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Much of the world thinks of the region as a place to play,

INAUGURAL ISSUE!

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but its diverse economy is beginning to gain attention

6519

Marine science lab at our back door The renaissance of downtowns University spinoff makes it big Quarterly business reviews New Urbanists' dream revisited

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University spinoff

makes it



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Cover photo by Michelle R. Thomas of Airbus jetliner assembly in Mobile, Ala.; cover designed by Thom Dudgeon.

From the editor

Putting experience to work

hanges in newsrooms nationwide have forced a lot of highly experienced journalists out of the news business. And the Gulf Coast region is no exception. With all those professionals available, it made sense to pull them together in a cooperative venture to create a product this region has needed for a very long time.

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the *Gulf Coast Reporters' League Business Quarterly*.

This is like no other publication you'll see, either print or digital. We cover a region nobody else is covering in a single publication: the metropolitan areas along the Interstate 10 corridor between Southeast Louisiana and Northwest Florida.

The area has ties that run deep, socially and economically. The 4.4 million people who live here care about what happens in their neighbor's back yard. With a gross product of \$223 billion, it's a region with a diverse economy that deserves a publication focused on its commercial activities.

Every quarter we'll bring you stories with a region-wide perspective. If it's about marine science research, we tell you about the entire region, not just one slice. If it's about Airbus in Mobile, we'll make sure we paint a picture that will place it in the context of the region's broad aviation sector.

Our nearly two dozen contributing reporters, editors, photographers, graphics artists, page designers, proof readers and researchers have experience ranging from a low of 20 years to a high in excess of 45. They count among their honors a Pulitzer for public service along with other national, regional, state and local journalism honors.

Many of them have been business



David Tortorano

reporters, and all of them have covered topics that run the gamut. They've chased hurricanes, covered trials, watched sports events and questioned politicians. And now all that experience is going into this brand new business publication.

What we're most proud of is that in an age where anyone with a computer and Internet access can be a publisher, this team is old school and abides by the principals of traditional journalism. We look for the stories nobody else is doing. We may or may not get it first, but we'll get it right.

I've had the honor of working with every one of the members of this team, and I understand their passion for the job and pride in their work. That's why they agreed to be part of this venture. The professionals who have come aboard jumped at the chance to participate in an untried venture because of their can-do attitude and belief that the product is needed. Since many of us have had full, satisfying careers as members of the Fourth Estate, you can consider this our Third Act.

I hope you enjoy this first issue, and that you make the *Gulf Coast Reporters' League Business Quarterly* part of your regular reading routine. □

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No doubt this region is a draw for tourists, but the diversity of activities that support the economy is surprisingly large

rom its world-class hospitality to gaming and entertainment venues to white-sand beaches, the central Gulf Coast region could easily be mistaken for little more than a waterfront playground.

But while the four-state region sprawled along Interstate 10 does enjoy significant tourism dollars, its

economic pillars are also built of sterner stuff.

Advanced manufacturing, aeronautics, chemical processing, oil and gas, military bases and national defense, high technology, health systems – these are just a few of the foundations of the often interrelated economies of the region stretching



Martha Simmons

from Southeast Louisiana through the Mississippi Gulf Coast, South Alabama and Northwest Florida.

"The greatest misconception about the coastal economy is that we're primarily a tourism economy," said Ashley Edwards, who in December became president of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Business Council. He previously served as chief executive officer of Hancock County (Miss.) Port Air Space, the former Port and Harbor Commission.

"Things are happening along the northern Gulf Coast that would be the envy of any other region in the United States. We're seeing so many businesses both nationally and internationally taking a second look at the Interstate 10 Corridor because of the advantages we're able to offer here."

Emerging 'Third Coast'

Michael Hecht, president and CEO of Greater New Orleans, Inc., contends that the region is emerging as

the "Third Coast" and is connected by much more than I-10. "What connects us.



besides the overall Southern culture," Hecht said, "are sectors of industry, oil and gas, energy, tourism, aerospace, maritime and trade across the entire corridor. We have a col-

lective future together. "Consider that the East Coast and the West Coast are getting more crowded and more expensive," Hecht said.

"Now the Third Coast, starting at Houston, is starting to emerge, for three main reasons. First, the business conditions are better, with lower costs and friendlier attitudes toward business. Second, our natural orientation and proximity to Central and South America – that's going to be important when the new Panama Canal opens next year. And third: Energy – oil and gas."

However, while the region is certainly connected, it is not necessarily homogenous. And that may be to its advantage.

River boom and Katrina baptism

"There is about \$31 billion in new construction occurring right now along the river from Baton Rouge to New Orleans. It's largely chemical firms," said Loren Scott, an economist and professor emeritus with Louisiana State University.

The cheapest and best way to ship the bulk chemicals produced by the plants is by barge or oceangoing ships, Scott said, noting that these large vessels can traverse the Mississippi all the way up to Baton Rouge.

New Orleans' worldwide reputation as a tourism destination often overshadows the rest of the region's industries, Hecht said.

"What distinguishes us is the city of New Orleans, which is one of the unique cities of the world, and many times has a reputation far greater than its size," he said, noting that foreign business people often know where New Orleans is, but know nothing of the state of Louisiana.

But the New Orleans area's economy is underpinned by a lot more than food, fun and music.

"We have three foundational industries: Energy, trade and advanced manufacturing," Hecht said. Greater New Orleans' advanced manufacturing is focused primarily on the design, manufacturing, and assembly of military ground transportation vehicles, civilian and military aircraft, space vehicles, and naval and commercial ships and boats.

Southeast Louisiana also boasts three diversified industries, Hecht said:

- Digital media: Currently the fastestgrowing software market in America with companies such as IBM and GE Capital, along with gaming companies such as Game Loft and Electronic Arts.
- Biomedical: A new, 1 million square foot medical center aiming to become a destination healthcare center such as University of Alabama-Birmingham, or M.D. Anderson, which accounts for more than 25 percent of hotel stays in Houston.
- Emerging environmental: Following the lead of the Dutch, who sell their water management technology all over the world, Southeast Louisiana is now taking its post-Katrina rebuild technologies to other regions, including areas devastated by Hurricane Sandy.

Exporting new water management techniques and technologies isn't the only way the New Orleans area has been making the best of the wreckage wrought by Hurricane Katrina, Hecht said.

"Katrina made it devastatingly clear that we were not functioning well before the hurricane," he said, calling the disaster "a bit of a baptism."

Area leaders emerged from the baptism with a new resolve to do things better, Hecht said. "Now everything is under new and better management. The business community is much more engaged and demanding of accountability."

Referring to the catastrophic flooding resulting from the levee failure in New Orleans, Hecht said, "Katrina was the worst manmade disaster in modern American history. The way you honor those who suffered is to build something back better."

That appears to be happening. Tourism has rebounded to pre-Katrina levels. And for those foundational and diversified industries, the New Orleans region, once known for exporting its best and brightest, now leads the nation in attracting college graduates and workers in their prime years, ages 35 to 49.

"Now people are not only staying in New Orleans," Hecht said, "they're choosing to locate here."

Meanwhile, Southeast Louisiana economic developers are not content to bask in their post-Katrina successes or go their own way. They continue to work with their Gulf Coast neighbors on issues ranging from establishing new international flights out of the New Orleans airport to national flood insurance and the BP oil spill settlement.

"We're emerging not only as a coherent economic region, but also as a nascent political block on the national scene," Hecht said. "When we get together, with our combined political and economic clout, we can get things done in Washington."

Happy to be blue

South Mississippi's metro population may be smaller than neighboring states' on the I-10 Corridor, but it enjoys a thriving and very diverse industrial base, according to the Business Council's Edwards.

"Our proximity to the Gulf is the driver of the economy," he said. "We have a diverse industrial base and the hallmark of that base is the blue economy that has arisen from the more humble base of the fishing industry all the way up to modern marine technology."

From shoreline casinos to shipbuilding to offshore oil and gas, the area's economy continues to rely on its connection to the Gulf of Mexico.

As the prime example, Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, with 800 acres and some 12,000 employees, is the largest manufacturing employer in Mississippi. For more than 75 years, the company has built ships for the Navy, Coast Guard, as well as foreign and commercial customers. Big vessels are also built by VT Halter Marine of Pascagoula.

Page 6: Construction in downtown Pensacola, Fla. Photo by Bruce Graner, illustration by GCRL.



However, the Mississippi Gulf Coast's industries are not only anchored in blue water. They also aim for blue skies.

"Ancillary to the blue economy is the aerospace sector that is so vital along the entire I-10 Corridor,"

Edwards said, adding that NASA's Stennis Space Center is a major presence in the area with more than 5,000 employees.

"We have everything from propulsion technology for the next generation of spacecraft to the development of the next generation of jet engine technology, with companies like Rolls Royce," Edwards said.

Rolls Royce jet engines are "the

premier jet engines in the world," with companies like Airbus using them in their aircraft, Edwards said. Much of the testing of those engines is done in Mississippi's Hancock County.

While NASA's Stennis Space Center is known for its connection to space exploration, it is also one of the nation's marine technology centers thanks to the Navy, other federal agencies and the universities.

"The Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command handles atmospheric and weather-based planning for the entire fleet," Edwards said. "They have a very large presence – in fact, the Navy has now overtaken NASA in terms of its employees and overall economic impact."

Stennis Space Center, which also has several universities as tenants, houses the largest concentration

of oceanographers in the world. It's from Stennis Space Center that the Navy operates its fleet of underwater unmanned systems.

South Mississippi looks very different from other parts of the state, Edwards said. "When you look at our shipbuilding, energy, Department of Defense activities, marine technology, oil and gas exploration, polymers and advanced materials, aerospace, what you find here

is a very diverse mix. The interesting part of that story is that we really have a trained workforce, and that allows us to compete globally for those high-end jobs in technology, research and development, energy, etcetera."

The central Gulf Coast region now draws the attention of business prospects that used to focus on Silicon Valley, Edwards said.

"We're not just competing with other areas of the Southeast involved in more traditional manufacturing. We're competing with California, Austin and

"Things are happening along the northern Gulf Coast that would be the envy of any other region in the United States."

the East coast. We're seeing so many businesses both nationally and internationally taking a second look at the I-10 Corridor because of the advantages we're able to offer here.

"You'd be hard pressed to find a region with a greater synergy with the global economy than what you find here along the Gulf Coast."

'Football culture' scores

It would be difficult to overstate the giddiness that still surrounds the landing of Airbus, what with Mardi Gras-style parades and grand receptions greeting the arrival of the first major sections from Europe in the summer of 2015. That wasn't surprising, since assembling A320 jetliners at the Mobile Aeroplex at Brookley is a watershed event in aviation history.

Troy Wayman, vice president of Economic Development for the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce, said the community response surrounding the effort to win Airbus is unlike anything he had ever seen. He attributed the response to the disappointment of the protracted battle to bring Airbus to Mobile to build military aerial tankers, an effort eventually shot

down by politically betterconnected Boeing.

"We are a football culture," Wayman said. "We don't like to lose. This community rallied."

The Herculean recruitment effort pitched by local, state and national officials ultimately resulted in Airbus deciding to build commercial aircraft in Mobile, resulting in

Southwest Alabama arguably winning the war, if not the battle.

With the assembly of the first planes already under way, Airbus will initially employ about 1,000 skilled workers to produce four aircraft per month. Wayman said there is already talk of production "very easily" increasing to eight or even 12 planes per month, should Airbus opt to hike production worldwide to meet demand. That would result in even more significant economic impact to the local economy.

But the Airbus jubilation must be tempered.

"We've had to manage expectations in this community," Wayman said. "In the state of Alabama, Economic pillars at a glance

- Aerospace/aviation
- Shipbuilding/boat building
- Commercial fishing
- Chemicals
- Oil and gas
- Gaming
- Tourism/travel
- Advanced materials
- Military/defense
- Agriculture

we've been spoiled by the automotive model, where the mothership lands and immediately you're deluged with just-in-time suppliers near the auto plant."

The economies of scale are far different for suppliers in the two industries, Wayman said. For instance, a company providing just-in-time delivery of automobile seats can afford to locate next door to an auto plant assembling some 300,000 vehicles per year. Since an aircraft assembly plant might produce dozens of planes in a year, a company manufacturing

> airplane seats would need to supply multiple plants in different locations in order to be cost-effective.

> Local economic developers are working to attract a network of FAA-certified services attractive to the entire aerospace industry, Wayman said, noting that Southwest Alabama's existing aerospace industry already employed thousands

of workers long before Airbus arrived.

For instance, MAAS Aviation will paint aircraft not only for new Airbus jetliners, but also for the older aircraft that are repaired and refurbished by VT MAE, a maintenance, repair and overhaul facility also located at the Mobile Aeroplex at Brookley, Wayman said.

But while the aeronautics industry takes off in coastal Alabama, shipbuilding is also cresting.

Austal USA, the Australia-based builder of littoral combat ships and fast transport ships for the U.S. Navy and a variety of other commercial vessels, now employs some 4,500 skilled workers on the Mobile

"The greatest misconception about the coastal economy is that we're primarily a tourist economy."



Photo by Michelle R. Thomas Much of the economic activity in Mobile is maritime related. This is looking up Mobile River from Cooper Riverside Park.

waterfront. Austal is one of the United States' largest tries that can pipe materials between them, a shipshipbuilders and defense contractors. Since it located ping method Wayman said is considered the safest. in Mobile in 1999, Austal USA has doubled in size five times, Wayman said.

Success stories like Austal and Airbus have contributed to the Mobile area outpacing state and national manufacturing growth.

"Our manufacturing employment has increased 38.2 percent in the last five years, compared with 9 percent for the state and 7.7 percent for the nation. That's due to our very strong economic development efforts," Wayman said.

Such efforts include building on existing industries and infrastructure, such as the 25 chemical plants stretching 60 miles from South Mobile County into neighboring Washington County, Ala. Many of these plants are located along waterways with easy access to the Mobile port for import and export of raw materials known as "feed stocks."

Since there is also a good infrastructure of pipeline connections in that area, economic developers are working to co-locate new and complementary indus-

The energy sector also continues to play an important role in coastal Alabama's economy, Wayman said, adding that the Port of Mobile is an Energy Transfer Port, a designation that allows for federal dollars to maintain the shipping channels.

While Wayman focuses his efforts on bringing new business to Mobile County, he acknowledges the strategic advantage of building on the strength of other cities along the I-10 Corridor. It's something all of them strive to do, in recognition of the strength they can draw from the combined force of all of their assets. And it's considerable.

"Just as they claim our assets, we claim theirs," Wayman said. "If we don't get a project here, I want it in Baldwin County or somewhere else on the Gulf Coast."

Military and 'Mardi Gras effect'

If there is one thing that distinguishes Northwest Florida – besides its drop-dead gorgeous beaches –



Photo courtesy U.S. Air Force, by Samuel King Jr.

Members of the 33rd Maintenance Group perform checks on an F-35A at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

it's the string of military bases stretching from Pensacola to Panama City.

For Larry Sassano, president of Florida's Great Northwest, an organization composed of 16 counties in the Panhandle, that represents not only the economic impact of the bases themselves, but also a highly trained workforce as service men and women cycle out of the military.

Pensacola Naval Air Station is known as the Cradle of Navy Aviation, and Whiting Field trains helicopter pilots. To the west, Eglin Air Force Base and Tyndall Air Force Base train pilots to fly fifthgeneration F-35 and F-22 fighters. Northwest Florida wants to parlay its positioning among Navy and Air Force bases as a hub for attracting all manner of associated aerospace industries.

"We have six military bases here. That means we have an ample supply of transitioning military men and women," Sassano said. "With the skill levels they possess, a lot of them are geared to working on aircraft." That labor pool comes in very handy for targeting aerospace industries. "It's one of our most rapidly growing industry sectors."

