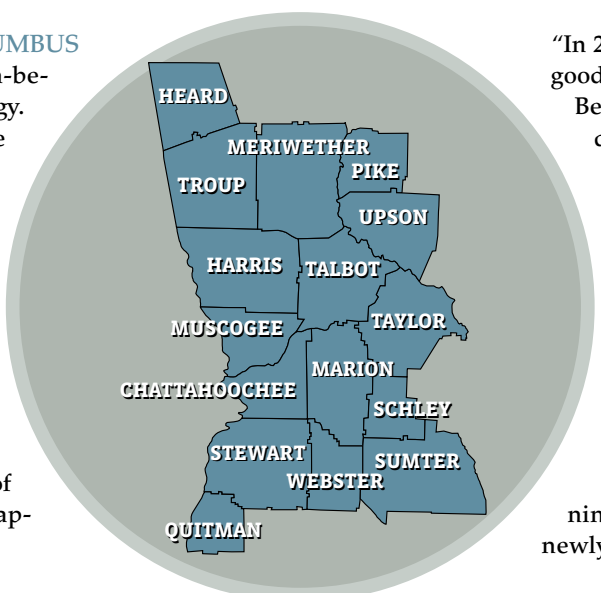
Promising Future

By Christy Simo

FROM LAGRANGE AND COLUMBUS to Americus and everywhere in-between, there's a subtle hum of energy. The area is gearing up for a massive influx of residents and new businesses as a long-awaited expansion of Fort Benning gets under way.

Additionally, the Kia plant continues to draw new suppliers and with them, new jobs and residents. It's a promising future in the making.

In 2010, the seven-county area around Columbus saw a total of 1,011 new jobs and $32 million in capital investment.



"In 2011, we're going to continue to see good things happen in our area," says Becca Hardin, executive vice president of economic development for the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce. "We really are in a position of growth, and we're definitely not taking that for granted."

According to UGA's Selig Center for Economic Growth, over the next three to five years, this part of Georgia will add roughly 33,000 new jobs.

The Armor School at Fort Benning opened in January as part of the newly created Maneuver Center of Ex-

cellence, relocating from Fort Knox, Ky. That translates into $3.5 billion in construction on the post and an expected overall economic impact jumping from $4.3 billion to $5.97 billion.

As many as 28,000 military personnel and their families are expected to start moving to the region this month, and local experts expect housing sales to shift into high gear in May.

Fort Benning is expanding physically, potentially adding 82,000 acres to the 180,000-acre base to provide a greater variety of terrain for training. Officials are looking primarily in Marion, Chattahoochee, Webster, Stewart, Russell, Harris and Talbot counties to work with landowners willing to sell property.

Marion County is hoping for some of the residential overflow. On Highway 26 East, a new 308-acre subdivision is about to break ground, with another 12 two-story homes under construction elsewhere in the county.

"There will be troops coming here, so I think these subdivisions will be right on time," says Thomas E. Keyt, Certified Building Official for Marion. A new middle/high school is under construction and will open in 2012.

Columbus has seen several companies open or expand. "A lot of our announcements this past year came from companies who are already here that took growth plans off the shelf and decided it was time to implement them," Hardin says. "That's a true sign of the economy turning around."

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Growth Plans: The Greater Columbus Chamber's Becca Hardin

Population

Counties	AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH (%) 1990-2000	POPULATION 2001 Number	POPULATION 2010* Number	State Rank	AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH (%) 2001-2010
Chattahoochee	-1.0	15,974	NA~	NA~	NA~
Harris	3.3	24,322	30,519	57	2.8
Heard	2.8	11,163	11,470	118	0.3
Marion	2.9	7,144	6,912	145	-0.4
Meriwether	0.0	22,589	22,508	81	0.0
Muscogee	0.4	186,609	188,663	11	0.1
Pike	3.4	14,036	17,976	93	3.1
Quitman	1.7	2,629	2,643	157	0.1
Schley	0.5	3,793	4,374	152	1.7
Stewart	-0.7	5,172	4,448	151	-1.6
Sumter	1.0	33,211	31,640	56	-0.5
Talbot	0.0	6,586	6,225	148	-0.6
Taylor	1.5	8,744	8,457	138	-0.4
Troup	0.6	59,617	64,505	36	0.9
Upson	0.5	27,711	27,243	67	-0.2
Webster	0.5	2,288	2,154	158	-0.6
Region Total	0.7	431,588	443,542	NA	0.3
State Total	2.6	8,419,594	9,908,357	NA	2.0
% of State	NA	5.1	4.5	NA	NA

NA Not applicable. ~ Data affected by military relocations. Reported 2009 population: 14,402.
* Extension of trends.
Source: Selig Center for Economic Growth, Terry College of Business, The University of Georgia, based on U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates.

