



OPPORTUNITY 2020 DAY 1

Sunday, February 23, 2020

The Decatur Daily

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

How the Mazda Toyota plant
will transform north Alabama

INSIDE: State's auto
connection began with
Mercedes-Benz

TUESDAY: Engines running
— Hiring, training programs
underway



Mazda Toyota story started 25 years ago with Mercedes



A museum and visitors center introduce car enthusiasts to the sprawling 3,800-employee, 1.2 million-square-foot Mercedes-Benz U.S. International plant in Tuscaloosa County. [ERIC FLEISCHAUER/DECATUR DAILY]

By Eric Fleischauer
Metro Editor

The story of Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA locating in Huntsville-annexed Limestone County begins not in 1988 when the announcement was made, but a quarter century before.

Bryan Chandler, then a board member of the Tuscaloosa County Industrial Development Authority, recalls the secretive 1993 meeting in downtown Tuscaloosa at which the board chairman revealed that efforts to recruit the Mercedes-Benz U.S. International assembly plant had paid off.

“I remember he said, ‘Go outside and look at this city, because it won’t ever look the same again.’ And he was right,” said Chandler, now the interim director of the authority.

The Mercedes plant provides a useful case study as north Alabama residents and leaders brace for the changes that will come when production begins next year at Mazda Toyota. Not only do most development officials view Mercedes, the state’s first auto assembly plant, as putting Alabama on global automakers’ maps and thus leading to the Mazda Toyota plant, but more than 20 years of Mercedes production provides insight into the transformation it has wrought in Tuscaloosa County.

Jim Page, chairman of the Tuscaloosa-based Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama and for nine years vice president of public policy and business development for the Decatur-Morgan County Chamber of Commerce, said Mercedes made a dramatic gamble when it came to Vance, Alabama.

“The unique thing



Chandler

about Mercedes is it put Alabama on the map for so much other foreign direct investment,” Page said. “You’ve got your ThyssenKrupp (steel processing plant), Airbus, Toyota (engine plant), Hyundai, Honda and of course Mazda Toyota.

“I think all of those developments can trace back to Mercedes making the decision to come to Alabama. That really opened the door for all those other OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) and their supplier bases too. We try not to ever lose focus that Mercedes really led the way with all that.”

Chandler views Mercedes as the starting point for Alabama’s increasingly robust automotive sector. Mercedes began production in 1997. Honda Manufacturing began production in Talladega County in 2001. Toyota Motor Manufacturing began production at its Huntsville plant in 2003. Hyundai began production in Montgomery in 2005, and Mazda Toyota announced its plans in January 2018.

Mercedes added credibility

“With Mercedes, we started out with some credibility that we didn’t have before. I know that was an important part of Honda and Hyundai, and those three probably translated to Mazda Toyota as well,” Chandler said. “Mercedes took a chance on Alabama. The OEMs that followed could point to that and say it worked. Not only were they able to get a workforce to produce a quality vehicle, state and local governments did what they committed to do, so you can come here with confidence that you will be successful too. It’s a lot easier to look at one that’s already working than to step out in faith.”

While the cumulative effect of successful assembly plants benefited north Alabama in recruiting Mazda Toyota, Steve Sewell, executive vice president of the Economic

Development Partnership of Alabama, pointed out that Huntsville had a unique sales point. Sewell started with EDPA in 1994, just after Mercedes made its announcement.

“Certainly Mercedes opened the door for us in automotive. It gave us the opportunity to go out in the 1990s, after their announcement, and position Alabama as an emerging automotive state,” Sewell said. “That certainly was instrumental to the growth we had in the ‘90s with Honda and in the early 2000s with Hyundai.

“I would be quick to say that in the case of Mazda Toyota, I really think that the success of the Toyota engine plant in Huntsville did more to influence the final Mazda Toyota decision. The success that they’ve had at the engine plant with multiple expansions and just a positive story all around gave them a high level of confidence that they could be successful with a project of this magnitude.”

Statewide, the impact of the burgeoning automotive sector has been dramatic.

In 2018, Alabama automakers combined to produce around 1 million cars and light trucks, putting it in the top five states nationally. Toyota, Honda and Hyundai also produced nearly 1.6 million engines in 2018, according to the state Department of Commerce.

More than 40,000 workers are employed in Alabama’s automotive manufacturing sector, including 27,000 working in the 150 supplier facilities that service the assembly plants.

Mazda Toyota will add significantly to those numbers. Construction on the \$1.6 billion plant began last year, and it is slated to employ up to 4,000 workers after production begins in 2021.



Sewell

It will have the capacity to produce 300,000 vehicles per year. Six Mazda Toyota suppliers have announced they will locate in north Alabama. Four are in Limestone County next to the assembly plant, one is in Athens and one is in Lawrence County. Combined, the suppliers plan to employ more than 1,700 workers.

Compared to Mazda Toyota, Mercedes had a relatively humble beginning.

“When Mercedes came in, it was a new project and a new vehicle. Those are big challenges. But they were starting with a pretty modest 65,000 units per year, because it was a new vehicle that they were introducing. That’s much smaller volume than you’re talking about with the Mazda Toyota project at 300,000 units. And the initial employment there was 1,500, as compared to Mazda Toyota at 4,000,” Sewell said.

Investment continues

A lesson from Mercedes and other Alabama plants, however, is that the initial capital investment is rarely the last.

In six separate expansion projects ranging from \$70 million to \$1.3 billion, the company increased that initial investment to more than \$6 billion. The original 1.2 million-square-foot facility has grown to more than 6 million square feet. Production has almost quintupled to 300,000 units per year, and employment has more than doubled to 3,800.

Mercedes is now in the midst of a \$1 billion expansion, expected to create another 600 jobs, focused on electric vehicles. A battery plant is being located 5 miles from the main plant, in Bibb County.

Mercedes exports more than \$1 billion of finished product each year to 135 countries.

“Mercedes had evolved and expanded since they got here, and they’re still doing it today,” said

Chandler. “We continue to talk to suppliers who, as Mercedes grows and expands and gets into different product lines, are either brand new in this area or are expanding their existing footprint. It’s been a continuous thing.”

Sewell said the extent of Mercedes’ gamble in coming to Alabama is hard to overstate.

“We had to overcome the perception that Alabama was more backward than some of the other states that were competing for the plant. That was a stereotype that the state had to overcome. We needed them to recognize that Alabama wasn’t maybe what they had heard or read about,” he said.

It wasn’t just that Mercedes was the first automaker to come to the state.

“It was the first time that Mercedes would build an assembly plant outside of Germany — not just in North America, but anywhere in the world outside of Germany. It was a historic project for Mercedes, and so the conventional wisdom back then was that they would go to a state that had experience in building automobiles,” Sewell said.

‘Whatever it takes’

Those tasked with recruiting Mercedes to Tuscaloosa County were cognizant that the odds were against them, but also knew the potential rewards were enormous.

“In the end, one of the things that Mercedes has always maintained was that Alabama’s statement that, ‘Your success will be our success,’ really helped to separate the state. What the leaders of Alabama meant by that was that this project would be so important to our state and to where we wanted to go in economic development that we would do whatever it takes to be successful,” Sewell said.

“In starting out with a greenfield project that was historic and new for the company, that gave

them a lot of confidence that the state at all levels was going to be there to provide support. In the end, it meant more to Alabama than to some of the other states that were competing.”

The gamble paid off for Mercedes. Did it pay off for Tuscaloosa?