Northwest Florida is setting its sights on advanced manufacturers supplying aircraft assembly plants such as Airbus.

"From our research, we know that the commercial fleet is projected to grow in the next 10 years, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$3 trillion for the manufacture of commercial aircraft.

"Airbus will probably have 600 suppliers," Sassano said, noting that a company that makes a part

for Airbus would also supply Boeing and other aircraft assembly companies. "We're after the suppliers. We have the skilled workforce and we have the training programs."

Economic developers are also targeting companies that provide aircraft maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO).

"You have to have a lot of repair work that must be done from time, what with aging aircraft and the number of aircraft out there, both commercial and military," Sassano said. That focus has reaped rewards. When VT MAE, one of Mobile's major aerospace employers that has been a fixture of the Mobile economy since 1991, began looking for a place to expand, it chose Pensacola International Airport for a new MRO facility, Sassano said.

Another industry to pursue is aerospace-associated information technology, Sassano said.

"You've got to have an IT equivalent in your backyard if you're going to be successful," he said, noting Eglin Air Force Base's focus on national security, IT and aviation. "Logistics goes along with all that, as well. Prospects want to know about intermodal transportation – rail, truck, airplane, barge. And the ports play a critical part," Sassano said.

While economic developers seek to diversify Northwest Florida's economy and capitalize on its aerospace industries, the service sector still reigns as a major employer, said Rick Harper, assistant vice president of the University of West Florida's Office of Economic Development and Engagement.

Tallahassee's seasonal service sector business is markedly different from elsewhere in the state. When other Northwest Florida cities are enjoying the high season of summer tourism, Tallahassee's economy is at its slowest, Harper said.

"State government is disproportionately important in Tallahassee," Harper said. Tallahassee's economy peaks when the legislature is in session. The city's economy is also driven by the presence of Florida State University, Florida A&M and other education and government employment.

Not surprisingly, tourism drives the service sector along the beaches.

"If you look at Fort Walton Beach and Panama City, they have about double the national average

Gross Metropolitan Product 2013 (in millions)		
Metropolitan area	current	chained
New Orleans-Metairie	\$81,843	\$70,665
Baton Rouge	\$52,247	\$45,769
Mobile	\$18,373	\$17,085
Gulfport-Biloxi-Pascagoula	\$16,182	\$14,768
Pensacola-Ferry Pass-Brent	\$15,202	\$14,208
Tallahassee	\$13,800	\$12,893
Crestview-Ft. Walton Beach-Destin	\$12,167	\$11,462
Panama City	\$7,420	\$6,974
Daphne-Fairhope-Foley	\$6,298	\$5,909
Hattiesburg	\$5,458	\$5,107
Dothan	\$4,896	\$4,583
Total	\$233,886	\$209,423

Chained figure adjusts for inflation. Base is 2009 dollar Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

density in the sectors of real estate rental and leasing, accommodations and food services," Harper said. "Pensacola has a more mature economy, but it has about one-third again the national average in lodging and food services."

Pensacola's economy is also bolstered by its position as a regional healthcare hub.

"Pensacola has three major hospitals plus the Naval Hospital," Harper said. "So you have lots of people coming from across the state line."

Patients travel from Alabama to Pensacola to take advantage of advanced services available in child health, cardiology and other healthcare specialties. That has prompted many Pensacola physicians to open offices in Baldwin County and Escambia County, Ala. as well, Harper said.

The line dividing South Alabama from Northwest Florida has always been a little blurry, anyway.

"We share the same climate, history and inbound migration patterns of people trying to relocate and make their fortunes," Harper said. "I call it the Mardi Gras effect. Everywhere from Pensacola west, we have a strong Catholic and Mardi Gras tradition. We have a fairly long, multi-generational history.

"We look a lot more like Mobile or New Orleans than we do Tampa or Miami."

Rick Byars is one of the economic development officials in the region who has a keen sense of the common interests. He is the economic development chief for Gulf Power Co., but has also worked in Louisiana for Entergy and has a broad vision of the capabilities of the region.

He sees multiple economic engines for Northwest Florida and the entire Gulf Coast. His list would include the defense industry, aerospace, advanced manufacturing, high technology and cybersecurity, along with energy. He points out that the abundance of natural gas is one of the drivers of industrial projects throughout the region.

"I think the future is very bright. What's driving the economy and will continue to drive the economy for a very long time is that the energy industry is red hot," he said. "In addition, the Airbus project has opened up a world of opportunity," he said. Like many others who have been paying attention to the economic development of this region posthurricane and post-oil spill, he is encouraged about what is yet to come.

"I think this I-10 corridor is poised to explode." \Box

About the author

Martha Simmons has worked as a writer, photographer and editor for the *Mobile Press-Register*, *Pensacola News Journal* and the *News Herald* of Panama City, Fla. She was chief communications officer for the Alabama two-year college system and two district attorney offices and most recently was a congressional staffer. She has freelanced for national and international publications, and worked in corporate communications for the Coca-Cola Company. She lives in Stockton, Ala. □



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The economy - jobs

The region's occupations

I f you're in the food service business in the Gulf Coast I-10 region, you've got plenty of company. Same, too, if you're in healthcare, transportation and material moving or academia. But far and away, most of us are office administrative support workers.

Of the nearly 1.7 million workers in the region between Baton Rouge, La., and Tallahassee, Fla., more than a quarter million are involved in office administrative support. The field includes a range of jobs, from receptionists to computer operators to tellers and office clerks. Most require a high school diploma or equivalent, and pay is in the \$30,000 to \$40,000 range.

Close to 194,000 of us are involved in sales or related jobs, and the pay depends on the specific job. A cashier might only get around \$20,000, but an advertising agent is closer to \$50,000. Sales engineers can make over \$90,000.

Healthcare practitioners and technical occupations, if combined with healthcare support, has a combined total of 149,540. The field runs the gamut of skill levels, from home health aides in the \$20,000 range to multiple fields, including pharmacists, dentists and surgeons, who make \$100,000 to \$200,000.

According to a February 2015 *MarketWatch* story, the American workplace is now largely one that sells things, or fixes meals, or shuffles information, or provides personal services to people. As the story points out, the United States is a service economy, not a thing economy.

More than 21 million people in the United States work in office and administrative support, more than 14 million work in sales and more than 11 million work in food services. Nine million work in transportation, or material-moving occupations, and nine million production workers.

In the I-10 region, if searching for the top two job categories for each metropolitan area, four job categories are either No. 1 or No. 2. Office administrative support is the No. 1 job in 10 of 11 metropolitan areas. The only area where office workers are No. 2

Guir Coast metro occupations		
occupation	employment	
Office administrative support	263,580	
Sales and related	193,910	
Food preparation and serving related	182,370	
Transportation and material moving	107,550	
Healthcare practitioners and technical	105,620	
Education, training and library	100,340	
Construction and extraction	99,690	
Production	87,450	
Installation, maintenance and repair	83,260	
Business and financial operations	77,830	
Management	72,160	
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance	54,540	
Protective service	51,720	
Healthcare support	43,920	
Personal care and service	36,640	
Architecture and engineering	34,640	
Computer and mathematical	30,170	
Arts, design, entertainment, sports and media	22,460	
Community and social service	20,000	
Legal	15,500	
Life, physical and social science	11,920	
Farming, fishing and forestry	1,640	
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2014		

Gulf Coast metro occupations

is in Crestview-Fort Walton Beach-Destin, where food preparation and serving is No. 1.

Sales and related is No. 2 in six metropolitan areas, while food preparation is No. 2 in three metro areas. The only other category to make it to the top two in any of the metro areas was production, which was No. 2 in heavily industrialized Pascagoula, Miss. – David Tortorano

The economy - history



A state of mind

PENSACOLA, Fla.

f you search the Internet for information about 18th century British West Florida, you'll come across a Wikipedia entry for the "Dominion of British West Florida."

No, it's not the British territory of the 18th Century, but something called a "micronation" created on the Internet in 2005.

The folks behind it adhere to the idea that the annexation of the territory to the United States in the 1800s was illegal, and that it is still part of Britain. It has a coin and a flag, and "citizens" who are barons and earls and such. Not surprisingly, it's recognized by nobody but other micronations.

But the region between Southeast Louisiana and Northwest Florida did once exist as a colony of the British crown. It was created in 1763, and Pensacola was its capital. It spanned the former Spanish and French regions between the Mississippi River and the Apalachicola River, with the northern border the 31st parallel, which today separates Southeast Louisiana and Mississippi and a large part of Florida and Alabama.

With its heavily loyalist population, the British West Florida territory didn't send delegates to the First Continental Congress, though some accounts say they were invited, nor did it have delegates at the even more famous Second Continental Congress.

Loyalist tendencies aside, it is not far-fetched to say that it could have become one of the original states. But history took the region in a different direction and it ceased to exist as British West Florida in 1783.

Today the 440-mile stretch of the Gulf Coast between Baton Rouge and Tallahassee that mirrors

The economy - history

somewhat the area that once was British West Florida is divided among four states. But there are strong socio-economic ties that will forever bind the region. A variety of factors determined that it would not be a state after all, but it is something of a state of mind.

Win Hallett, the retired, long-time former president of the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce, has a keen sense of the common ties. He once organized a coalition of chambers with a membership that reflected much of the former British West Florida.

"We have a shared history going back hundreds of years that we don't share with other parts of the state," said Hallett about South Alabama. That history shapes the way people from the region think, what they eat and even their music, he said. So to Hallett, it's natural to think in terms of the east-west corridor.

That this stretch of the Gulf Coast region is different in many ways from its respective states is illustrated by the Florida Panhandle. It has developed at a far slower pace than the rest of Florida, and many in the region refer to it as LA - Lower Alabama. It has even been left off some maps of Florida.

There was even a tongue-in-cheek effort in the 1980s to have Alabama annex Escambia County and Pensacola. Upset that promised money for dredging was not going to come through, the Escambia County Commission voted to ask Alabama to take over the county. Alabama even responded with its own resolution saying it would love to welcome Escambia County and Pensacola to the state.

But all that aside, what would the region along the I-10 corridor look like as a state?

First off, it would have a population of some 4.4 million people, and a Gross Domestic Product of \$223 billion. It would be more urban than many other states and the economic indicators would be stronger than those of their respective states today, with the possible exception of Florida.

The state would have major professional sports teams, including the New Orleans Saints of the National Football League and the New Orleans Pelicans of the National Basketball Association, plus scores of minor league teams in baseball and hockey.

And it would have more than its fair share of universities, including Louisiana State University, Tulane University, University of New Orleans, Dillard University, Southern University, Loyola University, the University of South Alabama and University of West Florida, Florida State University and Florida A&M University. One might also include the University of Southern Mississippi just up the road from I-10 in Hattiesburg, Miss.

All those universities, along with key federal facilities, would make the state heavily involved in research in a range of fields.

It would be known as the state with a heavy concentration of military bases, including researchintensive Eglin Air Force Base. It would be particularly well-known for military pilot training.

It also would be able to brag about having not one, but two NASA facilities: Stennis Space Center and 40 miles away Michoud Assembly Facility.

It would also be an intermodal transportation hot spot with multiple deepwater ports, including some of the busiest in the nation, as well as multiple airports, including the largest in the region in New Orleans, and the nation's newest airport just outside Panama City.

But since that invitation to participate in the Continental Congress was either rejected or never sent in the first place, it will never be anything more than a state of mind.

- David Tortorano

About the author

David Tortorano, owner of Tortorano Commissioned Publications of Gulf Breeze, Fla., has 40 years of newspaper experience. In the Gulf Coast he's worked for *UPI*, the *Pensacola News Journal, Northwest Florida Daily News, Mobile Press-Register* and *Sun Herald*, where he was on a team that won a Pulitzer Gold Medal for Public Service in 2006. Individual awards include a 1992 first-place for in-depth reporting from the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors. He lives in Gulf Breeze. □

The economy - profile



Photo by Michelle R. Thomas

Win Hallett and the radical within

MOBILE, Ala.

in Hallett speaks with the mellifluous tones of the Deep South, his drawl belying the energy of a professional booster who was the business community's chief cheerleader for more than 22 years as head of the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce.

He doesn't sound like a radical.

But there was a time about 20 years ago when Hallett espoused a truly radical idea: Let's forget about state and county lines and think about economic development as a region.

"I had been going to conferences where regional economic development was being discussed," Hallett said. "My thought was, we need to figure out how to leverage the assets and capabilities of our area better."

To do that, Hallett said, business leaders needed to apply the regional concept to everything from higher education to trade. While some intercity competition will always be necessary and appropriate, Hallett said, the opportunities for collaboration are often greater than those for competition.

"So let's compete on the 10 percent of business we share," he said, "and cooperate on the other 90 percent," he said.

Hallett began contacting other economic development players in an effort to coalesce the major population centers along the I-10 Corridor.

"Why I-10? If you go north, you get pine trees; if you go south, you get wet."

The economy - profile

The first meeting was in New Orleans, Hallett said, in a nod to its "cachet." Pensacola, Mobile, New Orleans and Baton Rouge were represented, and the discussions centered on what they had in common.

"We all had a fair amount of tourism. We also had a lot of federal government investment and infrastructure. We talked about how to align all our assets for a mutual win-win," he said.

The regional partnership concept generated a considerable amount of buzz as more cities bought into the concept. The next meeting, held at the Beau Rivage in Biloxi, Miss., drew 150 business leaders.

Politicians were not invited.

"No politicians. None. That set their hair on fire," Hallett said with a grin.

Instead of politics, the meeting tapped the expertise of business leaders from each city. "Growing out of this was a coalition of tourism folks," Hallett said. "They eventually started getting together on their own."

The third meeting took place at the Grand Hotel in Point Clear, Ala., and featured a presentation by a Georgia State University economist.

Politicians were still uninvited. "Elected officials wanted in so bad. They wanted to be out in front of this," Hallett said. "They were really mad now."

Eventually, however, the group did come to interact with politicos at the national level, but with mixed success.

"We decided to take our show on the road to Washington," Hallett said. "We came up with a regional legislative agenda. It was marginally successful." Congressmen and senators, as it turned out, were even more hidebound by state lines, and did not generally embrace regional collaboration.

Still, the D.C. fly-ins allowed business people to meet with policymakers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other business and government leaders, so the group continued to visit the U.S. Capitol for several more years.

As the years have passed, regional economic development activity has ebbed and flowed. Hurricane Katrina's widespread destruction in coastal Louisiana and Mississippi sparked significant changes to business and government leadership, making it more difficult to maintain the regional coalition in those states.

But nothing reinforces the regional partnership like the fight to land a big industry.

"Do you think they care what county it's in or even what state it's in?" Hallett said of major industrial prospects. "No. They care about workforce, energy, transportation, proximity to customers or the supply chain."

Hallett recalled the first efforts to bring multiple regional partners along on trade missions orchestrated by Mobile area business leaders.

"We all went so many places all over the world. There was so much lost luggage, so many missed flights and airport meals. We would bring people from Mississippi and Florida on our trade missions, even when we did all the work. We knew that if they

> were successful, guess where their products are going to come through? The Port of Mobile."

Perhaps the best example of a regional approach was the formation of the Gulf Coast Aerospace Alliance. The metro areas along I-10 banded together in part to exert combined political influence during

the Airbus-Boeing tanker competition.

In Hallett's view, the decision by Airbus to build commercial airplanes in Mobile was the best success of all. "Now we can't be hijacked by Congress. The political aspect has been taken off the table." Perhaps because of that, Hallett said, the Gulf Coast Aerospace Alliance is not quite as active as it was.

But when the need arises, Hallett is confident that business leaders have learned to see across state lines and combine their resources to go after the big success stories. Because, he said, they've learned that they have an awful lot in common.