Employment

Counties	AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH (%) 1990-2000	EMPLOYMENT 2001 Number	EMPLOYMENT 2010* Number	State Rank	AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH (%) 2001-2010
Chattahoochee	-7.9	1,412	2,203	122	6.2
Harris	4.8	4,920	3,508	101	-3.2
Heard	3.7	2,645	2,726	117	0.3
Marion	6.6	2,662	1,528	135	-4.7
Meriwether	0.4	5,750	4,481	92	-2.5
Muscogee	3.1	95,175	91,333	8	-0.4
Pike	5.5	1,878	2,084	123	1.2
Quitman	9.0	253	419	157	7.3
Schley	1.7	1,166	1,148	146	-0.2
Stewart	1.2	1,148	1,222	143	0.7
Sumter	2.3	13,879	10,233	52	-2.9
Talbot	0.0	794	812	152	0.3
Taylor	2.5	1,967	1,832	129	-0.8
Troup	2.1	34,985	30,285	24	-1.5
Upson	0.2	9,288	6,935	64	-2.8
Webster	2.3	428	460	156	0.8
Region Total	2.2	178,350	161,209	NA	-1.1
State Total~	3.3	3,879,979	3,720,333	NA	-0.5
% of State	NA	4.6	4.3	NA	NA

NA Not applicable. *Data are for March covered employment (subject to the unemployment insurance law of Georgia), and are not comparable to other nonagricultural employment statistics.
~ State totals include undistributed employment.
Source: Selig Center for Economic Growth, Terry College of Business, The University of Georgia, based on Bureau of Labor Statisitics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.

Kysor/Warren announced a new 140,000-square-foot distribution center and hired an additional 150 people.

Although Cessna announced in 2009 it was closing its Columbus facility, McCauley Propeller Systems, a division of Cessna Aircraft Co., decided to remain in Columbus and recently added a new composite manufacturing line, generating another nine jobs on top of the 65 already in place.

Sales of the 2011 Kia Sorento have been so successful that Kia Motors Manufacturing Georgia launched a second production shift at its West Point facility, hiring more than 600.

The plant also began producing the Hyundai Santa Fe in September 2010.

Per Capita Personal Income

Counties	AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH (%) 1990-2000	PER CAPITA PERSONAL INCOME 2001 ($)	2010* ($)	State Rank	AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH (%) 2001-2010
Chattahoochee	6.7	16,051	NA~	NA~	NA~
Harris	8.7	31,842	44,174	4	4.3
Heard	6.4	19,616	27,429	89	4.4
Marion	7.4	22,191	31,620	32	4.7
Meriwether	8.0	20,637	25,511	121	2.6
Muscogee	5.1	27,281	39,630	9	5.0
Pike	5.9	24,182	29,181	60	2.3
Quitman	5.8	20,254	24,687	133	2.4
Schley	5.2	20,183	24,542	135	2.4
Stewart	6.8	21,158	30,143	47	4.7
Sumter	5.3	21,924	28,635	69	3.4
Talbot	6.2	19,228	26,259	107	4.1
Taylor	4.5	20,280	25,485	122	2.9
Troup	5.5	25,459	30,486	42	2.2
Upson	5.5	20,621	26,133	109	3.0
Webster	6.4	23,653	32,007	30	3.9
Region Average	5.7	24,837	34,201	NA	4.2
State Average	5.9	29,201	34,674	NA	2.1
% of State	NA	85.1	98.6	NA	NA

NA Not applicable. *Extension of trends. ~Data affected by military relocations. Reported 2008 PCPI $26,979.
Source: Selig Center for Economic Growth, Terry College of Business, The University of Georgia, based on data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

"We've had great success with the Kia suppliers that have located in and around the Kia plant, specifically in the Harris County area," says Hardin, who is also executive director of The Valley Partnership.

In Harris County, Johnson Controls and Daehan Solution, which manufacture elements of the Sorento line, are adding 175 jobs each over the next year to keep up with demand. Johnson Controls' expansion represents a $12.2-million capital investment.

"Kia is expanding so quickly that these companies are having to expand to keep up," says Lynda Dawson, president of the Harris County Chamber of Commerce. "We're just real tickled."