Mercedes last prepared an economic impact statement in 2015. At that time — several expansions ago — it estimated that the plant was responsible for 24,500 direct and indirect jobs in the region with an annual economic impact of \$1.5 billion.

“In the last 25 years Mercedes, along with what’s happened at the University of Alabama, has transformed the Tuscaloosa-Northport area, and unincorporated parts of the county as well,” said Chandler. “The first thing I would say is Mercedes has provided steady jobs for the people of this area. I don’t know where we would be if we just relied on what got us to that point (before Mercedes came). Years ago the textile jobs and other jobs were being lost.

“I look out my office window now, and I’m seeing two brand new hotels being constructed in downtown Tuscaloosa. Certainly expansion at the University of Alabama is a big part of that, and it’s hard to know which caused which. One thing is certain, Mercedes being here did not hurt.”

While Huntsville will clearly experience an economic benefit from Mazda Toyota, Page is confident Decatur will, too.

“I think Decatur and Morgan County are very well positioned to see growth from Mazda Toyota, just because of geographical proximity,” said the former Decatur resident. “I’m biased because I spent so many great years in Decatur. I think it’s a great place to live, great neighborhoods, great schools and just a great quality of life.”



Page

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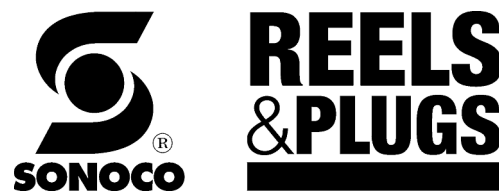
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The Decatur Daily

Housing construction booms to accommodate demand

By Michael Wetzel
Staff Writer

Morgan and Limestone county officials say they’re seeing a housing boom and are expecting more activity as the hiring of Mazda Toyota employees increases.

One local lawmaker and owner of a homebuilding company said the area will have difficulty keeping up with demand.

“We don’t have the inventory to fill the need,” said Rep. Scott Stadthagen, R-Hartselle, owner of Hagen Homes. “People looking to buy a home won’t have the pick of the litter. The inventory simply isn’t there.”



Stadthagen

He said potential homebuyers will be met with square-foot prices north of \$100. “We’re selling at \$110 right now,” Stadthagen said. “It’s supply and demand. Materials are going up. Labor is going up.”

Collin Daly, Limestone County Commission chairman, said the commission is approving plats and subdivisions at nearly every meeting.

“With the new lots that have been approved by the commission, the largest growth for new homes is expected to be in Districts 2 and 3 of our county,” Daly

said. District 2 encompasses East Limestone, while District 3 includes southeastern portions of the county.

The \$1.6 billion automotive megaplan is under construction in the Greenbrier area of Limestone County. Mazda Toyota announced plans to hire 4,000 workers by 2021 and several thousand more will find work with supplier companies to the site.

According to the Culverhouse College of Business real estate report released in late January, Athens’ residential sales for December tallied 175, up 22 units when compared to one year before when 156 existing single-family, condo and new construction homes were sold.

The report showed the average median price was \$236,500 in December with newly constructed units going for \$285,452 while existing homes went for \$197,450 on average.

Morgan County Commission Chairman Ray Long said the Priceville and Hartselle areas are busy with home construction activities, and he knows rural parts of the county will see activity, too.

“A few building sites in Decatur were announced a few months ago,” Long said. “We have seen building picking up around Trinity, also. In reality, the fastest growth will continue to be around



Jonathan Harbison works in a house being built at the Legacy Grove subdivision in Limestone County. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

Priceville.”

He said access to the interstate is key.

“The interstate highway is so convenient for workers to get to and from the Mazda Toyota site,” he said. “Along with the 4,000 jobs for Mazda Toyota, there will be a few thousand supplier jobs located in the area of the main plant. People look for convenience. Some of these workers may see this as an opportunity to move just a little farther out and buy several acres. They could have a few farm animals or even a small garden.”

Long said he expects luxury apartments to be popping up soon.

“A wild card in the housing market could be upscale apartments,” he said. “If a developer chose to build apartments in downtown

Decatur or even around the interstate anywhere, I think you would see them fill up quickly. With apartments, there is no yard work or upkeep. This would allow for more time for hobbies or relaxation.”

Wally Terry, director of development for Decatur, said most areas 30 minutes or so from the Mazda Toyota plant will see some sort of ongoing construction activity and, like Long, he said Decatur will benefit.

“We view our proximity to the growth internally and across the river including the automotive sector and the FBI sector, also known as Gate 9 at Redstone Arsenal, as being very promising for our community,” Terry said. “There are several subdivisions in various stages of discussion that we believe will

be very attractive at many different price points over the next several years.”

The FBI is planning a \$1 billion campus in Huntsville with 1,400 jobs coming sometime in 2021.

Terry said that two new subdivisions already approved in Southeast Decatur won’t be the only activity for the city.

“This does not preclude development that may occur downtown or around the new Austin High School (on Modaus Road) where individuals in a household may work in Decatur as well as Madison County/Limestone County,” he said. “In addition, there are many infill opportunities where a developer/builder could take advantage of existing infrastructure such as the Point Mallard area.

“Decatur with its many attractions such as the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, the Tennessee River and the many downtown activities and attractions that are not normally found in towns our size — like the Cook Museum and the Alabama Center of Art — put us on the map as a place to consider for quality of life.”

Morris Holdings is constructing 56 units along Old River Road with prices ranging from \$180,000 to \$250,000.

Greystone Properties and Land Services, led by Jeff Parker, plans

a 74-home development called Black Branch Point near Point Mallard. Phase 1 was approved with zoning for 32 estate homes along the river, off of Point Mallard Drive. Phase 2 of Black Branch will be 42 smaller homes.

Davidson Homes has plans to bring 135 homes near Garner Road in Hartselle with prices ranging from \$180,000 to \$200,000.

And, according to its website, Davidson’s Bakers Farm project near Priceville High School has 75 units starting at \$189,000



Bodley

already built or planned. Morgan County Engineer Greg Bodley said the county is seeing about a 10% uptick in subdivision approvals and expects that trend to grow.

“I anticipate a quite a few more subdivisions coming in,” Bodley said. “Decatur and Priceville have had good growth. In District 4 (which includes the Lacey’s Spring area), we expect at some point to gain some traction and start growing. We haven’t seen it yet; maybe we’ll see it by summer.”

— *mike.wetzel@decaturdaily.com* or 256-340-2442. Twitter @DD_Wetzel.

Mazda Toyota comes in midst of Athens-Limestone growth spurt

More than 1,100 residential lots approved since 2015 just in county

By Marian Accardi
Staff Writer

The construction of the Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA plant in the Greenbrier area comes at a time of residential and industrial growth in Athens and Limestone County.

The Mazda Toyota project — with an investment of \$1.6 billion and plans to hire 4,000 employees — is among at least 10 industrial developments announced in Athens and the county since 2015, according to Limestone County data.

Expansions at Carpenter Technology and HDT, new businesses locating in the area like Bocar, GE Aviation, Polaris Industries and Shape Corp. and Mazda Toyota suppliers Toyota Boshoku, YKTA and DNUS are bringing another \$1 billion in investment and 4,538 jobs.

In another announcement late last year, Indorama Ventures Sustainable Solutions LLC, formerly Custom Polymers, said it will add 100,000 square feet to its Athens facility and 60 employees, with a total capital investment of more than \$40.4 million.

“This is a growth area for jobs,” said Steve Turner, who represents eastern Limestone County’s District 2 on the Limestone County Commission.