"We have a common history. Common food. Common music," he said. "We are intertwined because of our history and political involvement and cross pollination."

– Martha Simmons

"Why I-10? If you go north, you get pine trees; if you go south, you get wet."



Gulf Coast cities and towns are seeing a rebirth of their downtown urban cores, a big change from the flight of the past...

or New Orleans, it's nothing new. Folks have been drawn to the urban core for years to enjoy the night life of the French Quarter, or Vieux Carre, and in particular Bourbon Street, or to see the beautiful homes in the Garden District. A stroll along the Mississippi River is also popular, along with visiting museums.

New Orleans has always been different. The most European-looking city in the United States, the Big Easy has been something of a living museum with a look all its own that draws people to its core.

But for some of the other city cores along the Gulf Coast, drawing people to their downtowns is something of more recent vintage. In virtually any city in the region, from Bay St. Louis to Mobile to Pensacola and beyond, the downtown areas are experiencing something of a renaissance.

Buildings that had been vacated for years are being refurbished, and sidewalks that were once deserted come nightfall are starting to experience lively activities ranging from festivals to clubs and more. Now people who once fled to the bedroom communities around the urban core are clamoring for places to live downtown. It's a trend that has been going on for some time now.

During the post-World War II urban decline, cities went through a period of decline as people moved to new areas springing up around the central cities for a variety of reasons. The term urban sprawl and bedroom communities became common. The flight led to something of a death spiral for many downtown areas. Shopping centers followed the population to the suburbs and people lost their reason for going downtown. But that was then.

According to "Downtown Rebirth, Documenting

the Live-Work Dynamic of 21st Century U.S. Cities" published in 2013, for more than three dec-



ades now, downtowns "are diversifying their economies and land use, restoring and enlivening public spaces." City centers have been adding arts, cultural, dining, education, medical and research institutions, along with hospitality leisure and sports venues.

There has also been "a dramatic and sustained increase in residents, living both within business districts and adjacent neighborhoods."

The report, prepared for the International Downtown Association, says places once shunned "are thriving after dark."

The *Business Quarterly* asked its writers who are spread across the region to explore some of these new urban hot spots so our readers can see that what's happening in their own town is actually part of a much larger trend.

And if you think it's just the core cities of each of the metro areas, you are in for a surprise. As one of our writers will tell you, the smaller towns outside the immediate I-10 area also experienced a rebirth. Alabama even has a program called Main Street Alabama, designed to help small towns rediscover what made them special in the first place.

Our survey is not complete. We took a sampling of the region, and we have no doubt there are more examples we could share with you. - *David Tortorano*



New Orleans Convention Bureau New Orleans has always been known for its downtown.

Photo page 20, downtown Mobile (photo by Michelle R. Thomas), illustration GCRL.

Move to Mobile that paid off

MOBILE, Ala.

hen Jim Walker and his brother Woody told their Fairhope neighbors back in 1987 that they were planning to move west to downtown Mobile, the reaction was decidedly negative.

"They said downtown was the roughest place you've ever been," Jim Walker recalled.

Undeterred, the brothers took a closer look at the area, scouting out possible locations, both business and residential. It was an eye-opening tour but,

Walker said, "rough" was not the word that came to his mind.

"Abandoned" was more like it. The one-time commercial hub of southwest Alabama had indeed hit upon hard times. Most of the retail stores that had anchored Mobile's Central Business District were long gone,



Matt Irvin

having fled to gleaming new malls that were closer to the suburban population centers and that provided free parking and air-conditioned comfort. Left behind were vacant, boarded-up storefronts.

It was against this backdrop that the Walkers opened their first downtown bar, G.T. Henry's, which in 1988 became a popular Dauphin Street pub that helped kick-start a new era of nightlife that would blossom into the thriving LoDa (Lower Dauphin) Entertainment District.

The next quarter-century would see a massive infusion of public and private spending that would put a lasting mark on downtown Mobile. And while boosters say there is more work to do, the transformation thus far has been nothing short of breathtaking.

One such booster is Elizabeth Stevens, who, as president and CEO of the Downtown Mobile Alli-



ance, spends her time promoting and working for progress in the city's core.

Or, as Stevens put it succinctly, "We get up every day and think about downtown."

Launched in 2006, the Alliance is a membership organization that represents the interests of downtown businesses. Its mission is to tackle problems that have a negative impact on downtown, but it also promotes economic development and beautification.

Much of the Alliance's work is funded through a property assessment on the 75-block downtown "business improvement district," or BID. The assessment pays for intensive beautification and littercollection efforts, concierge patrols that aid downtown visitors and programs that support economic development. The City Council green-lighted the BID in 2005, and renewed it in 2009 and 2014.

Big changes

In the late 1980s, then-Mayor Arthur R. Outlaw championed a plan to build a convention center alongside the Mobile River, a proposal that was seen as a way to open public access to the downtown waterfront while drawing tourists to the city.

The proposal wasn't universally popular, however, and in his 1989 bid for re-election Outlaw was defeated by political newcomer Mike Dow, who had campaigned against the proposal. But in a change of heart, Dow, at the urging of civic boosters, became a supporter of building what today is known as the Arthur R. Outlaw Mobile Convention Center. The revitalization of downtown began in earnest.

"The convention center was a game-changer," said Stevens.

When it opened in 1993, it was the first gem in what came to be known as the "String of Pearls," a series of attractions and improvements meant to bring people downtown while encouraging private investment. Since then, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on projects big and small.



Photo by Michelle R. Thomas

Downtown Mobile now draws visitors in a revitalization that began in the late 1980s.

Another major player in the rebirth of downtown Mobile has been the Retirement Systems of Alabama, the body that oversees the pension portfolio for the state's public employees.

The RSA renovated two hotels (the long-shuttered Battle House and the 1980s-era Riverview Plaza) and two major office buildings, the now-named RSA Trustmark Building and the historic Van Antwerp Building. In conjunction with its renovation of the Battle House, it built another skyscraper, the RSA Tower, which at nearly 750 feet is Alabama's tallest building and one of the Gulf Coast's tallest. Stevens called RSA's involvement a "pinnacle moment."

"What made a huge difference was the RSA Tower and the Battle House Hotel being developed together," she said. "The Battle House reopening changed the liveliness of Royal Street."

Monumental projects such as this have proved their value, but Stevens said there's been another important ingredient for the renewal process.

"You have to have things to do to bring people downtown," she said.

A variety of events do that very thing. The signature downtown celebration, Mardi Gras, has been joined by such family-friendly draws as the New Year's Eve First Night celebration, the monthly Art Walk and a number of activities in Bienville Square, including the daytime Brown Bag concerts and Kids Day events, to name a few.

Major brick-and-mortar projects also offer activities for visitors. Cooper Riverside Park and Mobile Landing have opened up the riverfront for walking, sightseeing and, this winter, ice-skating. The History Museum of Mobile and the adjacent Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center and IMAX Dome offer thought-provoking exhibits. Cathedral Square is a beautified greenspace central to a blooming arts community. The historic Saenger Theatre, restored to its original glory, hosts touring entertainers and serves as home to the Mobile Symphony Orchestra.

The Alabama Cruise Terminal, built to host cruise ships, has been idle for several years, but in September, first-term Mayor Sandy Stimpson announced a deal to again bring a cruise ship to Mobile, with service set to resume in November 2016. And the newest downtown jewel, the GulfQuest National Maritime Museum of the Gulf of Mexico, opened in September to give visitors access to interactive exhibits that tell the story of "America's Sea."

Government offices also have played a huge role in the new downtown. Since 1994, local and federal officials have opened:

- Mobile Government Plaza, housing city and county offices, as well as district and circuit courts;
- The courthouse annex, for probate court and other county services;
- New FBI and Social Security Buildings

In addition, a new federal courthouse is planned, and is expected to open in 2018.

Major private investments include new hotels (a Hampton Inn and a Candlewood Suites, and an under -construction Hilton Garden Inn); the renovation of others (the Admiral Semmes, recently rebranded as simply "The Admiral," and the Holiday Inn) and dozens of new restaurants and bars.

St. Louis Street has become a new hotspot for redevelopment. The one-time "Automobile Alley" is long past its glory days, but at least two of the abandoned car dealerships are being reborn as tech- and engineering-focused office space. Other renovated buildings house small businesses and residential lofts.

So what's the next priority?

"In my opinion, the most important thing we can do is get more residential development downtown," said Stevens. Right now, about 1,500 people live downtown, but there's room for growth. Developers are encouraged to create mixed-use projects that combine commercial and residential. Stevens said downtown is especially open to such projects.

"Downtown, you can have developments of different heights and different densities," she said, because such developments already exist.

The City Council last May approved a "form-based zoning code" for downtown, land-use rules that promote walkability and aesthetic appeal that is becoming a popular zoning option. "The form-based code is a new way of looking at zoning," said Stevens. "What's really important is the street life. Everything in the (form-based) code is all about quality street life."

Mobile's use-based zoning code tends to favor automobile traffic by requiring set-backs from the street and large parking lots, but this was a problem for developers who hoped to create the type of pedestrian-friendly projects that make sense downtown. In 2012, the Alliance hired a company co-founded by urban planner Andres Duany (*see page 36*), bestknown for designing Florida's Seaside, to develop a form-based code for downtown and to guide it through to its ultimate adoption.

The resulting code gives developers certainty that any projects approved for adjoining parcels will complement what they are doing. Stevens is excited about the code's potential, and predicts that "in 10 years it will have a significant effect downtown."

Abandoned no more

For Jim Walker, the rebirth of downtown has been gratifying in a number of ways, and not only in proving wrong those naysayers of so many years ago. For him, downtown is home, and he and his brother have found success in an expanding roster of businesses that includes their restaurant and bar, the OK Bicycle Shop, which operates in an iconic Dauphin Street building that once housed a bicycle store.

He said downtown has gotten an unfair rap on crime, but in his eyes the police department is doing a great job of protecting the area.

"Downtown Mobile is the safest place in the city," he said. The police know everyone downtown, he said, "including the bad guys."

He also had a lot of praise for Stimpson and his administration, saying their pro-business agenda streamlined the "bureaucracy" small businesses face.

"It's a unique place to live," Walker said. "A little village neighborhood."

Fairhope says it with flowers

In just about any endeavor, it's good advice to play to your strengths. For civic and community leaders in Fairhope, one of downtown's biggest strengths is its wonderfully landscaped, bayside charm. It's simply a beautiful place.

Fairhope is blessed with natural beauty – stately oaks and towering longleaf pines provide shade on the bluff overlooking Mobile Bay. And just a stone's throw away, downtown storefronts offer splashes of color and historic architecture that beckon the passersby who stroll down streets adorned with ornamental trees, shrubs and flowers.

Today, it's hard to believe that a setting so picturesque could have battled blight. Mayor Tim Kant remembers those days. In 1983, Fairhope hired him to be the city horticulturalist, at the time a unique position for an Alabama municipality. He was given the task of working on beautification projects that today would be the envy of many municipalities. Back then, it seemed a daunting task.

"Downtown was under pressure," Kant said. New retail centers had sprouted out on the highway – U.S. 98 – and were siphoning businesses and people away from the heart of the city. Fairhope also was still recovering from Hurricane Frederic, the September 1979 storm that tore through the Mobile Bay region, destroying homes and businesses, disrupting commerce and uprooting or severely damaging trees across the area.

"We lost a lot of green" in Frederic, said Kant.

A new vision was needed to save downtown. Upon his arrival, Kant met Fairhope architect Buddy Richardson, a man who harbored just such a vision. Richardson, who died in 2008, believed in what downtown could be, and became the driving force for the beautification efforts that transformed a neglected urban center into the gem that it is today.

Donating time and talent, Richardson worked with Kant and then-Mayor James Nix. The architect began drawing up a master plan for restyled streetscapes that emphasized on a pedestrian-friendly vibe.

They started with "bump-outs," street curbing that holds flower beds at downtown intersections. The first ones went in at Fairhope Avenue and Section Street, the heart of downtown.

Trees also became a priority. The city's Rotary Club donated dozens of trees, red maples and Bradford pears, which Kant started planting downtown.

"I planted a lot of trees to hide the ugliness," he said, referring to abandoned storefronts, many of them with broken windows and faded paint. "It wasn't very attractive."

Kant said the city developed a comprehensive plan in the 1980s that, among other things, mandated that all local government offices be located downtown. They also worked with the University of South Alabama and Faulkner State Community College to open satellite campuses downtown area, because the city felt "it was very big ... keeping a 4-year and 2year school here," said Kant.

Kant said the zoning board, working with the City Council, has helped give downtown Fairhope a business- and pedestrian-friendly environment.

There are no architectural rules that developers are required to follow downtown, he said, but "we try to



Christmas lights in downtown Fairhope add to the ambiance that already makes the town popular spot for shoppers.

educate them" on ways to integrate their plans into the surroundings. The city offers "an eclectic type of mixture that gives us character," he said. That character is partly rooted in the city's past. Downtown Fairhope has been recognized by the federal government as a National Historic District, and the Historic Fairhope Preservation Committee has listed 25 properties as meeting "the criteria for historical value for the National Register of Historic Places."

Government investment

In the mid-1980s, Kant said, the city took over an abandoned shopping center and refurbished it into a Municipal Complex that houses municipal offices and the city's Civic Center. The building also is home to part of the University of South Alabama's Fairhope campus.

Next door is the new police station that previously was a bank. The PD occupied its new home in the early 2000s, and the old downtown location was renovated by the Fairhope Single Tax Corp. and opened as the Fairhope History Museum, a gift to the city in honor of its 2006 centennial. (The FSTC, a non-profit that owns much of the land downtown, has its origins in the Single Tax Colony. FSTC leases land to people who pay rent and build homes or commercial structures; fees paid to the FSTC cover property taxes and projects it undertakes "to enhance the Fairhope Community," according to a brochure the organization distributes.)

One of downtown's most impressive public investments is the Fairhope Public Library, built from the ground up and opened in 2007. The nearly 40,000-square-foot facility has become a center for daily life in the city.

Another downtown amenity is the playground at Fairhoper's Community Park. A grassroots community effort came together to construct wooden playground equipment in 1994; 20 years later, the city gave it a makeover that included new playground equipment, accessibility features and a splash pad.

Fairhope is known for being an artists' colony, and this informs many of the beautification projects the city undertakes, said Kant. Artists generally have an affinity for natural beauty, an attitude that makes it easy to promote landscaping projects. "It's our theme," said Kant. "It's about the beauty and the flowers we plant."

In fact, anywhere you look downtown, you'll see flowers: in the bump-outs, in baskets hanging from light poles, in flower boxes in front of storefronts – even in boxes on top of trash receptacles. The city keeps downtown immersed in flowers year-round, thanks to the 10 greenhouses it operates to cultivate the many seasonal plantings.

"We grow most all of our plant materials," which allows the city to replant its flower beds with new annuals "at least" four times a year, the mayor said.

The opening of the 89-room Hampton Inn in April of 2009, in the heart of downtown provided a big boost for tourism, Kant said.

Because of its shops and restaurants, downtown Fairhope is typically abuzz with activity every night of the week, he said. Because of its reputation, the city often hosts visitors from other cities who hope to recreate the Fairhope magic in their own hometowns.

That magic has boosted property values and given the city quite a bit of recognition among national publications. *Travel and Leisure* has listed Fairhope among "America's Best Beach Towns" and "Most Romantic Towns." *Family Circle* placed it on its list of "10 Best Towns for Families." *Money Magazine* has called it one of the "Top 25 Places to Retire," and *Coastal Living* advises readers looking for one of the "Top 10 Romantic Escapes" to visit Fairhope.