"I think some of the existing industries are a little bit more optimistic, moreso than they have been for a couple of years," says Ray Coloumbe, economic development manager for the City of LaGrange. "I'm hearing from some of the plant managers that they might be hiring in 2011."

In Troup County, Hanil E-Hwa Co. opened in the summer of 2010, adding 173 jobs and representing an $8.45-million investment. Dae Ha America's facility is currently under construction, representing a $7.5-million investment. When it opens, it will employ 40.

The four-story, 76-bed Phoebe Sumter Medical Center is set to open at the end of 2011 and is aiming for a LEED Silver certification. The $125-million, 190,000-square-foot hospital re-places the former Sumter Regional Hospital, which was destroyed by a tornado in 2007.

"We have also seen a lot of activity in the downtown Americus area," says Angela Westra, president of the Americus-Sumter Chamber of Commerce. "Quite a few businesses have opened up in some of the vacant spaces downtown, which is exciting."

In December, Sumter County received a Work Ready designation, and its colleges have seen jumping enrollment.

"South Georgia Tech and Georgia Southwestern are both posting record enrollments," Westra says. "It's a huge economic driver for our community to have both [a] college and university here in the same county.

"Sometimes you get weighed down by what's not happening that you forget to look around and see all the great things that are," she adds. "There's a lot of development going on. I think we're about to explode."

In Troup County, the West Georgia Medical Center opened its South Tower. The $70-million project is the first phase of a 15- to 20-year plan to improve facilities and services at the hospital.

Pike County has seen several smaller retail businesses open, and other companies have reopened or ramped up production. Metal fabrication company Supreme Corp., which laid off almost half its 200-person workforce several years ago, is now back up to full capacity. Ranew's Truck & Equipment has added back 20 to 30 new jobs.

"They're the good pockets that we're seeing right now," says Karen Brown, Pike County chamber president and development authority executive director.

PIKE COUNTY CHAMBER

Infrastructure: Pike County's Karen Brown

The Certified Work Ready county will continue to strengthen its infrastructure in anticipation of new businesses moving in.

"Infrastructure is pretty important for us. We can't pick up the interstate and move it, so we have to create other opportunities that will attract business for us," Brown says. "With us not being right along the interstate, we're looking more at the small- to mid-sized industry, probably with 50 employees or less."

In Talbot County, a new 10-acre industrial park on the east side of Talbotton, the county seat, is being made site-ready for new industry. A road was just paved through the park, and water, sewage, fiber optics, gas and electricity are available.

In Ellaville and Schley County, three new businesses recently opened. A 127,000-square foot Cooper Lighting manufacturing facility closed in 2009, however, and Greenfield Metal Products closed last year.

"Greenfield had been here for years, so it was real upsetting when they left," says Ashley Lambert with the Ellaville-Schley County Chamber of Commerce. The upside is that the county now has two vacant buildings for prospective companies.

"We're so close to Fort Benning, and I just think it would be such an opportunity if anything that has to do with the military were to come here," Lambert says.

Taylor County welcomed Ansco Imaging Group, which added four jobs. "We're hoping more things will happen in 2011," says Patsy Brunson, Taylor County Development Authority executive director. "We continue to market ourselves to those who might be interested in Warner Robins and Fort Benning, because we're halfway between those two bases on a four-lane road."

In Upson County, Animal Health & Sciences brought 100 new jobs and $9.1 million in investment, and Diamond Alternative Energy opened a biorefinery demonstration plant, adding 25 to 30 jobs to the area.

J.R. Charles, executive director of the Upson County Industrial Development Authority, says he's seen an increase of prospect activity since June, and the county is working to strengthen infrastructure for new business.

"The city of Thomaston has won more than $1 million in grants to improve their water and sewer infrastructure," he says. "That will help us as far as water capacity to serve industry in the future."

Meriwether County recently announced German company Gustav Wiegard will be moving into the Meriwether Industrial Park, adding 50 jobs.

"We are also seeing a tremendous amount of activity with the Tier 2 and Tier 3 suppliers," says Clint J. Taylor, acting interim executive director for the Meriwether Development Authority, who notes he has several Korean companies considering a move to the county. "They are needing to relocate because of the success and expansion of the Kia facility."

He believes 2011 could be a transition year. "Companies are holding cash, but they're afraid to make a decision at this point until they have better clarification as far as what the future holds with rules and regulations," he says. "Once we get a better understanding, then we'll see the job markets slowly coming back, but also some capital investment in these existing companies, which is very important."

"Like everybody else, we're just trying to recover," adds Harris County's Dawson. "We're already seeing signs that we're about to move up. So we're really hopeful."

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