That part of the county is where much of the Limestone’s residential market growth is hitting.

Since the Polaris announcement in Jan. 2015, the commission has approved 1,112 new residential lots just in Limestone County, not including the eight

“We’ve been growing (in population) by 20,000 every 10 years, and I think we’ll grow that much in five years. It’s a good thing we’re growing. If you’re not, you’re dead.”

— Collin Daly, chairman of Limestone County Commission

municipalities there, said Michelle Williamson, the county’s community relations coordinator. And an additional 65 residential lots have recently received preliminary approval from the commission, she said.

After the Polaris announcement, “that’s really when the momentum started, and it’s never stopped,” Williamson said.

The number of lots approved has grown steadily, from 86 in 2015 to 143 in 2016, 202 in 2017, 281 in 2018, 311 in 2019 and 89 so far this year, county figures show.



Daly

“astronomical.”

“We’ve been growing (in population) by 20,000 every 10 years, and I think we’ll grow that much in five years,” he said. “It’s a good thing we’re growing. If you’re not, you’re dead.”

Housing and business growth

Daly expects more retail development will follow the population growth.

“I believe Mooresville Road is going to be our next County Line Road,” with more retail and residential developments, especially when Interstate 565 is widened and resurfaced from Interstate 65 to County Line Road and the new interchange at Greenbrier Road and I-565 is finished, he said.

Development at one subdivision on Mooresville

Road, Legacy Grove, started in the mid-2000s and continues today.

The developer, Legacy Premier Homes Inc., has submitted plans to the Limestone County Commission to get initial approval for an 11th phase, which will have about 46 lots. The first nine phases have more than 300 homes, according to Gray Winn, the listing Realtor, and “we’re selling available lots in phase 10,” which has 69 lots.

“Legacy Premier Homes built more than 300 homes in The Arbors (an adjacent subdivision also off Mooresville Road), and that’s now sold out,” Winn said.

“I think what’s driving the residential market is jobs,” he said. With a central location, the subdivisions attract people who work at Redstone Arsenal and Polaris Industries and in Decatur.

“Two big waves” of job creations are resulting from the plans of the FBI and Mazda Toyota, Winn said. “That’s where a lot of the (homebuyers) are coming from. The impact (of Mazda Toyota) is beginning to hit.”

The FBI said in 2018 that it plans to transfer 1,350 jobs to Redstone Arsenal. The FBI has the Terrorist Explosive Devices Analytical Center and Hazardous Devices School in Huntsville.

Winn said the last time the housing market was this strong was in the 2005 to 2007 time frame.

Keith Griffin, the president of the Athens Limestone Home Builders



New home construction is a common sight in Limestone County. This home was under construction this month near Mooresville Road. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

Association, said the housing sector right now is “wide open,” with the demand for new housing coming from both newcomers to the area and current homeowners upgrading.

“Everybody feels better about the economy,” said Griffin, who builds custom homes in Athens and in Limestone and Lauderdale counties.

More Athens housing

Athens is experiencing its own growth spurt.

“The number of single-family lots and multi-family residential units in the pipeline that have received initial approvals from the city’s Planning Commission has reached 3,632,” said Athens City Engineer Michael Griffin. “Of that number, 914 have been approved to start development and 369 have received final approval, meaning the lots can be sold.”

Keith Griffin predicts growth ahead along U.S. 31 on the south side of Athens because of the sale of some large tracts of land in that area to the large national home builders.

“I would say that by the summer, you’ll see dirt moving” in that area, Keith Griffin said. “And we’re seeing some slight movement on the west side of Athens. That’s a positive.”

Marks said the growing population will drive more opportunities for retail.

The latest development: a Publix-anchored shopping center, to be named MidTown Centre,

is planned on U.S. 31. The demolition of the vacant Kmart building at the property and construction are expected to begin this summer and completion set for fall 2021. The project’s development partners are Jimmy Lewis, manager of Athens Associates LLP and owner of the property, and Bill Ming and William Ming of Ming Commercial Real Estate Group of Athens.

“We are very fortunate in this area,” Marks said. “It’s a great place to live, to worship, to work, to play. It’s a great community.”

“As I’ve said, our biggest success is our biggest challenge, and that’s growth,” he said.

Marks said one of the city’s challenges is retaining first responders and by the budget’s mid-year, he plans to present the city council with a public safety plan including salary schedules for its consideration.

“We recently lost two police officer to the state highway patrol, mainly because of salaries and we’ve got to do something about that,” Marks said last month. “A challenge for us and yet one of the highest priorities is to keep our city safe. So we’ve got challenges in front of us because of this growth.

“It’s happening so fast and it’s difficult to plan for,” he said.

The city is applying for a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice’s 2020 COPS Hiring Program, which provides funding to hire and rehire entry-level career law

enforcement officers, for seven new police officers.

Infrastructure and roads

To address another issue evolving from growth, the city has hired Krebbs Engineering to develop a master plan for infrastructure development and determine the city’s sewer needs.

Limestone County also has its share of growing pains, namely keeping up with road and infrastructure needs.

“As much as we’d like to be proactive, we’re having to be reactive,” Turner said. “We just don’t have the budget to create roadways to move traffic. As we can, we’ll add turn lanes and traffic signals to make traffic flow as efficient as we can.”

Daly said that plans are to resurface about 17 miles of roadway this summer, using money from the Alabama Transportation Rehabilitation and Improvement Program-II, a new program created under the Rebuild Alabama Act.

The act requires that at least \$30 million be set aside off the top of the Alabama Department of Transportation’s share of new gas tax revenue for local road and bridge projects on the state highway system.

“Without this money, we couldn’t have touched those roads,” Daly said.

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OPPORTUNITY 2020

Chamber using videos to help recruit families

By Deangelo McDaniel
Staff Writer

The Decatur-Morgan County Chamber of Commerce is using a series of short videos to promote Morgan County and lure families seeking jobs at the Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA plant under construction in Huntsville-annexed Limestone County.

The videos — which focus on education, parks and recreation, tourism, workforce opportunities and jobs, health care and community organization — are also targeting applicants who may be seeking jobs at the FBI's new Redstone Arsenal headquarters that's under construction, chamber President John Seymour said.

Both facilities are slated to open in 2021. Mazda Toyota will eventually have close to 4,000 workers, and the FBI is relocating about 1,400 jobs.

"Residential growth is part of our five-year plan, but one of the problems Realtors said they are having is available housing," Seymour said.

The jobs at Mazda Toyota are new, but about 1,400 of the jobs at the FBI facilities are transferring from the Washington D.C. area.

Decatur has experience recruiting residents moving to the Tennessee Valley from other parts of the country.

In November 2005, President George Bush signed Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) panel



Decatur leaders are ready to welcome new auto industry workers as well as FBI employees filling the 1,400 jobs the agency is moving to Redstone Arsenal. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

recommendations to relocate the headquarters of the Army Materiel Command, Army Space and Missile Defense Command and most of the Missile Defense Agency work from the Washington, D.C., area to Huntsville.

Under BRAC, the Pentagon relocated 5,000 military-related jobs and the Tennessee Valley population was estimated to increase between 15,000 and 20,000. A little more than 50% of the jobs that came to Redstone Arsenal were defense contractors and another 38% were Department of Defense civilian jobs.

Decatur leaders tried to recruit families and made significant changes in the educational system, such as providing bus services because this was available to most families coming to the area from Northern Virginia.