"The independent stores give downtown a uniqueness" that supports the city's success, the mayor said. In fact, he said, they've been so successful that parking spaces sometimes are in short supply.

"But that's a good problem to have," he said. \square

About the author

Matt Irvin, former assistant metro editor at the *Mobile Press-Register*, is a freelance writer, researcher and editor. Through a newspaper career that spanned more than 30 years, he worked as a reporter, page designer, copy editor and news editor. He's a native of the Gulf Coast region and lives in Mobile, Ala. □

The rebuilding, and then some

GULFPORT, Miss.

rive through downtown areas of any Mississippi Gulf Coast city on any given day or night, and it's not easy to find an open parking space. Restaurants and bars are intertwined with banks and retail shops that keep these areas busy during daytime hours.

Downtowns in cities from Bay St. Louis to Pasca-

goula not only were rebuilt after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005; they were reborn, with city leaders carrying out their visions of streets that would be full night and day.



Melissa Scallan

"You always want to have a vibrant city and especially downtown," Gulfport Mayor Billy

Hewes said. "We're fortunate that we have a good mix of offerings."

After Katrina hit, there were five restaurants and bars in downtown Gulfport, the second largest city in the state. Now, there are more than 30.

"If you leave Gulfport hungry, it's your own fault," Hewes said, laughing, and added, "I think we're just getting started."

The city's downtown has a unique view of the Mississippi Sound, which makes it attractive to business owners, Hewes said. Besides the normal banks and real estate offices, the city also has seen a number of specialty retail shops open downtown. Some businesses that operate mainly during the day also are leasing apartments and lofts on their upper floors.

The downtown revitalization has spread throughout the Mississippi Coast. In Bay St. Louis, residents and tourists flock to new restaurants, bars, retail shops and art galleries. To the east, in Biloxi, the city is re-

paving roads downtown, as well as putting in new infrastructure.



Biloxi's downtown

has thrived since the early 1990s, when Mississippi approved gaming and casinos were built along the waterfront. But the historic city has continued to improve in the last decade.

In the summer of 2015, the city opened MGM Park, home to the minor-league baseball team, the Biloxi Shuckers. Residents from all over the Coast attend the games, which helps downtown businesses.

Across the Biloxi Bay, the city of Ocean Springs' downtown area also boasts a variety of businesses, including dress shops, restaurants and cultural center.

"Downtown revitalization was a core element of our recovery plan," said Ocean Springs Mayor Connie Moran. "We incorporated a new streetscape plan with accessible sidewalks/crosswalks, new decorative lighting and a new plaza by the historic train depot for a farmers' market and festivals. We also buried utility lines along Government Street, built several hidden parking areas behind retail and planted Oak trees to form a tree canopy similar to Washington Avenue."

That canopy is one of the main features that make the city unique, Moran said.

"The breathtaking canopy of ancient Live oaks is the most obvious asset that sets us apart," she said. "People enjoy shopping and dining in a safe, clean and beautiful environment."

Lisa Bradley served as Gulfport's Main Street director from 2006-2014 and oversaw the façade program for private property owners, as well as the streetscape program. Those two were done at the same time that the city's infrastructure was rebuilt by FEMA.

"We felt like it was important to have that all land at the same time," she said, adding that the façade program improved the look of storefronts and drew more businesses to the area, while the landscaping helped the area to look better. The result has been a more robust downtown than Gulfport has seen in years, even before the disaster storm.

"Retail was very slow to come back," Bradley said. "So we divided the train depot into four or five spaces for new retailers and charged them rent below market price until they can get their businesses up and running. We wanted to create a cluster of businesses that could help each other."

Gulfport officials broke ground in mid-December on a downtown project dubbed "Fishbone Alley." This is an alley between 26th and 27th avenues that will be transformed with artwork and landscaping. Businesses in the historic buildings lining the two



Photo by Michelle R. Thomas

Lovelace Drugs in downtown Ocean Springs is one of the draws of the downtown core.

streets can have courtyards that open into the alley.

The price tag is \$250,000 and will be paid for with a federal grant. It should be complete in about three months.

Bradley, like Hewes, believes the concept of living downtown will catch on, especially if there is a grocery or convenience store downtown.

"People want to be able to walk everywhere," she said.

The city recently found out it would get \$17 million to build a state-of-the-art aquarium, which leaders hope will bring more tourists and businesses to the area.

Moran is hoping for the same in the Ocean Springs downtown area.

"Ocean Springs has always been an historic arts community, inviting tourists to enjoy the ambience," she said. "We have even more restaurants, unique galleries, festivals and nightlife entertainment than ever before.

"We've gone through some growing pains, but we are proud of the national accolades we have received, such as the 2013 Great American Main Street Award."

Moran added that she would like to see a Fresh Market, Acme Oyster House and several hotels in downtown Ocean Springs, as well as mixed use development there and along the waterfront. For now, she likes the progress the city has made.

"Our unique restaurants across various culinary tastes, along with nightlife establishments with live talent, draw people of all ages to downtown," Moran said. "I appreciate the diversity and vibrancy that these businesses have added to Ocean Springs." \Box

About the author

Melissa Scallan is a former reporter and editor with 25 years of newspaper experience. She previously worked for the *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* in Alexandria, La., the *Monroe News Star* in Monroe, La., and the *Sun Herald* in Biloxi, Miss. Currently she manages the public affairs office of the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources in Biloxi. She lives in Gulfport, Miss. \Box

Tired town gets its mojo back

FORT WALTON BEACH, Fla.

ort Walton Beach came into its own in the early 1950's as a hip little beach town complete with a casino, dance pavilion and state of the art beach cottages.

Its downtown grew up along U.S. Highway 98 just north of the Santa Rosa Sound and, according to Ted Corcoran, president of the Greater Fort Walton Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, "was *the* place

to go in the 50's, 60's, 70's and into the 80's, until Northwest Florida started moving east."

The malaise that descended upon the little city was a lengthy one, and tattoo parlors and dive bars took hold.

"For about 20 years Fort Walton Beach was the old, tired, broken

down car, while everyone east was driving brand new models," Corcoran said.

But Fort Walton Beach has its mojo back.

It's trendy again. Retailers catering to bikers, runners, kayakers and tobacconists maintain store fronts on the U.S. 98 strip west of the iconic Brooks Bridge. They share space with proprietors of older antique shops, clothing stores and new era artists in the field of body art. Long established fine dining restaurants like the Magnolia Grill benefit from the allure of newer, cutting edge purveyors of food and spirits, and vice versa.

Fort Walton Beach features its very own microbrewery and a beach bar, sand and all, in the middle of downtown. You can find a snooty wine joint if you so desire, or grab a seat in any of a handful of places that specialize in serving up the increasingly popular craft beers. Parties are held downtown to celebrate traditional holidays like St. Patrick's Day, Christmas and



Halloween, and the city hosts its own wild event each spring with its Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival.

More is coming.

Plans are on the books for a mixed-use development the likes of which the city has never seen, and millions of dollars have been set aside to improve the Fort Walton Beach Landing on Santa Rosa Sound and create a waterfront walkway sure to enthuse and educate visitors.

The city itself continues to take an active role in encouraging new development and improving the assets that it holds in downtown.

The Fort Walton Beach City Council voted in 2014 to create a downtown business and entertainment district that essentially allows adults to carry alcoholic beverages from one location to another or onto public areas like the Landing. In conjunction with that Landing Park concerts and movie nights are held weekly during in the spring, summer and fall.

The city has also been proactively governing to attract business. Its most recent offerings include substantially reduced impact fees to developers and tax exemptions for existing businesses willing to expand.

City fathers have committed more than \$3 million over the course of nine years to fund some exciting improvements at the Landing Park. They've also done the legwork required to convince Florida's Department of Environmental Protection to set aside \$1.1 million in BP oil spill money to build a waterfront boardwalk that will give people an opportunity to see, up close, planned enhancements to the area environment.

"We see nothing but incredible positive 'everything' in downtown Fort Walton Beach," Corcoran said.

Bill Avery moved to Fort Walton Beach in 2006 and fell in love, first and foremost, with the big, wide open Fort Walton Beach Landing Park on Brooks Street, which runs off of and parallel to busy U.S. 98. It was the park and the sense of community they got



from it, he said, that convinced him and his wife Lora to settle down in the city. They opened a pizza restaurant they called Fokkers across the street from the Landing.

He remembers well downtown at that time, the stalwart Magnolia Grill across the street, "a couple of tattoo parlors, and antique stores that were never open."

"Change was inevitable," he said. "We leased a place and moved into a dead zone."

Avery credited himself and a few other business owners with helping to kick start the anticipated change. They began staying open a little longer and holding events like pub crawls to lure local people downtown.

"Fort Walton Beach is where people live," he said. "Destin (eight miles east) is where you go to vacation."

The collaborative efforts of business, city leaders and community redevelopment experts helped turn the tide toward improvement, Corcoran said. Soon enough, Run With It, a store catering to runners, opened for business and became immediately popular, even hosting Tuesday runs along quiet Brooks Street behind the store.

Bob's Bikes, another sports-related shop, has since moved its business downtown, and another store catering to paddle boarders and kayakers has located there as well.

Those businesses have also contributed to the esprit de corps of downtown. The Tuesday runs get fantastic turnout and Bobby Nabors, owner of the watercraft store, has opened a bar called The Boardroom, in a niche that actually opens onto his business.

The city upped its own stake in the game, Corcoran said, by hiring, almost three years ago, young Michael Beedie as its city manager.

Beedie, Corcoran said, singlehandedly outlined and created entertainment district ordinances for Fort Walton Beach. These ordinances allow downtown visitors to carry alcoholic beverages from one establishment to another or possess them in public areas within the district.

"He is of the demographic who is not ready to go directly home on Friday nights, but is desiring a city where he and family and friends can socialize, wander from one unique restaurant to another – which has made downtown hip again," Corcoran said.

Beedie has also guided the city's creation of a master plan under which just over \$3 million will be set aside through 2024 to enhance the amenities within its Fort Walton Beach Landing Park. Improvements include construction of a covered amphitheater enhanced by terraced seating, a bowl shaped event lawn and a non-motorized boat launch and coastal ecology demonstration area, according to the master plan.

The city has already been approved for \$1.1 million in National Resource Damage Assessment money from BP to build a boardwalk that will run on either side of and through the Landing Park. The concept was originally conceived years ago, but funding for it became a reality in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, when BP shelled out millions to Gulf Coast municipalities to "make things right."

Beedie said the Department of Environmental Protection, the agency that had to approve the boardwalk project, loved the concept. Plans are to install native sea grasses and an artificial oyster reef along the walkway and construction of interactive devices along the roughly two mile course to educate travelers about what they're seeing.

The Fort Walton Beach landscape will be forever altered when a long-planned multi-use development to be called the Landmark Center is constructed at a prominent city intersection in the middle of the downtown.

"I think this Landmark thing will be the biggest thing to happen to this city in a long time," said Avery.

When completed the \$33 million, multi-story Landmark Center will tower over the rest of downtown. Plans call for two buildings connected by an extended archway. The 144,000 square foot development will house a 112-room Hilton hotel, 24 loft condos, retail space, a top floor restaurant and sky bar and a conference center. Indoor parking will be provided to residents and guests, according to the planners.

"It's very classy," Ken Wright, the spokesman for the group developing Landmark Center, told the

Northwest Florida Daily News last year. "It's sort of that Louisiana-French Quarter-European style."

Another major change to downtown Fort Walton Beach will come possibly 10 years down the road when the Florida Department of Transportation hires a contractor to replace the Brooks Bridge that runs from the eastern edge of downtown across the Santa Rosa Sound to Okaloosa Island.

The two lane bridge is 50 years old and has to be replaced, according to FDOT District 3 Secretary Tommy Barfield. The new bridge should be wider and lower than the existing one. Its much larger footprint than the existing span could theoretically wipe out much of the downtown area, and have a major impact on the city's ongoing rehabilitation effort. Barfield has said it may take \$1 billion to replace the Brooks Bridge, with the purchase of right of way contributing greatly to that cost.

Corcoran and others are optimistic the bridge can be replaced without wiping out the eastern end of Fort Walton Beach's downtown, and some business owners who say they've been briefed about ongoing engineering studies are optimistic as well.

"A more pedestrian friendly bridge allows more folks from the Island to walk to downtown and ultimately the bridge revision will certainly modify and enhance the traffic flow through downtown," Corcoran said. \Box

The Pensacola downtown boom

PENSACOLA, Fla.

t is quite telling that whenever an out-of-towner comes to visit us in Gulf Breeze, at some point we make sure we take them across the bridge to downtown Pensacola for what has become something of a standard "tour."

After crossing the three-mile bridge that links Gulf Breeze to Pensacola, we turn on 17th Avenue to pass under the Graffitti Bridge, which is adorned with



Photo by Bruce Graner

Palafox Street has become popular for visitors.

graffiti that changes on a regular, almost daily basis. Then at Cervantes, we could make a right, which would take us to the



scenic bluffs. But instead we turn left and head to the intersection of Cervantes and Palafox. Then we head south on Palafox and the site of the battle between Spanish and British forces during the American Revolution.

We take Palafox all the way to the downtown business district, and if it's at night - and it usually is we like to see the reaction of our guests to all the people strolling around, enjoying the restaurants and the bars. Some are here to go to the Saenger Theatre. We also make sure we show them the food trucks at the corner of Palafox and Main.

We go all the way down to the foot of Palafox to the waterfront, and sometimes if we're lucky there's a ship at the pier. There are plenty of private pleasure boats as well.

We'll often take them to the stadium where the Blue Wahoos play, and then head to the Seville Historic District, where there are plenty of old homes dating to the 19th century. We also make sure we show them the beautiful homes at Aragon Court.



Photo by Bruce Graner

Pensacola's Palafox Street has been listed by the American Planning Association as one of the America's Great Streets.

This is all a far cry from what was in downtown Pensacola when we first moved here in December of 1984. I worked in downtown Pensacola, and during the daytime there was a fair amount of activity. It

About the photographer



Bruce Graner has more than 40 years experience as a newspaper photographer. He began his newspaper career with the *Times Enterprise* in Thomasville, Ga., and has contributed photographs to national publica-

tions such as *Newsweek* and *People*. He retired from the *Pensacola News-Journal* in October 2015 and is a freelance photographer. He lives in Pensacola, Fla.□

still had a 5-and-10 with a lunch counter. But at night, it was pretty dead, save for Trader Jon's.

I can't say I paid much attention to downtown Pensacola after I stopped working there in the early 90s. Sure, we'd bring visitors to Trader's, because I knew the owner, Martin "Trader Jon" Weissman, a real character who liked to wear different color socks.

But today, the transformation of downtown Pensacola is something of a point of pride. My wife and I do like living in Gulf Breeze, just like we liked living at Pensacola Beach when we first moved here. But there's something about downtown, the ease of access, the constant activity, that is quite appealing. And though I can't ever recall in the past thinking I would like to live in downtown Pensacola, now there's something to be said about it. Having things in walking distance is quite a charming thought, though there is still no grocery store.

– David Tortorano

Networking helps rural towns grow

MONROEVILLE, Ala.

S now on the square, holiday festivals and shopping contests are abundant in rural towns lately, all part of a larger plan to battle economic decline in a region traditionally among the poorest in the nation.

"They are doing a lot," said Josh Dewberry, editor

of the *Monroe Journal* in Monroeville, hometown of "To Kill a Mockingbird" author Harper Lee. "What they are doing is going well, more than anyone has tried to do here before. We had Halloween, Christmas tree lighting with snow...they are getting tremendous turnouts for events on the square."



