

LOCAL

Touting new jobs, Buncombe economic development leaders seek 'broad community prosperity'



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The Citizen-Times

Published 10:38 a.m. ET Aug. 22, 2019

ASHEVILLE - Buncombe County economic development officials expect to see continued growth and possibilities in the aerospace and medical device engineering industries while luring more corporate headquarters to plant their flags here in the coming years.

The county added 250 new jobs at average wages of nearly \$42,000 annually in the past year, generating an infusion of some \$33 million into the local tax base, said Clark Duncan, executive director of the Economic Development Coalition. That's buoyed in large part by a roughly \$20 million capital investment by Vancouver-based custom HVAC manufacturer Haakon Industries for a new facility at Enka Commerce Park.

It follows a trend of broad workforce development in the past decade built on the back of hundreds of millions of dollars in investments by companies such as GE Aviation, New Belgium Brewing, Ingles Markets and Linamar.

In an Aug. 20 presentation to county commissioners, Duncan said the EDC's guiding principle involves generating "broad community prosperity," often through better employment opportunities, which are linked to improved health and educational outcomes for residents.

"We need to think seriously about the capacity of our workforce and the capacity of our sites and buildings if we want to have meaningful and quality jobs and a diversified economy," he said.

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In the past four years, the EDC has facilitated announcements of \$196 million in new taxable investments in real and personal property, Duncan said. That includes the addition of more than 1,000 new direct jobs and new labor income totaling more than \$117 million that will result in an estimated \$9.5 million in local taxes.

He said part of the coalition's recent success has come from its "ground-up strategy for growing the next generation of headquartered businesses in Buncombe County" through programs like Venture Asheville, for example. Through Venture Asheville, he said 25 startups were launched in the past year representing \$14 million in new local revenue and creating 108 new jobs.

"Our investments in entrepreneurship pay off in big and meaningful ways," he said.

But the new jobs come at a price to county taxpayers. The county offers some performance-based incentives for economic development projects. Such incentives usually are contingent on new job additions, salary requirements and financial investment benchmarks.

In total, the county has seven active economic development agreements — two with GE Aviation as well as with Ingles, New Belgium, Linamar, Jacob Holm Industries and Avadim Technologies — for about \$25.8 million in incentives, said Tim Love, the county's economic development director.

Of the total, it has dispersed the most money thus far — some \$3 million, one-third of the total incentive — to Linamar, a vehicle component and system manufacturer, for its facility on Hendersonville Road in Arden. Only Jacob Holm is nearing completion of its agreement with more than 95 percent of its incentive already dispersed.

Love said a lot of economic development incentives have not yet been dispersed, based on timelines laid out in agreements or the companies still need time to see how they perform.

"Again, many of these companies are performing well but I wanted you to know that funding is being watched and has not been fully dispersed at this point," Love said.

Duncan said much of the thinking now is about what the next five years will hold. Through population growth and other national and local trends, he said growth should come in some "high-value targets" such as the manufacturing sector as well as in the attraction of corporate headquarters operations.

"There's sort of a broad understanding that we have a loud need for greater employment opportunities for that office, shared services, back office, technology office employer," he said. "We are aggressively creating opportunities to both grow those folks here and attract that kind of investment."

Additionally, the EDC hopes to partner with city and county leaders in the coming years for the development of future industrial sites and other corridors that could support new jobs, he said.