The district also spent more than \$2 million on training to add an International Baccalaureate

diploma program. Decatur dropped the IB program in 2017 because of lack of interest, but kept its busing program.

Very few BRAC families moved to Decatur, and Seymour said the most significant reason was the housing market crashed. He said Decatur was counting on families in Northern Virginia to sell their expensive homes in exchange for cheaper housing in Morgan County.

"We were counting on them to put their money in Decatur area banks and build lives here, but a lot of families couldn't sell their homes in Virginia," Seymour said. "The entire Tennessee Valley suffered because of the housing crash."

Chamber communications director Grant Thompson said the videos are a different approach than what happened with BRAC.

"We're in a unique position to highlight everything good about Decatur, and



Decatur officials plan to promote the city's strengths to potential newcomers, including two high schools that opened in 2018. The 231,000-square-foot Austin High School was built on a new campus near Modaus Road Southwest and Shady Grove Lane.

these short videos allow us to do so," he said, adding that anyone promoting Decatur can share them. "Every community has a story to tell and we're telling the story of Decatur."

Decatur Mayor Tab Bowling is the speaker in a welcome video that promotes Decatur and all of Morgan County.

He said chamber officials in Morgan, Limestone and Madison counties as well as the Morgan County Economic Development Association hired a firm to talk with companies in the area about what they needed and future jobs.

Bowling said the area will need about 50,000 people for the estimated 25,000 jobs that are coming by 2023. He said the unemployment rate in the area is about 2.6%, which is an indication that "everyone who wants a job in the area already has one."

Bowling said that this means Decatur needs to



One of Decatur's selling points will be its historic charm. In addition to two historic neighborhoods, the city has historic homes such as the Dancy-Polk House, at 901 Railroad St. N.W. Built in 1829 by Colonel Frances Dancy, the Palladian style home is on the national and state historic registers.

share the message internally as well as recruit people to move to the city for new jobs coming.

"We have to work on communicating Decatur's message, and this is where the videos will help," he said. "Decatur is well-positioned for growth, but it's going to take a team effort."

The mayor also said the marketing and public relations position the city created in November will help share the city's message and what Decatur has to offer.

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Explosive growth not a given for towns near automakers

By Eric Fleischauer
Metro Editor

The mayors of Vance in Tuscaloosa County and Lincoln in Talladega County are thankful that automakers chose to locate just outside their town limits, but neither saw the explosive growth in revenue or population that once seemed inevitable. Their experiences may be a cautionary tale for the smaller communities around the \$1.6 billion Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA plant being built in the Greenbrier area of Huntsville-annexed Limestone County, a facility slated to hire 4,000 after it begins production next year.

The town of Vance surrounds Mercedes-Benz U.S. International, which in 1993 became the first automaker to announce plans to locate in Alabama. It began production in 1997. Four years later, in 2001, Honda Manufacturing of Alabama opened its factory in an unincorporated area surrounded by Lincoln.

“We have been disappointed that we have not gotten the commercial growth that we wanted,” said Brenda Morrison, mayor of Vance. She’s a lifetime resident of the Vance area and joined the Town Council in 1996, after an aggressive Mercedes-related annexation effort expanded the town limits to include her home.

“So I’ve been dealing with the Mercedes situation for a long time, and that’s why I ran for office. I knew there was going to be growth, and we wanted to make sure it was positive growth. We also wanted to work with Mercedes,” Morrison said. “They have been a good neighbor. They have helped us when they could.”



Mayor Carroll “Lew” Watson of Lincoln was also mayor when Honda

in 1999 advised state officials that it planned to locate a plant there.

“I’m the one that got out and met with the landowners and got the options up,” Watson recalls. “Economic Development called me on a Friday afternoon and said, ‘Can you find 1,500 acres?’ and by Wednesday we had 1,700 acres under option.”

But like Morrison, he’s been disappointed with commercial and population growth.

“We did not see a large increase in the commercial side. We had hoped to see that, but the restaurants and this sort of thing didn’t come,” Watson said.

Because both Lincoln and Vance are hungry for sales-tax revenue, the lack of commercial growth has been a blow. Neither municipality collects property or income taxes, although Vance recently voted to implement a small property tax beginning in October 2021. Both towns benefit from property taxes that have helped their county school systems.

“One of the things it did for Talladega County is the taxes they paid for schools. They don’t publish these numbers anymore, but at one time the plant provided \$4 million a year in school



Officials in Vance have been disappointed by the lack of new retail since a Mercedes-Benz plant began production in 1997, but taxes on the purchase of power by Mercedes suppliers helped it build this town hall seven years ago. [PHOTOS BY ERIC FLEISCHAUER/DECATUR DAILY]

taxes,” said Calvin Miller, executive director of the Talladega County Economic Development Authority. He lists three new schools built in and near Lincoln, and notes that other schools have been improved.

Land prices

Both mayors attribute the lack of commercial growth in part to landowners with unreasonable expectations.

Watson, who is a certified real estate appraiser, said speculators pushed up land and building prices after the Honda announcement.

“The commercial value prior to the Honda announcement, on good commercial property, was about 80 cents a square foot. Following the Honda announcement, it jumped to \$2.50 to \$3 per square foot. It was immediate. Land values went from about \$1,000 to \$1,200 per acre to as much as \$5,000 per acre,” he said.

Much of the land was bought by developers, with grand plans of providing homes to the thousands of Honda workers expected to locate in Lincoln.

“There will be speculators who are going to buy land in anticipation of getting a big benefit. Don’t necessarily depend on that. Don’t depend on being able to buy that 500 acres and doubling your money in a few years. It just doesn’t work that way. If you’re expecting big returns through land speculation, you might be better leaving your money in a CD,” he said.

And indeed, the presence of developers with land did not immediately translate to new homes.

“The immediate reaction in the community as far as our homebuilding was, surprisingly, a decline initially. It took us awhile to figure it out, but what was transpiring was that the developers and builders were taken aback. They wanted time to adjust to the new environment. They wanted to know what was going to happen. This was the immediate reaction, a drop. Then interest picked up and we had new subdivisions begin to take place,” Watson said.

Morrison also attributes the lack of commercial development in Vance to recalcitrant landowners.

“To be quite honest, what we’re dealing with is people still think their land is worth more than it actually is. We’ve had family members that have died and then their children took over, and they’re still holding onto the property,” she said. “But some have realized you’re basically going to get fair market value, and if you’re not going to live on it, it’s best to try to do something with it. There



Despite the presence of the 3,800-employee Mercedes-Benz plant, Vance has enjoyed little retail growth. One of the few bright spots is this Dollar General, which has provided the town with important sales-tax dollars.

is still a lot of vacant property. That’s been some of the problem, but things are beginning to open up.”

Lincoln’s population, about 3,900 in 1999, had climbed to 6,704 by 2018, according to a U.S. Census estimate. Talladega County’s population has remained flat, at about 80,000, since before Honda opened.

Despite the slow start, Watson said, homebuilding picked up.

“We had 22 new subdivisions that hit the ground within the first four or five years, after the grand opening of the plant. It really picked up after things got started there,” he said.

Vance’s population, about 250 in 1999, is now about 1,600.

“There’s a ton of industry because of the Mercedes plant, and it has brought jobs galore. We have four subdivisions now, whereas we didn’t basically have any until Mercedes came along. They brought people in from all over the world that wanted to be closer. So we have four major subdivisions right in the town of Vance,” Morrison said.