Connie Baggett

Dewberry said a new business, coffee/ice cream shop "The Bean & Cream" recently announced its 2016 opening on the historic square, and there are hopes more new business will follow. The local economy struggled in recent decades after textile giant Vanity Fair moved most of its manufacturing off shore and its management and design to larger cities.

Other manufacturing mills idled in the community, leaving the county's unemployment at a staggering 9.7 percent in October, according to the Alabama Department of Labor report. That measure had dropped from 9.8 in September from a high of 11.2 in July. The state's unemployment rate for October was 5.9 percent and the national rate 5 percent.

Dewberry said economic development efforts here are still largely focused on wood products and textiles outside the retail efforts of Main Street.

Another factor in regional economic efforts is a recently announced merger of four community college/technical schools into one regional institution. Brewton's Jefferson Davis Community College, Monroeville's Faulkner State Community College, Evergreen's Reid State Technical College and Bay Minette's Faulkner State Community College will merge over the next two years with Faulkner's administration taking the lead, said state officials.



Dewberry said that

will have an impact on the economies of all the cities and towns that host those colleges that have typically driven workforce training. Retail/tourism business, he said, is one area where Main Street can be effective in shaping growth.

"We have been a Main Street Alabama city for a year now," he said. "It is just getting off the ground statewide, but I think things are moving in the right direction."

Mary Helmer arrived in the state in 2013 as the newly-hired state director of Main Street Alabama, an organization with a focused approach to revitalize downtowns. It reorganized in the state in 2010 after several years of limited or no activity.

Main Street has seen enough success in places like Athens and Alexander City that Helmer was recently part of a revitalization conference convened by the White House Rural Council, in partnership with the National Main Street Center and Project for Public Places. Helmer, federal officials and non-profits with rural focus explored how to shape effective federal and philanthropic assistance.

Main Street Alabama serves as coordinator of the Main Street program statewide and stresses publicprivate partnerships, broad community engagement, and strategies that create jobs, spark new investment, attract visitors and spur growth, Helmer said.

"Following a 30-year model for community revitalization that has seen great success nationwide, we build upon the authentic history, culture and attributes of each downtown or neighborhood commercial district to generate sustainable change."

Main Street Alabama incorporated in 2010 to provide national certification, training and technical assistance to downtown communities and neighbor-

Economic development - rural towns

hood commercial districts that are wanting to follow the National Main Street Model, which focuses on organization, promotion, design and economic vitality. The goal was to re-establish a stronger program that could match the investment and success of neighboring state Main Street programs.

Helmer set out to follow the directive of building the organization, providing essential services to Main Street Communities, which pay membership fees for different levels of services to sustain the program. To grow new Main Street Communities, it requires educating and engaging leaders and the public, she said.

Sixteen Alabama cities are now part of the program along

with 24 who participate as Downtown Network communities. These communities represent a population of over 800,000 people throughout Alabama in 33 counties, Helmer said. Alabama Power executives felt strongly enough about the program that the electricity supplier paid fees for multiple cities to join as network members.

Alabama Power manager Larry Woods said the strategy is working in rural areas, one reason the power provider paid network fees for cities in several south Alabama counties.

"Supporting communities and community development is important to Alabama Power Company," Woods said. "We live and work in these communities across the state, and we want our communities to thrive and be successful. These communities are our home."

The idea behind the trademarked "Four-Point Approach," Helmer said, "is that all four points work *together* to build a sustainable and complete community revitalization effort."

<u>Organization</u> establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among various groups that have a stake in the commercial district.



Photo by Connie Baggett City Park in historic downtown Brewton. <u>Promotion</u> takes many forms but the goal is to create a positive image that will rekindle community pride and improve consumer and investor confidence in the commercial district.

Design means getting a Main Street community into top physical shape and creating a safe, inviting environment for shoppers, workers, and visitors. Design takes advantage of visual opportunities inherent in a commercial district by directing attention to all of its physical elements: public and private buildings, storefronts, signs, public spaces, parking areas, street furniture, public art, landscaping, merchandising, etc.

<u>Economic Vitality</u> strengthens

a community's existing economic assets while diversifying its economic base.

Helmer said two cities in particular were recognized for great strides in the past year.

Athens used public and private partnerships to foster new businesses like H.C. Blake, a family-owned and operated plumbing, electrical, heating and cooling company servicing North Alabama, Helmer said. "Shortly after H.C. Blake purchased W.E. Estes & Sons and their building, Jim Batson, owner of H.C. Blake, contacted Spirit of Athens and offered use of the storefront building, warehouse, and a vacant lot."

The non-profit partnered with H.C. Blake and have since opened High Cotton Arts, an art incubator, in the storefront building and plan to use the vacant lot for outdoor classrooms and events.

"Jim allowed SOA to take a vacant building and fill a community need to offer affordable working space for artists," she said. "High Cotton Arts opened in April 2015 and houses 8 artists. Spirit of Athens and the Athens Arts League, a committee of SOA, provide assistance and resources to artists in marketing their own business and bringing foot traffic into the center."

Economic development - rural towns

Helmer explained that the participating artists are taught to think out of the box, encouraged to teach classes, participate in special events, and promote their work through social media and other marketing materials. "High Cotton Arts would not have been possible without the generosity of Jim and H.C. Blake," she said. "The committee also received private donations and funding from the local legislators as well as in kind donations and at least 700 volunteer hours this year."

Alexander City hosted the "Missing Piece Competition" that offered \$100,000 in business development assistance for the selected winning proposal. From 11 applicants, Coffee Corner came out the winner, Helmer said.

"Main Street Alabama is transforming quality of life in Alabama communities by restoring the vitality of their downtowns," she said. "Economic development is at the heart of this effort. Working with affiliated local entities, Main Street Alabama helps bring jobs, dollars and people to support vibrant and sustainable commercial districts that are essential to healthy communities. Main Street Alabama delivers expertise and tools to help create powerful partnerships needed to bring historic downtowns back to life. At the state level, we champion programs, policies and resources that pave the way."

Main Street Alabama partners with the State, with EDPA, and with other economic and community development organizations to advance the *Accelerate Alabama Plan*.

Rural towns across the region are finding opportunities and providing training following a tested, proven model to grow retail business and tourism. The program helps towns find their niche; exploit their unique attractions for growth.

"Preserving historic buildings while filling them with new uses has proven a potent strategy to create places that draw people of all ages, incomes and cultures to live, work, shop and spend leisure time," Helmer said. Towns as diverse as Thomasville and Brewton are opting to work at retail development.

"Main Street programs are more than great events and pretty downtowns," she said. "Main Street is a comprehensive approach to economic development that supports entrepreneurship, enhances the tax base, builds community capacity, and creates partnerships among groups key to revitalization. Across the country, Main Street communities evidence the value of mixed-use, walkable historic downtowns."

About the author

Connie Baggett has more than 20 years as a reporter with the *Mobile Press-Register* and nearly a decade as a political strategist and public relations coordinator. She's a 1989 graduate of the University of South Alabama in Mobile, former workforce training coach and currently director of program management for the city of Brewton, Ala. The mother of three, she's also a singer/songwriter and lives in Brewton. □



Real estate


It was a grand vision for South Mississippi in the wake of Katrina, but today Andres Duany says it was too much of a dream...

BILOXI, Miss.

he energy at the Isle of Capri casino a little more than 10 years ago was almost palpable. These out of town New Urban planners and designers, along with the 80 or so local experts, had come together at the lightly damaged waterfront casino hotel to help plan a new Mississippi coast. They did it through brainstorming sessions called "charrettes."

All around them they saw a devastated South Mississippi coastline: other casinos tossed inland, homes

torn to their foundations, businesses wiped away, roads and bridges heavily damaged.

It was to these planners a chance to build and showcase what once was - walkable urban communities that shunned creeping urban sprawl. This would be a showcase of new 21st century communities in Waveland, Bay St.



David Tortorano

Louis, Long Beach, Gulfport, Biloxi, and others, using the newest, and to their way of thinking, the best in modern urban planning.

Over six days they developed plans for a Mississippi Gulf Coast of multiple communities where people could walk to stores or work or use efficient public transportation, like a trolley linking all of the towns across the coast. It was holistic, it was bold, it was appealing.

But it was not going to happen.

A variety of factors, including new federal guidelines about the elevation of coastal homes, insurance costs, politics, the allure of getting casinos back and the pressing need to return some sense of normalcy

as quickly as possible all conspired to ensure that the grand vision would never happen. Only bits and



pieces here and there would take hold.

One of the key players who led the effort to build a new Mississippi Gulf Coast knows now that it was too much of a dream. And he says he'd take a different approach today.

Andres Duany, the world-renown Miami-based architect, planner and co-founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism, led the Mississippi Renewal Forum just weeks after the historic Aug. 29, 2005 hurricane. He said the process was certainly therapeutic, coming at a time when people were still in shock and needed something to give them hope.

Duany was in Europe when the *Business Quarterly* reached him by phone and asked him to reflect on that massive planning and design undertaking that occurred more than 10 years ago.

He said that from the start, the political leaders established an upbeat tone about the rebuilding effort. From the governor down to local officials, they assured locals who were still reeling from the devastation that South Mississippi would come back better than ever and that billions of federal dollars would be available for rebuilding.

"The therapeutic atmosphere infected us, the planners," he said now about the ambitious design forum. With so many talented designers and visions of restoration dollars, "it was a toxic combination, dreamlike. Everyone who participated was allowed to dream. People asked for things that were impossible."

The resulting plans were, indeed, too idealistic.

"Our proposals were too far a reach beyond what had been there before the storm. Normally we, the planners, would have known such things impossible, but hope and money was in the air," he told the *Busi*ness Quarterly.

Reality took a back seat to the dream.

That they were caught up in the excitement isn't that surprising. I covered the Forum every day for the *Sun Herald*, and the possibilities were exciting. Be-

fore the hurricane, I had written stories about the rush to build condos, and the way it was taking over much of the shoreline. Like others, I saw the potential for an entirely new South Mississippi, even though I knew there were two opposing forces at work that were pulling people in different directions.

On the one hand were these talented planners who were intent on taking into account the wishes of locals, going so far as to pore over old photos. They came up with plans for the 11 towns, ensuring each retained its own distinct character while still the epitome of modern urban thinking.

On the other hand, outside the Isle of Capri, there were resilient, hard-hit residents preoccupied with

the present. They needed places to live, jobs, services, and were dealing with insurance companies. I saw it every time I went back to the newsroom, where some staffers had lost their homes yet were dutifully still coming to work every day.

I couldn't help but ask myself when I saw their struggles, can all these folks who lost so much afford to wait for these beautiful plans to reach fruition?

Getting a handle on everything that was happening was a challenge in itself. I had to go from one group to another, one room to another, listening in to find the most interesting, important points to write about for the daily story and sidebars. I always found something.

I was struck by the creativity of the visions being put on paper for what a new Mississippi Gulf Coast could look like. Much of the look was familiar to me. In the late 80s I had written about Florida's Seaside, an idyllic looking place with white picket fences and pastel-colored beach homes. It was designed by Forum leader Duany.

The planning was on a grand scale. The participants came up with picturesque communities, each with its distinct flavor, linked by trolley, light rail, and bike and walking paths. They pictured converting U.S. 90 into a pedestrian-friendly grand boulevard and shifting most commuter traffic further north. They also wanted to move the railway freight inland, to free up the existing coastal tracks for commuter rail connecting the 11 coastal cities.

One of the moments I remember clearly occurred when I was in a large room with designers hunched over sketches. I stopped in the middle of a long line of tables laid end-to-end and looked at an intriguing sketch showing a small, simple, attractive home.

Marianna Cusato continued to work but took the time to tell me the cottage in her sketch was less than 300 square feet, had a porch and was designed as an affordable alternative to FEMA trailers.

I got a copy of the design and the story appeared on

the front page of the *Sun Herald* the next day. Little did I know that I had written about what would become one of the enduring results of the forum, the Katrina Cottage. Last October, Rob Steuteville,

editor of *Better Cities & Towns* and senior communications advisor at CNU, wrote a 10-year anniversary story for his publication. He also had a front-row seat at the Renewal Forum, and he headlined his

story, "The enduring, versatile Katrina Cottage."

He wrote that at the request of Duany, architects created designs for affordable cottages that could be manufactured and shipped in modular form.

"The idea gained national attention with Marianne Cusato's 294-square-foot design, which was published in the *Sun Herald* during the charrette and then built and displayed three months later at the International Buliding Fair in Orlando," he wrote. "It won the People's Choice architectural award from Cooper Union in 2006 and was published in mainstream papers and journals nationwide."

Duany said about 3,200 of the cottages were built.

But the Katrina Cottage success was a bright spot in a process that was doused in cold water just as the experts were wrapping up their designs.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency issued its new flood elevation advisory maps, and virtually everything they had done would have to be

"The therapeutic atmosphere infected us, the planners ... Everyone who participated was allowed to dream."

elevated, some buildings as much as 20 feet or more despite the negotiations by the new urbanist planners that eventually reached all the way to Washington. Some put together technical alternatives, others simply moved forward hoping the maps wouldn't stand.

Duany said it was the one problem that could not be overcome. He considered the higher elevations to be a draconian measure that put an entirely different dynamic into the rebuilding process.

"What happened was the wealthy were able to come back but the poor couldn't because it was too expensive relative to the smaller houses to raise them," Duany said.

He said the planners predicted the lower income areas would move away to suburban subdivisions with the proposed flood elevations. They also predicted that retailers, who have to be at sidewalk level for easy pedestrian access, would end up reestablishing their businesses further inland, closer to Interstate 10. The elevation issue, in fact, would end up advancing urban sprawl, he said.

"It was a very bad outcome, just as we predicted and feared," Duany said.

The gap between what the designers thought the Mississippi Gulf Coast could look like and what was the most prominent issue in the minds of residents was summarized by Biloxi's then-Mayor A.J. Holloway, a year after the hurricane.

"Quite honestly, I wasn't too impressed with the charrette and new urbanism," he told me for a report I did for the philanthropic group Living Cities in October 2006, a group that had come in to try to help Biloxi and Gulfport after the forum. He said that what the new urbanists came up with after the hurricane was unrealistic and pricey. Besides, he had more immediate matters to face, including cleanup and getting Biloxi's casinos on shore. Housing also preoccupied his time.

It would be easy to point out that a drive along U.S. 90 provides few indications that any of the plans developed at the forum came to fruition. In fact, it would be easy to assume it all was a bust; a lot of time, effort and money spent on something that simply didn't occur. But that would be unfair and not quite accurate.



Image courtesy Bruce Tolar

The cottages were a major hit resulting from the forum.

While the Katrina Cottages were the most visible result of the forum, less obvious was the adoption of form-based codes, which differ from separate use zoning, the more common practice.

Along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, "there's probably more of a concentration of form-based codes because of the charrette," said Steuteville, who said a lot of the consultants working with the cities helped bring that about. But that's something that is in the background, and not that obvious to observers.

Still, Steuteville wishes more had happened.

"I think it's a shame that they didn't look at some things, like the light rail and trolleys and creating another boulevard that reconfigured how the buildings relate to the streets. It could have tied the whole coast together."

Was it all worth it?

"I think that it was really an extraordinary experience for the planners as well as the people who participated," he said. "It gave people hope, only six weeks after the hurricane, to look at the future like that. I think, knowing that not all of it got built, it still was very much worthwhile."

Duany, for one, learned a lot from the experience. Given a chance to do it all over, he'd suggest two charrettes: one within two months of landfall, designed to give folks hope, and one a year later when people are ready for the technical aspects.

For Gulf Coast residents, its an opportunity they would just as soon never have. \Box



The little house that could

Out of all the elaborate plans created by the New Urbanists, the attractive, tiny Katrina Cottage may be their enduring legacy...

BAY ST. LOUIS, Miss.