On a percentage basis, if not in actual numbers, both towns experienced significant population growth. Yet many years after the plants began production, they have still struggled to capture growth in their retail sector.

And it wasn’t for lack of effort. Both towns revised their zoning codes. Watson supervised the construction of a new wastewater treatment plant while the Honda plant was under construction, and Vance installed a sewer system.

“Sewer is gold. That may sound kind of ironic, but if you have sewer you have some bargaining power,” Morrison said.

Tensions

Tiny Vance dramatically increased its footprint through annexation, one of several efforts that put it at loggerheads with the city of Tuscaloosa. The larger city annexed a narrow strip of land along Interstate 20, with its new city limits snaking to a point just outside the Mercedes

property.

“Tuscaloosa annexed 16 miles out on the interstate. They brought sewer out here. They service sewer to the Mercedes plant, but we service all around them because we have it annexed in. It was ugly. The first four years we were in office, I can’t tell you how many times we got sued,” she said. “It was bad. It was a David and Goliath situation, and we were definitely David.”

Those tensions, she said, have passed.

“That administration has moved on, and we have a great relationship with (Tuscaloosa Mayor) Walt Maddox,” Morrison said. “He wants to take care of his city and we want to take care of our town.”

Suppliers

Lincoln not only missed out on significant retail growth — although Watson said there have been recent prospects — but also on suppliers.

“We did not see a lot of new industry popping up right in the city. We were hoping Honda would generate a lot of suppliers, but that didn’t occur. But it occurred around us,” Watson said.

While he wishes his town could have snagged suppliers, their proximity still benefits residents.

“We have folks living here who got jobs in those plants. It wasn’t all that bad. We did get a benefit. And there were local companies that got work out of Honda — a lot of contract work, a lot of engineering companies, food service, almost across the board. That’s what happened here,” he said.

Miller said it was not happenstance that kept suppliers from locating in Lincoln.

“When Honda first located here, the suppliers didn’t locate really close to the plant because Honda had plans to expand. They didn’t want to compete with their suppliers for labor. So most of their suppliers located away from the plant in surrounding counties to start with,” he said.

The jobs provided by Honda and its suppliers were fortuitous, Miller said. Before Honda



A 2018 C-Class sedan nears the end of the assembly line inside the Mercedes-Benz U.S. International plant in Vance on Sept. 12, 2017. Mercedes marked 20 years of production in Alabama in 2017. [GARY COSBY JR./TUSCALOOSA NEWS]



Mercedes-Benz U.S. International has a big presence in Vance, including a museum in the visitors center at the automotive plant. Vance hasn’t experienced the retail growth it anticipated after Mercedes moved in, but it still enjoys significant benefits from the plant. Mayor Brenda Morrison figures more than half of the current residents work at Mercedes or one of its suppliers. [ERIC FLEISCHAUER/DECATUR DAILY]

arrived, Avondale Mills was one of the county’s largest employers. It closed in 2006.

“Our unemployment rate didn’t go up tremendously. They had over 1,000 people, but the unemployment rate didn’t go up tremendously because of the automotive industry,” Miller said.

Vance has been quite successful attracting suppliers, which has benefited it financially. Legacy Industrial Park, next to Mercedes but inside Vance town limits, is home to Averitt Express, Brose, and several other large Mercedes suppliers. They purchase electricity from Alabama Power, and Vance benefits from taxes on the purchase.

“That helps us tremendously. We’ve gone from no budget, basically couldn’t hardly pay our employees, to a \$1.9 million budget, as small as we are,” Morrison said. “That’s significant, but it’s from 1997 to now, more than 20 years.”

The thousands of employees at Mercedes and its suppliers, however, have not attracted retail, and thus have not generated sales taxes. Morrison’s excitement over a Dollar General store in Vance is a reminder of the retail drought in the town. Indeed, driving through Vance, it’s almost the only retail store present.

“We had told the Dollar General representative, ‘If you come it will blow your mind.’ And they came, and it did blow their mind. This Dollar General is the best one in the district. It is covered up,” she said.

In Lincoln, Watson expresses similar enthusiasm over a KFC and a travel center, both of which provide needed revenue, but not much of it.

Both mayors see plainly the cycle they are in.

They need more rooftops to attract retail, and more retail to attract new residents. One obstacle to attracting new residents, ironically, is the same transportation infrastructure that appealed to the automakers.

“The larger cities have existing infrastructure and housing markets, and an interstate highway that goes from Birmingham to Tuscaloosa,” said Brian Chandler, interim

director of Tuscaloosa County Industrial Development Authority. “So people in this area are not as reluctant to get in their car and drive to work. Mercedes and the supplier footprint draw employees from all over.”

Both mayors are optimistic, talking enthusiastically about commercial developments they believe are imminent. But they’ve held those expectations since the 1990s.

The delay in commercial growth is particularly disconcerting to Morrison, who watched the frustration of rural residents forced to sell land to make way for the sprawling plant.

“There was a lot of resistance to this. We had people that had lived in the country all their lives. I saw grown men stand up and cry that I knew personally. It was heartbreaking for them to lose their homes,” she said. “The county had the right to condemn their property if need be, but they did work with them. We still have people that are very bitter about it. It’s caused a lot of hard feelings.”

Despite that painful start, the townspeople have enjoyed significant benefits from the plant. She figures more than half of the current residents work at Mercedes or one of its suppliers. And one day, she hopes, the slowly expanding number of rooftops will result in retail growth.

“We’re still hoping that the commercial will come,” said Morrison. “If we can get it, there’s so much we can do for this town. We’ve done a lot. I don’t want to brag, but we’re sitting right now in a brand new town hall that’s less than seven years old. ... But my point is God has blessed us, because we have worked with the industries. We have brought in positive growth.”

“Not to say we haven’t hit some bumps along the way, because we have hit plenty. But we have prevailed. Hopefully we will continue to do so.”

Her advice to communities expecting to benefit from Mazda Toyota: “Just hang in there, be patient, trust in the good Lord, and go forward.”

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FOCUS ON WOMEN

Take a cue from successful women

Although women make up 45 percent of the labor force and only 5 percent head Fortune 500 companies, women are making greater strides than ever before. For example, in 1998, just one woman led a Fortune 500 company, according to Pew Research Center.

Certain traits could help propel successful women to the top. Here's a look at some of the ways female professionals can overcome professional hurdles and make their mark.

- **Be passionate about what you do.** Women who maintain passion about their careers are more likely to overcome any challenges and stand out in the workplace. If your profession is not stoking any passion, explore alternate career opportunities.

- **Recognize your strengths.** Today's professionals are less likely than their predecessors to stick with one company or line of work for their entire working lives. But just because you change jobs or career paths does not mean your past experience is useless. Successful women know what they do best, whether it's public speaking, writing or making sales pitches. Apply those strengths when looking for a new job or career.
- **Know when to ask for help.** Even the most accomplished women have limitations. Asking for help when you need it can help you overcome those limitations. To be good at what you do, you first have to learn from others. Sometimes the smartest way to overcome an obstacle is having several hands on deck to provide a boost. Thinking that the work is better left to you alone could be a mistake.

Enlist help when you need it and never hesitate to ask for another perspective.

- **Make time for exercise.** A sluggish body can make for a sluggish mind. Successful people need to be sharp, and exercise can help them maintain their mental focus. According to John J. Ratey, Ph.D., a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, muscles send hormones rushing to the brain where they mix with a substance called brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF. BDNF plays a role in brain cell growth and learning. Without it, brains can't absorb new information or grow and learn. Exercise also helps relieve stress, which can make resolutions easier to see and make tasks less overwhelming.
- **Go easy on yourself.** While many successful people strive for perfection, achieving perfection is unlikely, if not

impossible. Successful people often admit to being their own worst critics, but don't beat yourself up if you endure some trial and error. Mistakes can be a great teacher, so use any you make to your advantage.

- **Don't be afraid to take risks.** Successful women are not afraid to take risks. Many may have decided they don't fit a specific mold and want to affect change. However, calculated risks are different from reckless decisions, and it is important to recognize the difference. A calculated risk may involve starting your own business after learning the ropes in a specific field and testing the waters. Reckless behavior would be opening that business with no relevant experience.



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We're in business to provide top notch floors and walk-in showers to the community and surrounding areas. I took the business over from my parents in 1980, Grady and Virginia Dumas, who founded this business in 1958. I graduated from Athens University with a B.S. in Education and also have many certifications in the flooring industry. My daughter Jana is married to John Lovelace. They have 3 children named John William, Locke and Liza Kate.

333408-1



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COMMISSIONER**
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Decatur, AL 35601
256-351-4690
www.morgancountyrevenue.com

Amanda G. Scott, CPA Revenue Commissioner
Amanda Scott was elected Revenue Commissioner of Morgan County in 1996, and has worked diligently to improve the office by introducing and maintaining current technology that has greatly enhanced the service level to the residents of Morgan County. Property tax information and the convenience of payment are available online. She opened satellite offices in Hartselle and at Lacey's Spring for the benefit of taxpayers. Her office periodically holds "Property Tax Workshops" to train and assist the public, realtors, appraisers, bankers, and attorneys. Amanda considers it a privilege to serve the public and constantly strives to build a better Revenue Commissioner's office in Morgan County. Amanda graduated from the University of North Alabama in 1984 with a Bachelor of Science in Accounting. She received the Certified Public Accounting designation in 1992, and Alabama Certified Tax Administrator designation in 2001. In 1998 she was honored with the political Leadership Award from the University of North Alabama. She and her husband David E. Scott, who is also a certified public accountant, have three daughters and are members of First United Methodist Church.

333401-1



Shawn D. Garth
REALTOR®, ABR, SRS,
BCG, MRP, GRI, CHME
Association of Realtors and holds several certifications/designations; HRC, ABR, SRS, CHME, GRI, MRP, BCG. As an award-winning Realtor, she has received over 30 real estate awards and has been a Top Producer for Marmac Real Estate over the last 6 years. Shawn was also recently named Decatur's "Best of The Best" real estate agent for 2019.

Shawn is the President of the Morgan County Referral Partners, a local chapter of one of the world's largest international networking groups-BNI. She is involved in several community service projects and activities and also serves on the boards of MarMac Charities and LifeLine. Although Shawn loves helping people find the perfect home, she also enjoys fashion, traveling and shopping. She will tell you that her greatest joys are her two sons who have made their mom very proud in their accomplishments. Shawn is just a phone call, email, or text away from assisting you with your next real estate transaction.

333414-1



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Pat Winsett has owned Winsett Financial Group since 1990 and is happy to be celebrating her 29th Anniversary this year. She started with one assistant and now has a full staff of ten employees. Her daughter-in-law, Joy, has served for the past 20 years as Office Manager and Accounts Supervisor and now her son, Ted, has joined the firm. The company offers Personal Tax Service, Business Tax Service, Bookkeeping and Payroll. Pat has been offering retirement and advanced tax planning services since 2000. Pat and her staff offer excellent customer service and are open year round with extended daily hours during tax season. Pat was happily married 53 years to Ted Winsett before his passing in 2018. She enjoys her family and friends very much and her church family from Grace River Community Church. Pat has three successful children and seven beautiful grandchildren, all of whom she is very proud.

333384-1



Jones
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Tammy Jones Cockrell Operations Manager
Jones Outdoor Services, Inc. has been serving the Morgan and Lawrence County communities with tree trimming, tree removals, and providing solutions for homeowners since 1987. In 2019, we added drainage solutions and for 2020 we have relocated to the Beltline to provide more services for the area. Our newest expansion will start in March. We will offer landscape materials such as mulch, dirt, river rock and pebble rock for delivery or pickup. Tammy finds that even after 4 years she is learning... always learning! No matter what background, being adaptable and teachable is the key to being successful in any industry. She feels blessed to have awesome lady mentors in her career who showed her these traits. "Try being 46 and learning how to put a business in the cloud or redesign a company to work remotely and be mobile ready. Manage a team of 7 and keep 240-300 jobs going yearly. It's been fun and the most challenging job in my career." Tammy is a 1992 UNA graduate. She has a son, Alex, two cats, and a brother. She is a HUGE gardener and loves digging in the dirt! Since living in Decatur, Tammy also rediscovered her love of photography. "We have such awesome beauty in our area."

333381-1



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Lisa began working at Cricket by the Creek in 1976 and purchased the store 11 years ago. She has a talent for making a woman look her best and feel confident for any occasion. She loves to create outfits for ladies whether it's the entire look or adding to their existing outfit. She has a passion for helping ladies in the store or wardrobing them in their own home. Lisa has volunteered her time and services helping numerous clubs and charities, hosting fashion shows for their fundraising goals. She donates funds and time to several local charities and is a member of the Better Business Bureau. Her business was recognized for Outstanding Commitment to Service & Volunteerism by the Volunteer Center. Her store, Cricket By The Creek was recognized as Best of The Best by Decatur Daily in 2017 for ladies clothing. Lisa married Decatur native Rick Jones. She is a member of Women's Chamber, Trowelers Garden Club and Trinity Baptist Church.

333397-1



Auto suppliers looking at Hartselle park

By Deangelo McDaniel
Staff Writer

HARTSELLE — The Morgan Center Business Park came close to landing a supplier for the \$1.6 billion plant Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA is constructing in Huntsville-annexed Limestone County, Hartselle Mayor Randy Garrison said.

“We met with them several times in 2018, but they selected another location,” he said, adding that interest in the Hartselle site near Interstate 65 remains high.

HIROTEC — a state-of-the-art exhaust production and stamping facility — picked Fayetteville, Tennessee, over the business park in Hartselle.

The company’s \$48 million investment is generating about 100 new jobs in Fayetteville.

“We missed out on this one, but I feel confident that we’re going to get something because of Mazda Toyota,” Garrison said.

Morgan County Economic Development



Morgan Center Business Park, as seen in May, lies near the geographic center of Morgan County. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

Authority President Jeremy Nails said more than one supplier has expressed an interest in the 135-acre site near I-65 and Thompson Road, which is complete with access to water, sewer, electricity and high speed Internet service.

He said he couldn’t release specific names of companies that had contacted him about the park or what they will supply for Mazda Toyota.

Nails said engineers have been mitigating wetlands on the largest tract in the

park, which would make the property easier to develop in case a company comes in and is on the fast track for development.

“Mazda Toyota is bringing about 4,000 jobs, but we’re expecting suppliers to the plant to generate another 6,000 jobs,” he said.

Garrison and Nails said interest in the park has “elevated” since Mazda Toyota announced its plant, which will have the capacity to build 300,000 vehicles a year.

After paying off bonds that constructed Mallard-Fox Creek Industrial Park on the Tennessee River in



Officials say interest in locating in the Morgan Center Business Park in Hartselle remains high. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

Decatur, county and city leaders agreed to continue using part of their Tennessee Valley Authority in-lieu-of-tax revenue to construct the park near Hartselle.