Just weeks after Hurricane Katrina swept through the Gulf Coast leaving unimaginable devastation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation donated a \$1 million grant for a massive strategic planning effort to begin the rebuilding in South Mississippi.

"In a crisis of this magnitude, you could go in a thousand different directions and a million people will be offering both dollars and help," said Alberto Ibargüen, Knight Foundation's president and CEO,

in announcing the grant. "The best way we can help right now is to support the efforts of Mississippians to develop a strategic plan for the revival and reimagining of their community."

The nonprofit Congress for the New Urbanism, based in Chicago, was chosen to guide the



Lisa Monti

design and planning for the 11 coastal cities and worked in partnership with the Mississippi Governor's Commission for Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal.

Led by Andres Duany, an architect, urban planner and founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism, some 100 CNU engineers, designers, planners and other professionals along with about 80 local

architects worked through an intense, week-long process Oct. 12-17, 2005.

The Mississippi Renewal Forum was considered the largest such design charrette ever held. Organizers were facing down the enormous task of rebuilding or repairing thousands of homes, commercial buildings and the infrastructure of coastal counties and municipalities that had been pounded by Katrina.

The design efforts produced drawings, plans, reports and spurred conversations to get the Coast back on its feet and make it better than before. By one account, a report on the recovery done three years after the hurricane, two ideas stood out: cottages for housing and codes for rebuilding. Photo by Michelle R. Thomas

The Cottages at Oak Park in Ocean Springs, Miss.

Architects Allison and John Anderson of unabridged Architecture in Bay St. Louis were in the thick of the planning and discussions during the charrette process and afterwards.

"The long term effect of the Mississippi Renewal Forum goes beyond the Katrina Cottage," said Allison Anderson. She sees the ideas generated by the architects and urban designers being translated into the post-Katrina development patterns and land use.

"All the discussions raised awareness of design as having a positive impact in our community," she said, and discussion of codes and smart growth is more prevalent than it was before the storm.

"That has had very positive results for residents along the Gulf Coast," she said. "The Renewal Forum really brought awareness of walkable communities to the forefront and smart growth instead of urban sprawl. Many cities including Bay St. Louis, have made huge strides in connecting neighborhoods to downtown and to each other."

Architect Bruce B. Tolar of Ocean Springs was a member of the recovery planning team which helped spur the creation of housing that became known collectively as the Katrina Cottage. The houses - as small as 200 square feet up to 1,300 square feet with a second story - are an innovative step up from the basic, temporary FEMA trailers.

The cottages, designed to be permanent and grow in value, became the poster child of the renewal effort to house thousands of residents who had lost some 80,000 homes to the storm.

Tolar said looking back at the results of the charrette planning process, he sees more accomplishments than just the Katrina Cottages.

"I don't think it's the only thing. It's the thing that got the most attention."

He said planners may have been too optimistic and that some proposals were just extremely optimistic. "We didn't realize how hard they were to accomplish and how much time it would take to make things happen."

Tolar said his design team spent time brainstorming and fleshing out ideas for the cottages. He said he kept his own family in mind in his designs and focused on what he would want in a cottage if his family lived in one.

Tolar said Duany tapped Marianne Cusato's little yellow cottage design to be built for a model neighborhood. The first cottage made was displayed at the International Building Fair, a homebuilder's



Photo by Michelle R. Thomas

Katrina Cottages in Ocean Springs, Miss., are a legacy of the Mississippi Renewal Forum that was held in October 2005.

show, in Orlando. It drew favorable reviews. It won the People's Choice architectural award from Cooper time and interest in building cottages was slowed by Union in 2006.

Afterwards, the house was brought to Ocean Springs and put on public display on a lot at Washington and Government streets.

Tolar recalled a woman who traveled from Picayune, Miss., to see the cottage. "She just stopped and stared at the house and said, 'It's so humane.' It struck me like a bolt of lightning," Tolar said.

It wasn't long after that encounter, Tolar said, the momentum started to build for the model neighborhood and Cottage Square began to take shape in Ocean Springs. The two acre infill development now has 15 houses.

There are now five cottage developments of various sizes in Ocean Springs and one in Pass Christian. "They stay 100 percent occupied," he said. "They're rarely empty for more than a month."

Tolar said the Katrina Cottage idea was ahead of its the recession and lack of funding. Ten years later, the cottage concept is gaining attention in other parts of the country.

"In the last six months the interest has really peaked for us," he said. He is in talks with developers in Decatur, Ga., and Asheville, N.C., to develop cottage neighborhoods. \Box

About the author

Lisa Monti, former business editor of the Sun Herald in Biloxi, Miss., is a writer, editor and photographer with 40 years experience in publishing, private industry and government. She's worked as a reporter and editor at daily newspapers, lifestyle magazines, business journals and more. She lives in Bay St. Louis, Miss.



The marine science lab in our own back yard

Maritime research in the Gulf of Mexico has always been given short shrift, but the oil spill has made this region a hot spot...

BATON ROUGE, La.

he Gulf of Mexico is the ninth largest body of water in the world and an important economic engine because of the rich natural resources in and under its waters, from massive underground deposits of crude oil and natural gas to productive fishing grounds.

But for too long, the area was underfunded for research, compared to the waters of the East Coast, Great Lakes and West Coast. According to figures cited by The University of Southern Mississippi's Department of Marine Science, while the Environmental Protection Agency's regional programs spent more than \$1.01 billion on the Great Lakes and \$485 million on Chesapeake Bay during a 30 year period, \$87 million was spent on the Gulf of Mexico.

"This is the hardest working body of water that the nation has," said Monty Graham, chair of the USM marine science department.

But the funding picture for research in the Gulf has greatly improved over the past few years, ironically, because of a disaster that imperiled the fragile ecosystem of the body of water. This has led to more research than ever into the Gulf, including a new center under construction in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that will be an international hub for coastal research.

"There will be more money coming in for research in the next year or so than ever before," said LaDon Swann, director of the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, a federal/state partnership that includes the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association and nine academic institutions.

The drivers for all this activity are the massive civil and criminal penalties BP paid for the Deepwater



Horizon disaster, which killed 11 people and left a record-setting oil spill that marred the Gulf along with the fish, mammals and birds that inhabit it.

The research component of the BP settlement includes, over a 15-year period, about \$200 million for the NOAA Science Program and nearly \$20 million for each of the five Gulf Centers of Excellence set up in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. In addition, the Gulf Research Program of the National Academies will support over a 30 year period about \$500 million in research.

Swann said the additional money will allow for bigger picture research projects, like studies into fisheries, community ecosystems and making communities more resilient to natural disasters. The goal is to look at long-term solutions for issues such as the erosion of coastal wetlands and rising sea levels.

"We want to take the research information and help synthesize that, so it can be understood by people who are non-scientists," said Swann, specifically mentioning people who work in key Gulf Coast industries like fishing and tourism.



Photo by Gloria Tortorano Tarballs at Pensacola Beach, Fla., after the 2010 BP spill.

Page 44: Diver collects algae and seaweed samples near natural gas rig. Photo by Caitlin C. Wessel, Dauphin Island Sea Lab.

According to a Deepwater Horizon tracker set up by the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, a network of state and federal government agencies, academics, business leaders and non-governmental organization that seeks to ensure a healthy Gulf, there have been 229 projects funded in the five states along the Gulf with \$1.2 billion in BP money. These projects include such things as looking at the effects of the spill on life in the Gulf, using new materials to absorb oil and restoring oyster beds.

Graham, who became head of the USM marine science department in August 2011 after the BP spill, said the historical lack of funding for research in the Gulf led to gaps in the knowledge of the body of water. That forced scientists to come in quickly and collect data to fully understand the scope of damage caused by the spill.

"We know the Gulf of Mexico was relatively poorly monitored and the observational systems were incomplete at best," Graham said.

Total funding for the marine science department at USM has jumped from \$6.3 million in 2010, to \$17.4 million in 2015. The university's Gulf Coast Research Laboratory has also seen a modest boost in funding, going from nearly \$8.3 million in 2010 to almost \$8.6 million in 2015.

But Marcia Landen, the associate vice president for research at USM, notes some of those earlier numbers may have been boosted by federal and state spending for Hurricane Katrina recovery.

The university looks at the additional money from

torical shortfalls in funding research in the Gulf of Mexico, Graham said. USM worked with the National Science Foundation to bring a research vessel from California to the Gulf, a move that will greatly increase the knowledge of what is happening in the body of water.

"Our approach at USM is this is money coming in to support sci-

and we're not going to hire a bunch of people, expecting they'll go away in a few years."



Photo by Michelle R. Thomas The Gulf of Mexico is a rich environment for study.

The Gulf of Mexico is relatively understudied, Graham said, so there's a rich environment for research.

"We're using this as an opportunity to build prothe BP settlements as a way of making up for the his- grams for us to be competitive in the future," he said.

> "There will be more money coming in for Gulf research in the next year or so than ever before."

"The funding climate from the federal government has really taken a hit. If we want to stay competitive, we have to help the nation keep an edge in STEM fields."

Another center for marine studies that hopes to become an international leader is the Water Campus in Baton Rouge, a collaboration between Louisiana Economic Development, the Coastal Protection

ence," he said. "We don't feel this is one-time money and Restoration Authority, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation and the Water Institute of the Gulf. The first phase of the 30 acre development, between

downtown Baton Rouge and LSU, should be completed by the end of 2017. About \$45 million will be spent to build the first portion, which will include a scale model of the Mississippi River that will allow scientists to test coastal restoration methods by seeing how sediment moves.

Officials with the Water Campus say the development could eventually include a range of public and private offices for firms and agencies involved in the water management industry and curbing coastal land loss caused by rising sea levels. Louisiana officials estimate this could generate 20,000 to 45,000 new jobs through 2030.

"Louisiana in a sense is the canary in the coal mine," said Nick Speyrer, director of communication for the Water Institute. "You go to other parts of the country and the world and they face similar challenges. The ultimate vision is for Louisiana to be

seen as the place where the world's best coastal research is taking place." \square

About the author



Timothy Boone has more than 20 years of experience working for newspapers and business magazines in Louisiana and Mississippi. He has covered beats ranging from casinos to real estate. He's worked for the

Alexandria Daily Town Talk, the Daily Iberian, Mississippi Press, the Sun Herald of Biloxi-Gulfport, the Advocate and Baton Rouge Business Report. He lives in Baton Rouge, La. D

The research organizations

drive to one of the grand daddies of marine science research in the Gulf of Mexico, the University of Southern Mississippi's Gulf Coast Research Laboratory in Ocean Springs, makes you think you might be lost as you pass through a neighborhood filled with attractive homes.

Same, too, if you go to the Environmental Protection Agency lab at Florida's Pensacola Beach on the north side of the island next to Santa Rosa Sound.

One of the less publicized features of the Gulf Coast I-10 region is the number of organizations, federal and state, involved in estuarine, littoral and ocean marine science.

The federal marine science research is conducted by the U.S. Navy, Environmental Protection Agency and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Department of the Interior.

State-related research is done by the universities with interests in the region. That list includes Louisiana State University, University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi State University, University of South Alabama, University of West Florida and Florida State University. Some have separate opera-



Photo by David Hay Jones, Dauphin Island Sea Lab Tiger shark is doused with seawater before getting tagged.

tions, and some are members of two cooperatives, the Northern Gulf Institute, created in 2006, and the Marine Industries Science and Technology cluster, created in 2014.

The Northern Gulf Institute is a NOAA cooperative institute launched in 2006, one of 16 NOAA cooperatives. Led by Mississippi State University,



The Dauphin Island Sea Lab south of Mobile, Ala., was founded in 1971 and is just one of the marine science labs the region.

other members are the University of Southern Mississippi, Louisiana State University, Florida State University and the Dauphin Island Sea Lab. It defines the Northern Gulf of Mexico region as the upland, watershed, coastal zone and coastal ocean areas from the Sabine River in Louisiana to the Suwannee River in Florida.

The Marine Industries Science and Technology Cluster, I-10 corridor, is led by the Mississippi Enterprise for Technology. MSET was awarded more than \$500,000 by the U.S. Small Business Administration to put Mississippi on the map as a center of activity for the nation's marine science and technology industry. The goals are to create jobs, build synergy among cluster participants, attract industrial investment and increase the marketability of innovative technology.

But it's the Navy that's the big dog in marine science activities. The Naval Oceanographic Office at Stennis Space Center, Miss., provides oceanographic products to the Department of Defense. It's a subordinate command of the Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command, which also is at Stennis Space Center.

NAVOCEANO has operational control of seven oceanographic ships operated by the Military Sealift

Command. The ships are all forward deployed and operate year-round. NAVOCEANO also operates a fleet of unmanned underwater vehicles operating worldwide. The Navy also operates a detachment of the Naval Research Laboratory at Stennis.

While research is scattered throughout the region, much of the federal activity is at Stennis Space Center. It includes the National Data Buoy Center, National Coastal Data Development Center and the U.S. Geological Survey Hydrographic Instrumentation Facility. - *David Tortorano*

About the photographer

Michelle R. Thomas worked at the *Mobile Press-Register* for 17 years, culminating in a position as photography manager. Later she became an insurance broker and also opened her own business, MRT Images. She has won

multiple awards for her photography, including a national award for photography that appeared in *Alabama Living* magazine. She lives in Daphne, Ala. \Box

The alien world of the deep

t's an alien environment, a world untouched by sunlight where life forms begin under entirely different rules. It's a world with mysterious "blue holes" that form lakes on the ocean floor, completed with their own shorelines.

The creature spotted near an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico (*photo*) certainly looked like something from a distant planet. It's a 26-foot long Mangapinna or longfin squid. Scientists believe it traps food on the bottom of seabed floor.

The Gulf of Mexico and all the other bodies of deep water in the world represent an environment whose depths are as unfamiliar as a distant planet. They hold amazing secrets waiting to be discovered, and marine science is a key.

Oceans make up two-thirds of the Earth's surface, yet nearly all of it is still unexplored. Oceans drive and moderate weather and climate, provide food, transportation corridors, recreational opportunities, pharmaceuticals and other natural products and serve as a national security buffer.

To get a sense of what has yet to be explored, fold a paper in thirds. One represents land and two represent water. Place a quarter on one of those thirds. That's the part of the oceans charted so far.

The vast majority of marine organisms have yet to be identified. Most major classes of the earth's organisms are primarily or exclusively marine and possess unique reproductive systems, sensory and defense mechanisms that have adapted to extreme environments, from cold polar seas to the great pressures of the ocean floor.

And much can be learned from them. The number and variation of species greatly exceed terrestrial biodiversity, and that represents a vast, relatively untapped source of new materials, compounds and organisms that may well overtake the use of terrestrial organisms for biotechnology in the coming decades. Given the potential for new products and services, marine science represents a possible economic boon.

The promise includes special purpose chemicals and pharmaceuticals. Marine organisms produce



powerful adhesives, anti-cancer agents and the most potent natural toxins known. \square

(Condensed from Mississippi Gulf Coast Marine Science 2007-2008, Preface and Part I, by David Tortorano)

University spinoff makes it



IHMC was once part of a university, but in the 10 years since it became independent, it's made a name for itself on the international stage... Boston Dynamics

Business Quarterly, January 2016 - 50

PENSACOLA, Fla.

t took about 20 years of working with various robots on walking before the Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition got the hang of it. IHMC was able to take a Boston Dynamics humanoid robot and make it climb a pile of carefully stacked bricks without falling in the DARPA Robotics Challenge in June.

On the way to that feat, the Pensacola high-tech

team worked on a robotic dog (quadruped) walking over a rough terrain. It also partnered with NASA on a biped robot, called Robonaut, with no arms or head and experimented on making it walk.