The Morgan County Industrial Park and Economic Cooperative District board — which governs the Hartselle Park — finished Phase 1, but the predicted jobs and revenue some said would come have not.

Still, the decision to build the park was right because Morgan County is now in a position to capitalize on some of the

spin-off industry that will follow the Mazda Toyota plant, County Commission Chairman Ray Long said.

“This is a great park with interstate access, and the county is not in a position as it was before Mallard Fox was built,” he said.

Long said the lesson from Mallard-Fox is you have to be ready when something knocks on your door.

Local leaders built Mallard-Fox Creek a little more than 25 years ago after Morgan County lost a \$300 million plant because it lacked infrastructure on the Tennessee River.

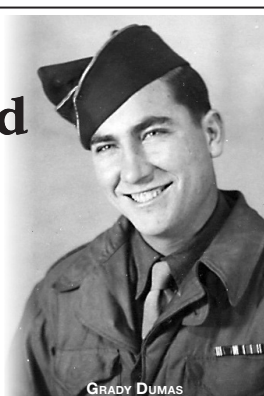
After the West Virginia-based auto supply company went elsewhere, Lynn Fowler, who would later become Decatur’s mayor, and The Decatur Daily’s then-publisher, Barrett C. Shelton Sr., convinced city and county leaders to borrow \$9.8 million for Mallard-Fox Creek.

“The good thing for Morgan County is we’re ready for any suppliers to the plant,” Garrison said.

— deangelo@decaturdaily.com or 256-340-2469.
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By Michael Wetzel
Staff Writer

An influx of up to 10,000 new workers at Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA and its suppliers

Leaders say positive change coming to Morgan County, Decatur

means more demand for services, more vehicles on the road and more tax revenue for local communities, officials say.

Morgan County leaders welcome the growth. While census numbers show the county’s population has been stagnant for most of the past decade, the automobile producer and suppliers are expected to change that.

Ray Long, Morgan County Commission chairman, said he expects to see young people staying here for good jobs instead of moving away.

“With the addition of the Mazda Toyota jobs to go along with our already booming economy, I think you will see people start to expand the way they live,” he said. “Young people who are fortunate enough to get one of these jobs will start expanding their way of living. I think you will see them purchasing a home much earlier than the generation just before them. I think you will see the younger generation driving newer cars.”

He expects to see service jobs increase, too.

“The younger people will depend more on the luxuries that we normally associate with television shows,” Long said. “They will want their own swimming pools. They will have that boat that their parents always wanted. They will get to live a higher standard than the younger generation just above them.”

Tom Fredricks, president of Fredricks Outdoors, said it is important that business owners prepare for the disposable income the companies coming in will put in the wallets of their employees.

“North Alabama is poised for a decade of growth with 10,000 jobs coming with Mazda Toyota, FBI, Google, Facebook locating here,” he said. “These people will be buying toys, boats, zero-turn mowers. ... We’re already seeing increased

sales numbers from economic growth, and we’re already off to a good year in 2020.”

The FBI is expanding its Huntsville operations, Facebook recently located a data center in Huntsville and Google installed high-speed fiber internet in Madison County.

Higher pay

Mazda Toyota officials say production jobs will start at about \$17 an hour. Long and others feel many area employers will see their good workers leaving for the bigger paychecks tied to the automotive industry.

“A few years ago, the going rate for a starter job was around \$10 an hour,” said Long, who has been in office for the past 10 years. “The minimum pay at the Mazda Toyota plant is \$17 an hour. Then that rate is set to accelerate once the employee gets some training. The Tier 1 supplier companies will also be paying a very good rate.”

“This will place a big burden on the companies that are already here. We have several good production plants in the area that pay their employees between \$12 and \$15 an hour. There will be an enormous amount of pressure in the next few months for these companies to increase pay or take a chance on losing a lot of employees to Mazda Toyota. An employee with a good work record will probably be able to go wherever he or she wants to work. Usually that will result in a higher wage for them.”

Morgan County Economic Development Association CEO and President Jeremy Nails said the good job opportunities

coming to Morgan County will bring other challenges. “These opportunities bring more income into our communities, and that will assist our local governments prepare for the challenges of growth.”

He said keeping the roadways maintained with increased traffic will be an obstacle across the region.

“Transportation infrastructure is one of the key challenges facing all of north Alabama,” Nails said. “I know our local leaders are working every day to make sure we have free-flowing traffic into and out of our community for both residents and truck traffic that supports our industrial and distribution companies.”

Decatur Development Director Wally Terry said the growth will cause inconveniences, but nothing that the city and county can’t overcome.

“Whether it’s the county, city or both, there are no challenges that cannot be overcome, but probably not without some inconvenience and tough decisions to be made,” Terry said. “Infrastructure needs, including transportation, will be a challenge. The time it will take to make the daily trips will increase. There will hopefully be road projects that will test our patience.”

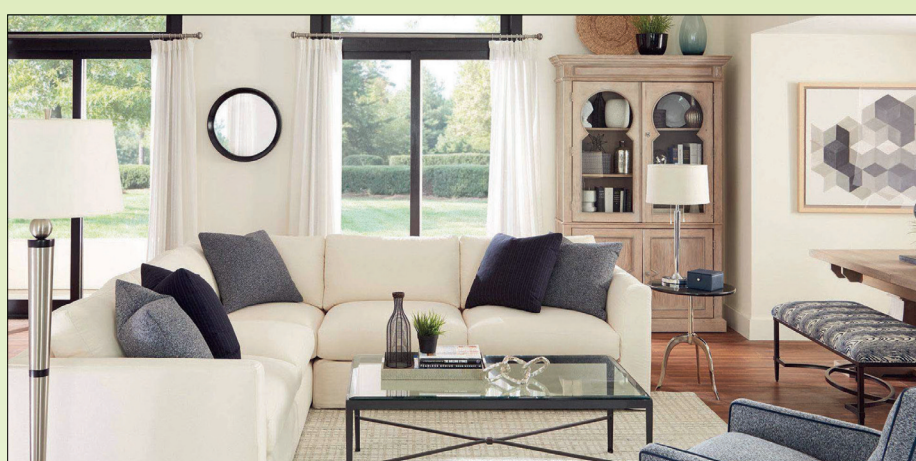
“I once had a developer that I was apologizing to for the inconvenience created when the new river bridge was being built. He reminded this young banker to not apologize for road projects as they were the lifeblood of moving goods and services.”

Road projects

Alabama Department of Transportation spokesman Seth Burkett said ALDOT is working to meet the increased road usage issues. ALDOT has announced plans to widen Interstate 565 to help accommodate the heavier traffic load.

“The \$17 million resurfacing and six-laning between I-65 and County Line Road is one of two major projects in this area to be funded by Gov. Kay Ivey’s first-year plan for Rebuild Alabama,” Burkett said.