"Dozens of man hours went into this before we started the

DARPA Challenge," said Jerry Pratt, an IHMC robotics researcher.

"This was a super aggressive program, so it was nothing we did in a day for that challenge. Their mobility is severely limited. It's incredible where humans can get. They can climb fences. They can crawl underneath things. Humanoids are still kind of pathetic. We'll keep pushing them forward."

Pathetic is right. They walk very slowly, and they have a bad tendency to fall over, not a good habit for a heavy, high-tech machine.

IHMC finished second in the DARPA robotics competition, by the way, and earned \$1 million for its effort. It beat out some of the most prominent research organizations in the nation.

The robot used in the challenge, named "Running Man," is just one example of the achievements by IHMC, which began doing independent research and development more than 10 years ago when state legislators agreed in 2004 to let the creative group break off from the University of West Florida, where it got its start in 1990.

The separation allowed IHMC more autonomy in its research projects, such as being able to partner with private industry, and the ability to expand the number of researchers and its facilities. The first IHMC researchers began working for the new notfor-profit research institute of the Florida



University System in February 2005.

Has IHMC's first 10 years of independence been a success? Founder, Director and Chief Executive Officer Ken Ford said he is proud of the research institute's successes to date.

"In 10 short years, we have built a vibrant research organization conducting leading-edge research in artificial intelligence, cognitive science, knowledge modeling and sharing, human interactions with autonomy, robotics, exoskeletons, undersea technology, advanced interfaces and displays, cybersecurity, linguistics and natural language processing, software agents, expertise studies, knowledge representation, machine learning, and human performance and resilience in extreme environments, as well as other related areas," Ford said in an interview with the *Gulf Coast Reporter League's Business Quarterly*.

"At IHMC, our culture is our secret sauce," Ford said from the institute's satellite office in Ocala, Fla. "We are teammates and delight in each other's accomplishments. The start-up culture and values remain strong. The first 10 years have brought many successes and we are confident that the next decade will continue in that same direction."

IHMC has done its pioneering research with industry and government partners that have included: Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), National Science Foundation, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, National Institutes for Health, Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Agency, Department of Transportation, IDEO, Raytheon, IBM, Microsoft, Rockwell Collins, Boeing, Lockheed, and Science Applications International Corp., among others.

NASA has tapped IHMC for its expertise to help it develop walking capabilities for its Valkyrie robot. It received a grant from the National Robotics Initiative and NASA's Johnson Space Center.

Page 50: NASA Valkyrie photo in the background, IHMC photo of Atlas in foreground, illustration by GCRL.

One of the goals of the National Robotics Initiative, announced in 2011, was to create robots that would assist in missions in hazardous environments. NASA hopes to one day use Valkyrie robots to build habitats on distant planets, and for co-exploration with humans.

A Valkyrie robot spent time last year at IHMC so the team could work on its bipedal control algorithm. NASA's plan is the IHMC's expertise in locomotion will be used in all the R5 robots that will be at the center of a new competition launched by NASA, the Space Robotics Challenge.

One area that IHMC plans to make gains in the coming years is in undersea technology. It recently hired Dawn Kernagis and David Fries in 2015. Kernagis is a biomedical doctor who studies how underwater exploration affects the human body. Fries has an extensive background in developing ocean-related technologies, like a device to count fish populations.

The two express excitement, not only about IHMC, but about working together and with the other research scientists to develop useful products that enhance human capabilities underwater.

"We have a nice team," Kernagis said. "I've never worked with an agency that has a perfect blend of expertise in an incredible collaborative environment. I don't think twice about knocking on a door, presenting an idea and asking, 'What do you think?' I've never seen anything like that in an academic environment."

Fries, who already has 35 patents issued, licensed 12 technologies and has published more than 60 arti-



Photo by Bruce Graner IHMC's new \$8 million, three-story research facility.

cles in oceanography, promises to develop even more ocean-related technologies while at IHMC. They may forecast realistic fish populations, clean up oil spills or do other much-needed work.

"I'm passionate about taking technology and innovations and getting them out there in the marketplace," said Fries, who has spun off at least three companies. "I'm looking forward to seeing inventions be used commercial-wise."

Julie Sheppard said Kernagis and Fries are an example of IHMC's commitment to enhance human abilities with technology developed by the institute. Sheppard serves as the institute's general counsel and as a special assistant to Ford.

"A lot of great things have happened in the first 10

years," she said. "Now, we're starting to get things patented and into the commercial world."

IHMC, which has solidified its national reputation for leveraging and extending human capabilities, seemingly has an unending list of future projects. Some ideas come from IHMC and others come from a collaboration of funding agencies and the research institute. Pratt,

Elsewhere in the region

IHMC has become well-known for its work in robotics, but there are other organizations in the region doing work in the field. The Naval Oceanographic Office in Mississippi operates a fleet of unmanned underwater vehicles,



and the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Panama City, Fla., also uses them. In addition, unmanned aerial systems are built by Northrop Grumman in Ocean Springs, Miss. □

for instance, looks forward to the day humanoids can do really fast walking over rough terrains. He'd like to see a legged robot learn how to crawl, stand up, balance, walk and learn how to run all on its own. He is excited about an upcoming "Olympics" for paralyzed people wearing exoskeletons. The Cyberthon is scheduled in Zurich, Switzerland in 2016.

"There is plenty of stuff to do," said Pratt, who holds four patents on robotics inventions and was named to the Florida Inventors Hall of Fame this year. "One thing leads to 10 more things. There's never an end to it."

And IHMC is preparing for its more than 100 researchers, which include computer scientists, cognitive psychologists, neuroscientists, linguists, physicians, philosophers, engineers, social scientists and others, to have a facility to help advance their latest innovative, human-centered ideas.

An \$8 million, three-story, 30,000 square-foot research facility located behind its current downtown Pensacola location is scheduled to be completed by February. It was delayed a year by flooding during heavy rains in 2014.

"We're really pleased to be back on track with the new building," CEO Ford said. "The delay was troublesome, but the architects were able to develop some really good, workable solutions. We're eager now to get this building built and keep growing in Pensacola."

About the author

Duwayne Escobedo worked two dozen years as an editor, investigative reporter and columnist, covering a range of news, business and feature stories. His work has been in the *New York Times, Associated Press, Bloomberg* and *Time* magazine. He won the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors award for investigative reporting in 1997. He lives in Pensacola, Fla. \Box

Santa Rosa County is serious about helping you grow your business





The infusion of \$1.5 billion in BP money could forever transform the economic landscape of Northwest Florida...

FORT WALTON BEACH, Fla.

magine receiving a huge sum of money and being told, "Here. Make the world around you better."

That isn't really too far from what five prominent Northwest Florida residents were asked to do when they were selected in late 2013 to serve as the first board of directors of a nonprofit corporation

called Triumph Gulf Coast.

These five, a former state House Speaker, an accountant, a developer, a CEO and a policy administrator, have been handed the daunting task of managing the greatest economic development fund in the history of Florida. They've been asked to find ways to diversify a regional economy



Tom McLaughlin

that's long relied on tourism and the military.

To accomplish this, the board of directors of Triumph Gulf Coast will have at its disposal \$1.5 billion secured for eight Panhandle counties when a settlement for economic claims was reached between oil giant BP and five Gulf Coast states that filed suit following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010.

Florida's share of the \$4.9 billion settlement came to about \$2 billion, and, thanks to legislation shepherded though the state Legislature in 2013 by then-Senate President Don Gaetz, 75 percent of that money is to be spent on economic diversification projects within eight "disproportionately affected" Panhandle counties: Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, Bay, Wakulla, Franklin and Gulf. Triumph Gulf Coast board members say they intend to use the huge infusion of dollars to bulk up local



efforts to recruit new businesses, provide opportunities for the expansion of existing facilities and encourage entrepreneurial endeavor.

"This is one of, if not the greatest opportunity for Northwest Florida in terms of economic development," said member Stephen Riggs IV. "Triumph has the ability to bring transformational change to the economic landscape."

But they also see the chance to do much more than just bringing in jobs. Members say they want to make a "generational impact."

"The legacy of Triumph should be 'wow," said member Allan Bense. "Our legacy will be noticed when our children and grandchildren don't have to leave Northwest Florida to find suitable employment."

Triumph board members say they'll move deliberately and invest wisely to maximize the impact of the dollars. They say they'll put money into "human capital development," the education and training of new generations of workers. And they'll use the BP funds to shore up and enhance existing infrastructure so that Northwest Florida can support the growth economic development is sure to bring.

"Northwest Florida has some incredible blessings to build upon with our tourism industry and strong military presence," said board member Stan Connally. "But opportunities like Triumph Gulf Coast are giving us the chance to be even stronger – to diversify our economy and work together as a region to invest in our future."

The spill

What would become one of the greatest environmental disasters in United States history began to unfold on April 20, 2010 when a huge bubble of methane gas ran up the drill column of the deep water well called Macondo and caused a massive explosion that killed 11 people and injured 16. The well,

Page 54: Oil residue on Pensacola Beach, Fla., after the BP spill. Photo by Gloria Tortorano.

constructed 41 miles off the coast of Louisiana by Transocean and leased by BP, burned for two days before sinking. Oil began gushing from the broken pipe some 5,000 feet beneath the surface and would flow for nearly three months before crews could figure out a way, on July 15, to cap the leak.

Government experts put the amount of oil that escaped into the Gulf from the Deepwater Horizon site at 4.9 million barrels, or more than 100 million gallons. The nasty gunk reached the shoreline of Louisiana and Mississippi, filling bayous, staining shore lines and devastating wildlife.

Residents of Northwest Florida could only watch helplessly as the oil plume spread and each day the threat to their snow white beaches increased.

The nation and the world were also watching, and the oil spill was a nightly news highlight. While first Louisiana, then Mississippi and Alabama and Texas suffered environmental blows, Florida, and in particular Northwest Florida saw its multibillion-dollar tourist industry wither.

Oil from the spill, in the form of tar balls and tar mats, got on the beaches of Northwest Florida. But it was the constant barrage of media coverage that created a negative impression of a region that relies heavily on drive-in traffic from neighboring states. Tourists avoided the beaches and found other places to spend their vacation dollars. It would be two years before the visitors began returning.

"Clearly the worst of the damage occurred in the 24-month period during and following the spill," said Rick Harper, the head of the Office of Economic Development and Engagement at the University of West Florida.

The massive blow to tourism and all the businesses that relied upon it struck an area already hard hit by recession and facing dramatic cuts in Department of Defense spending. Northwest Florida's reliance on the military and tourism became painfully clear.

"Northwest Florida's economy, in many ways, is a two-trick pony, state Sen. Don Gaetz said. "We have to get away from being a two-trick pony."

Triumph

Three years to the day after the explosion at the Deepwater Horizon drill site, on April 20, 2013,

Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi filed suit against BP seeking \$5.4 billion for past, present and future damages the state had suffered because of the BP oil spill.

Gaetz laid the groundwork two years earlier for Northwest Florida to receive the bulk of the funds realized through any settlement the state might reach with BP in legal wrangling over economic damages.

He had successfully lobbied state leaders to support his Oil Spill Economic Recovery Act, which called for all dollars coming to the state for economic damages to be split so that 75 percent went to the eight Northwest Florida counties.

"Northwest Florida was seriously and disproportionately affected not only by the spill but also by perceptions created by the spill," Gaetz argued. Evidence provided to the Senate indicates that sales and bed tax receipts were down by 40 percent or more in parts of our area and down by nearly a third overall in the coastal counties of Northwest Florida."

His bill passed with bipartisan support.

During the legislative session of 2013, just months before Bondi filed her lawsuit, Gaetz amended his Oil Spill Recovery Act to create Triumph Gulf Coast, establish its board of directors and set up parameters for how the settlement money would be spent. He did this, he said, to prevent Northwest Florida's windfall from being "frittered away" and to make sure the money was "used in a responsible fashion to benefit the citizens, environment and economy."

"My goal as the senator for Northwest Florida is to make sure our citizens and community are protected by a 30-year endowment," he said.

Triumph Gulf Coast was set up to manage a trust fund. Its board has 30 years to spend the \$1.5 billion "in equal amounts each year."

The nonprofit corporation was designed to be free of government control. It "is not a unit or entity of state government," the enabling legislation states. It "is a separate budget entity and is not subject to control, supervision, or direction by the Department of Economic Opportunity in any manner."

The board, assembled in late 2013, won't be free from oversight, however. An independent auditor will look over the investment funds each year. The

state's Auditor General will also conduct an annual review of Triumph Gulf Coast's books. Twice a year, at the end of June and the end of December, the board will be required to report to the governor, House Speaker and Senate President on its investments, priorities and the progress being made in selecting suitable economic development opportunities.

The enabling legislation also establishes strict guidelines for board membership.

Members cannot be political office holders and can only serve a single term. They are required to abide by Florida's Sunshine laws regarding open records and open meetings and to disclose their own finances. Board members are barred from benefitting financially from their association with Triumph.

The 2013 legislation called for the selection of five members to be the corporation's first governing board. The governor, Senate president, House Speaker, Chief Financial Officer and Attorney General were each entitled to pick one member.

Gaetz's influence over the initial selection process was demonstrated by the fact that three of the members are from Okaloosa County, where he lives.

As Senate president Gaetz selected Bay County resident and long-time political ally Allan Bense, a former state House Speaker.

Attorney General Pam Bondi picked Okaloosa County resident Pam Dana, a government official in the Jeb Bush administration.

CFO Jeff Atwater chose Okaloosa County accountant Stephen Riggs IV and House Speaker Will Weatherford picked Bob Bonezzi, an Okaloosa County developer.

Gov. Rick Scott selected Stan Connally, the President and CEO of Gulf Power in Escambia County.

To stagger terms, Bense and Bonezzi will serve five years as inaugural board members while the others serve four-year terms.

The board

The Triumph Gulf Coast board of directors has been in place for more than two years and the board has met just twice. At its first meeting members voted to make Bense the board's chairman. At the second, in November, it hired a law firm to offer advice and an administrator to take care of day-to-day functions, though no one is drawing a paycheck yet. That's because the corporation the board was established to run doesn't yet exist and won't until the first infusion of cash from BP lands in a bank account established by Triumph. This too is by legislative design, said board member Riggs.

BP's first payment to Florida will be its biggest. About \$400 million will come to the state, which means \$300 million is to be directed to the eight disproportionately affected counties in the care of Triumph Gulf Coast. The earliest the BP fine payment could arrive is February.

"We do not have a date certain for when funds will arrive," said UWF's Harper, who has been acting as an advisor for the Triumph Gulf Coast Board.

On its way to Northwest Florida, the funds will pass from BP to the federal treasury and from the treasury to Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi. The legislature, which convenes in January this year, must approve the appropriation of the funds to Triumph Gulf Coast.

The first check will be the last Triumph is going to see for a couple of years. After the first payment, BP has until 2019 to make its second. That payment and those that will flow annually afterward will total a little more than \$100 million. In all, 15 payments will be made over 18 years. Triumph Gulf Coast has 30 years with which to utilize the money it receives.

A possible spending plan

Gaetz's first version of the Oil Spill Economic Recovery Act, passed in 2011, secured \$30 million for economic development in the eight impacted counties, also to be spent on efforts to diversify. Harper, who at that time was working for the Senate president as a senior policy director of economic affairs, was asked to create a formula through which the \$30 million would be awarded.

Gaetz and Harper now argue that the formula Harper and his staff came up with worked well enough that it can be utilized by Triumph Gulf Coast.

The concept started with "a regional approach to economic development" that removed the state from the decision making process. All dollars allocated by Harper's group had to go to businesses that were not tied to tourism or the military. The idea was to help Northwest Florida diversify and lessen its dependence on those two pillars of the local economy.