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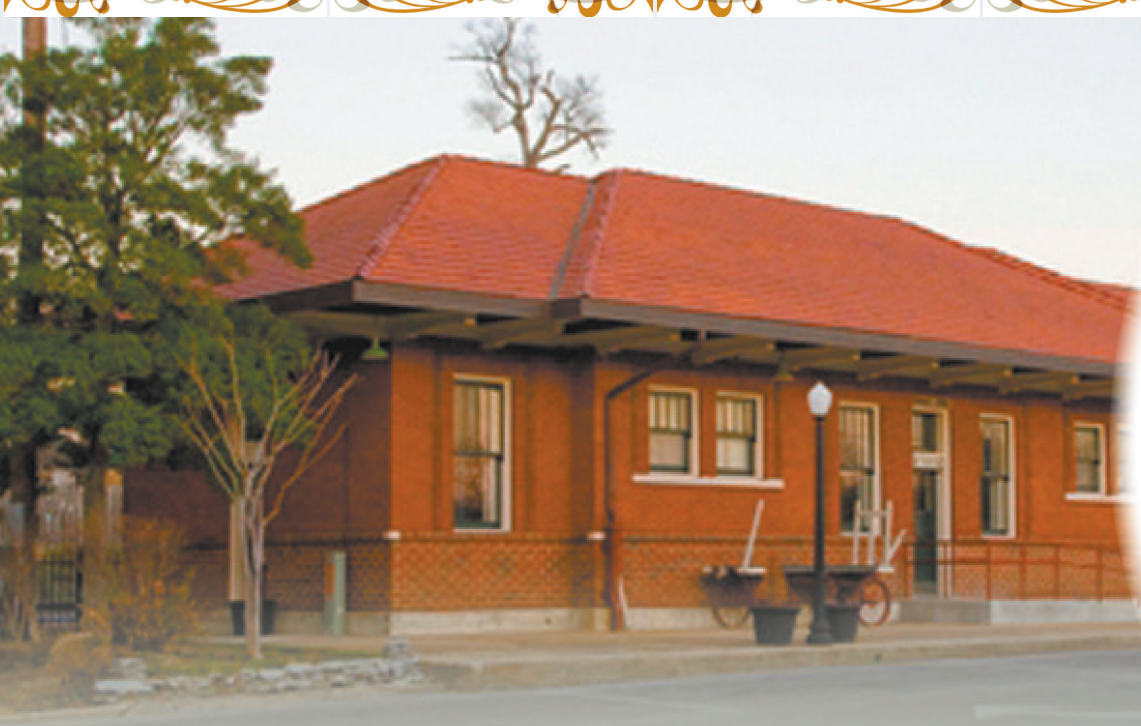
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New plant transforms Limestone landscape



On January 10, 2018, Jacob Lambright conducted a preliminary survey of the future site of the Mazda Toyota manufacturing plant, along Old Highway 20 in Limestone County. [CRYSTAL VANDER WEIT/DECATUR DAILY]



The structure of some buildings is already rising in May 2019. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

From the first land survey in January 2018 through the erection of the first walls for the 3.7 million-square-foot Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA plant, these photos provide a visual record of two years of intense work on the auto assembly facility in the Greenbrier area of Limestone County.



Crews work on widening Old Highway 20 beside the Mazda Toyota plant's construction site in frigid temperatures during mid-November 2018. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Foundation construction is already underway in March 2019. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Debris from an old gin is hauled away on March 15, 2018, as preparation for the plant site continues. [CRYSTAL VANDER WEIT/DECATUR DAILY]



OPPORTUNITY 2020



Construction continues inside the press building of the new Mazda Toyota plant in mid-December 2019. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

Once-rural area reshaped by plant

Key dates for Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA:

- August 2017: Japanese automakers Mazda and Toyota enter into agreement for an alliance and issue an invitation-only request for proposal for a manufacturing plant.
- Jan. 10, 2018: Toyota and Mazda announce that 2,500 acres in Lime-stone County, including a 1,200-acre Tennessee Valley Authority-certified megasite, will become home for a \$1.6 billion

joint-venture auto plant that will eventually employ about 4,000 workers. About 100 sites in more than 25 states were reportedly considered before the list was narrowed to 11 states and then to two — Alabama and North Carolina.

- March 2018: Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA officially named.
- Nov. 16, 2018: Groundbreaking held as a prelude to construction beginning in December.
- Dec. 20, 2018:

Agreement announced to protect the habitat of the endangered spring pygmy sunfish.

- May 14, 2019: Dai-kyoNishikawa (DNUS) become first supplier to announce it will be an on-site partner of Mazda Toyota.
- July 2019: Toyota announces it will build an unspecified SUV at the site rather than the Corolla compact.
- Spring 2021: Production at plant scheduled to begin.



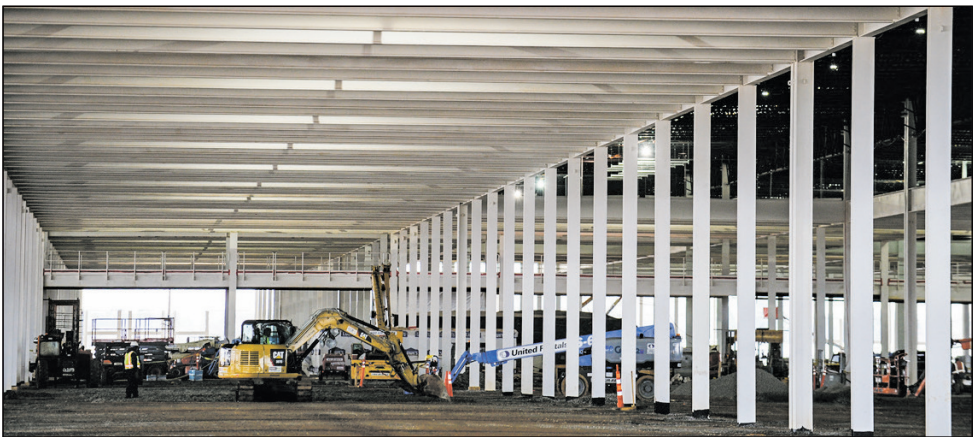
Construction of a new road that runs between Old Alabama 20 on the north and the railroad to the south can be seen in October 2019. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Constant activity becomes the trademark inside the construction site of the new plant. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Cranes dominate the skyline at the new Mazda Toyota plant. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Construction inside the building that will house the assembly lines for Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA continues in mid-December 2019. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Construction continues inside the press building. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

Leaders Are Servants

In order to be a good leader one must be willing to be a servant. Government officials and political leaders who do their job well invariably stress that they are public servants and therefore take pains to actually serve and benefit the public. Religious leaders must do the same, serving their flocks as a good shepherd does his sheep. Jesus did not consider it beneath him to wash the feet of his apostles on the night before he was arrested. And in our working lives, we all know that the best managers and supervisors aren't afraid to get their hands dirty and serve their employees almost in the same way that a loving parent serves his or her children, educating them and helping them when necessary with difficult tasks. We are all called to serve God by serving our fellow man and in the process of doing so we lead by example. Don't consider it beneath you to serve others. Service to others is our highest calling.

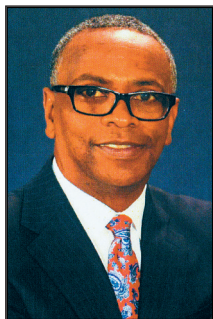
— Christopher Simon



Pastor Billy Ray and Gloria Young
First Missionary Baptist Church

Congrats to our wonderful Pastor and First Lady on 20 years of service to God and His people as they continue to be a true blessing wherever the Lord takes them. Continue to lead by example! We love you!

Members of First Missionary Baptist Church of Hartselle



Pastor Scott J. Coffey
Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church

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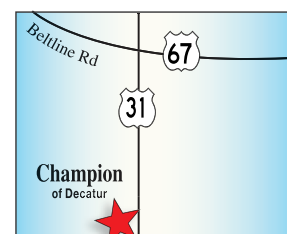
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