Projects were vetted by local economic development agencies to ensure that the business ventures receiving money were sound. Performance was monitored and "claw back" provisions established so that Harper's crew could get its money back if a business didn't live up to expectations.

Criteria that called for a creation of a particular number of jobs or dictated a wage rate were waived given the realities of Northwest Florida, a region whose job opportunities and wage rates don't rival more populated areas of the state.

About \$25 million of the \$30 million was applied successfully to fund 13 projects that created 9,000 jobs. The remaining \$5 million was "clawed back" and will be spent on future projects, Harper said.

Utilizing "multiplier affects" and looking out 15 years, Harper projects more than 24,000 jobs will eventually be created that are "directly attributable to this (original) program." He predicts total revenues generated to reach \$2.1 billion by 2030, meaning a return on investment of 4.6 dollars for every one dollar of the \$30 million spent.

"The point of the \$30 million fund, and how well it worked, is we now have a model for economic development on a regional basis. We have in place analysis and vetting to make sure we're not buying purple smoke," Gaetz said.

The worries

Triumph Gulf Coast has been viewed skeptically by local officials who feared the state was trying to get its hands on money the eight counties believed they rightfully deserved to control.

"It wrests control away from the counties. I don't see how you could come to any other conclusion by reading it," Santa Rosa County Commissioner Lane Lynchard said after the legislation creating Triumph Gulf Coast was introduced in the Senate in 2013.

Wariness subsided as it became clear the money obtained through the state's legal claims were not the same dollars coming through the RESTORE Act, another pot of BP money. But now a new fear looms. Just as Triumph Gulf Coast was created through legislation, it can be eliminated or altered the same way. Many fear lawmakers across the state, seeing how much money is involved, will seek to change the funding formula. "We have a sizeable amount of money that's going to go to the eight affected counties. We need to protect it," Bense said at the last Triumph meeting. "We need to be vigilant and do the best we can."

What they're looking at

Gaetz calls the BP money and Triumph Gulf Coast "our region's game changer." His vision, as laid out in a recent article he wrote, is that the BP dollars "must be used for long-term, long-lasting investments to broaden and deepen our regional economy."

The \$30 million that came to the region soon after the spill allowed local economic development agencies to help small businesses like Walton County's Mar Jam Supply Co. and the Greyton Beer Co. The two companies created 12 and 40 jobs, respectively.

With \$1.5 billion, there is no corporation in the world that economic developers in Northwest Florida can't approach. "The reason not to succeed can no longer be that we don't have the money," Gaetz said.

But luring big business isn't the only route Triumph Gulf Coast can take in spending money on economic diversification. Emerging industries like cyber security and unmanned aerial vehicle research and development have been discussed as good bets for a region filled with military installations.

Other companies, like those that make craft beers or offer new technologies to make government work more efficiently, have already proven worthy of investment. And then there are those ideas for making money that haven't even been hatched yet.

"We need to tell entrepreneurs to get their creative caps on, and let economic developers know it's time to think bigger," Gaetz said. "There is now not an economic development transaction for which Northwest Florida cannot compete."

About the author

Tom McLaughlin covers courts and politics for the *Northwest Florida Daily News*. With 30 years of newspaper experience, he's won the national Best of Freedom Award and Florida's Gold Medal for Public Service award, along with three investigative reporting awards and awards for court and beat reporting, explanatory writing, deadline reporting and columns.□

The Triumph Gulf Coast directors

Chairman Allan Bense

Allan Bense was selected by then-Senate President Don Gaetz to serve on the governing board of Triumph Gulf Coast.

In one of its first orders of business, the board voted to make Bense its chairman. The title won't be confirmed until the corporation the board will over-

see is formed this year. A Bay County resident,

Bense served in the Florida House from 1998 to 2006 and was Speaker of the House during his last two years in office. He's now chairman and CEO of Bense Enterprises and serves as a partner in companies with stakes in healthcare, road building, insurance, farming and mechanical contracting.



Bense sits on the board of directors at Gulf Power and Capital City Bank Group. He's chairman of the board of trustees of Florida State University, the James Madison Institute and Gulf Coast Hospital.

He's a past board chairman of the Florida Chamber of Commerce, the Florida Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, the Florida Council on Military Base and Mission Support and the Bay Economic Development Alliance. He's a past vice chairman of Enterprise Florida.

"I think no doubt it can be a game changer for Northwest Florida," he said of Triumph Gulf Coast, "\$1.5 billion is a lot of money."

Pam Dana

Pam Dana of Okaloosa County was Attorney General Pam Bondi's choice for the Triumph Gulf Coast Inc. Board of Directors.

She is Senior Strategic Advisor for the Institute for Human & Machine Cognition and owns the SURE LURE Charter Co., a charter sport fishing business.

Dana served as the executive director of the Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade, and Economic Development during Gov. Jeb Bush's administration. She led or served on the following: Governor's Advisory Council on Base Realignment & Closure; Governor's Military Base Commanders



Forum; Florida Defense Alliance; Florida Seaport, Transportation, and Economic Development Council; Miami River Commission; Florida Council of 100; Seaport Security Standards Advisory Council; Transportation 2020 Commission; Destination Florida Commission; Council for a Sustainable Emerald Coast; ITFlorida; World Golf Foundation; Governor's Commission on the Future of Space and Aeronautics; Governor's Council of Economic Advisors; Coastal High Hazard Study Committee; Florida Aquaculture Review Council; Florida Free Trade Area of the Americas Board; and the Scripps Florida Funding Corporation.

Stephen Riggs IV

Stephen Riggs IV of Destin was the choice of Flor-

ida Chief Financial Officer Jeff Atwater to serve on the Triumph board.

Riggs is a certified public accountant and partner with the firm of Carr, Riggs & Ingram. He is the son of founding member Steve Riggs. After graduating with a master's in accounting from the University of West Florida, he joined the inter-



national accounting firm of Ernst & Young. Riggs and his wife then returned to Destin to raise a family. They have four children.

"My hope is we will create and foster economic opportunities so my children will have the opportunity to benefit from our accomplishments," he said.

He has more than 12 years of accounting and auditing experience and is a member of the state and local governmental section of the Florida Institute of Certified Public Accountants.

Stan Connally

Stan Connally was chosen by Gov. Rick Scott to serve on the Triumph board. Connally, of Escambia County, is president and chief executive officer for Gulf Power. He's been employed with the Southern Company, parent of Gulf Power, since 1989 and has been in his current job since 2012.

Connally serves on the

board of directors of the Florida Chamber of Commerce as well as on the boards of Enterprise Florida, the Pensacola Chamber Foundation, Gulf Coast Kid's House and the James Madison Institute.

Connally also is Gov. Scott's appointee to the Aerospace Alliance Board, an organization represented by business leaders from four Gulf Coast states who work together to bring aviation-related jobs to the region.

Connally also serves on the Florida Council of 100 and the Georgia Tech Woodruff School of Mechanical Engineering External Advisory Board.



Bob Bonezzi

Bob Bonezzi was selected by then-House Speaker Will Weatherford to serve on the Triumph board of directors.

Bonezzi, of Okaloosa County, is president of Destin-based Bonezzi Development Co., a land management company. His corporation is responsible for such landmark achievements in construction as the



Board Walk on Okaloosa Island and the Blackstone Golf Course in Mossy Head.

Bonezzi Development has built and managed office parks in Shalimar and Mary Esther, major mixed -use developments on Okaloosa Island and in Mary Esther and Mossy Head, residential properties in Santa Rosa Beach, Destin, Crestview and Mary Esther and restaurants in Fort Walton Beach, Perdido Key, Pensacola, Destin/Miramar Beach and on Okaloosa Island.

"Bob Bonezzi has experience in retail, hospitality, real estate and property development. He isn't just exceptional in one aspect of economics," said Sen. Don Gaetz. "He's a low key leader. He's a work horse, not a show horse," Gaetz said.

- Tom McLaughlin



Spotlight - The region by the numbers

The Gulf Coast I-10 region can be viewed through a number of prisms, including economic areas, metropolitan areas and counties/ parishes. Below are statistics from the U.S. Cluster Mapping project. Table 1 shows prosperity of each economic area, and Table 2 shows the same statistics for metropolitan areas, typically smaller than the economic area.



Table 1: Economic area cluster study (ranked by prosperity)						
Economic area (map number)	Prosperity GDP per capita, real dollars 98-2013	Annual wage, average private, 1998-2013	Unemployment 1998-2013	Employment, private non-ag 1998-2013		
Baton Rouge, La. (15)	\$45,678	\$41,927	6.15(louisiana	364,725		
New Orleans, La. (117)	\$45,137	\$42.773	6.15(louisiana)	639,098		
Pensacola, Fla. (125)	\$33,402	\$34,031	7.24(florida)	209,926		
Mobile, Ala. (112)	\$32,892	\$34,583	6.46(alabama)	260,200		
Tallahassee, Fla. (163)	\$32,716	\$34,451	7.24(florida)	165,459		
Gulfport-Biloxi, Miss. (69)	\$32,410	\$32,866	8.61(mississippi)	145,263		
Panama City, Fla. (123)	\$31,537	\$29,959	7.24(florida)	85,448		
Jackson, Miss. (includes Hattiesburg) (80)	\$30,825	\$31.236	8.61(mississippi)	577,311		
Dothan, Ala. (48)	\$29,279	\$30,468	6.46(alabama)	105,890		
Source: U.S. Cluster Mapping	1					

Table 2: Metropolitan area cluster study (ranked by prosperity)

-		•••	• • • • • • •	
Metropolitan area	Prosperity GDP per capita, real dollars 98-2013	Annual wage, average private, 1998-2013	Unemployment 1998-2013	Employment, private non-ag 1998-2013
New Orleans-Metairie, La.	\$47,685	\$45.621	6.15(Louisiana)	475,098
Baton Rouge, La.	\$46,836	\$45,754	6.15(Louisiana)	336,853
Crestview-Fort Walton Beach-Destin, Fla.	\$38,765	\$34,032	7.24(Florida)	75,730
Panama City-Lynn Haven, Fla.	\$37,790	\$33,618	7.24(Florida)	58,862
Mobile, Ala.	\$37,648	\$39,195	6.46(Alabama)	147,574
Tallahassee, Fla.	\$34,376	\$37,520	7.24(Florida)	107,724
Gulfport-Biloxi, Miss.	\$34,099	\$40,366	8.61(Mississippi)	125,157
Hattiesburg, Miss.	\$31,927	\$33,865	8.61(Mississippi)	49,945
Pensacola-Ferry Pass-Brent, Fla.	\$30,489	\$35,970	7.24(Florida)	120,422
Dothan, Ala.	\$29,770	\$35,944	6.46(Alabama)	49,684
Daphne, Ala.	\$29,362	\$30,351	6.46(Alabama)	54,988
Source: U.S. Cluster Mapping	-			



The Makers movement is spreading region-wide as people say goodbye to high-stress jobs to do what they enjoy doing...

BREWTON, Ala.

n a home-based workshop in South Alabama, Megan Brantley peered intently at the woodblock clamped to a table. Her hands worked the chisel, peeling away everything not part of an exquisitely crafted walnut wooden spoon.

"My brother has been telling us forever we need to be doing this for a living," she said. "It all started with some lamps we made our family for Christmas

one year, and it grew from there. Really, we are artists more than 'makers,' but people like to put a label on it."

Across the country, people are leaving high-stress jobs to make things with their hands, products consumers seem hungry to buy. In some cases, the home-based



Connie Baggett

makers are finding enough demand to grow their small businesses into larger operations, feeding off of each other's creative energy.

The movement, something of a return to the days when people made what they needed or wanted using what was available, is part utility, part artistry and for most, just plain enjoyable. It's popular enough that economic development organizations are taking note.

"We have seen the incubation of several businesses in Makers Spaces," said Marylon Barkan of the Main Street Alabama network, referring to markets established for do-it-yourselfers.

"It is a great low-risk concept to teach, develop interests and build on the synergy of working with other creatives. "A great example of an economic impact would be Yellowhammer Creative, which developed inside



MakeBham in the Avondale neighborhood in Birmingham. They have seen great success from their designs and last year Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones was photographed in their Heart of Dixie shirt," Barkan said.

Yellowhammer has grown from a business focused on concert poster production and now provides stationery, web design, clothing printing, full logo/ branding development, album cover design, package design and wedding invitations.

"Giving people a space to create and sometimes sell their products is not exclusive to Maker Spaces," Barkan said. "Arsenal Accelerator in Selma, where G Mammas Cookies began, and High Cotton Arts in Athens, are two more examples of using the community production concept with wonderful outcomes. Both of these projects are located in Main Street communities as well."

A recent downtown laboratory conference hosted by Main Street featured several successful businesses borne in the movement. Maker Movement leaders, Garlan Gudger of Southern Accent Architectural Antiques and architect Bruce Lanier of Standard Creative, gave detailed explanations of how creative minds can benefit from sharing workshop settings. Gudger described how organizing makers in small business incubator settings and showcasing products in maker events can have a huge economic impact.

"There is tremendous interest in locally and state made items," Barkan said. "People are craving the unique, quality items that are being produced by their friends and neighbors. The Southern Makers show is prime example of an economic impact from the movement. Tickets sell out quickly for the show each year and last year, it was expanded to a two-day event to accommodate the interest.

"Shows like this allow makers to test the waters and judge interest in what they are producing and

Page 62: Megan Brantley sells hand-crafted items at local farmers' market. Photos in this article by Connie Baggett.



Hand-carved spoons and turquoise inlaid cutting board.

also attract a customer base that is willing to pay a premium for their products. It also captures a growing list of Alabamians that are the target market for makers. Famous Alabama makers such as Natalie Chanin uses making as a huge marketing tool and sells kits that allow you to make your items designed by her. Her hometown, Florence, is also a Main Street Alabama community."

In Brewton, the couple behind Flannel and Floral is steadily growing their business, testing the waters for products and potential. Success so far could mean a bigger investment timewise in the year to come, they said.

Megan and husband Shannon, a musician and potter, spend more and more time creating wood-based artwork largely from reclaimed lumber and other sources for exotic wood jewelry, utensils, lamps and even tables and leather-covered chairs. Flannel and Floral products have made their way into some celebrity hands -- a lamp for Naomi Judd and an Alabama-shaped necklace for Britney Howard of the Alabama Shakes. Every female member of the Willis Clan of TLC's new reality show also donned the jewelry at a recent show. The locallymade products are rapidly building a following.

Media attention boosted sales, the couple confirmed, but the larger bonus is the connection to other makers out there who gather at large regional markets hosted by Southern Makers or Made South all through the year. They communicate largely by Instagram, and inspire each other, Shannon says.

"Most of the makers are working for themselves and not in corporate jobs for a reason," Shannon said. "Some quit conventional jobs because they had a passion and they could be happier doing something they enjoy. With just about every one I've met, it's not about the money. Rich or not, we'd still be making stuff."

People snap up tickets at engineering and design firm Goodwin Mills & Cawood's Southern Makers events that feature carefully selected artists, crafters and food items.

"We have everything from handmade brooms, spoons, paintings, pottery, just anything that is handmade in Alabama," said Revel Crowley, marketing coordinator for GMC. "We came up with the idea after a friend from New York came to Alabama looking for goods to buy. She wanted to know where



Megan and Shannon Brantley own Flannel & Floral.



Reclaimed wood used to create Edison bulb desk lamp.

all the awesome things were she had

heard about, so we decided to bring all

those people to one

ented people in the

ble things are often

known only to their

Social media plat-

forms and vendor

that can eventually

neighbors or locally.

gatherings allow net-

Revel said the tal-

state making incredi-

place."



Jewelry by Megan Brantley.

build larger enterprises and create local jobs for the dozens of small maker operations across the state.

They have names like Hot Damn Jelly Company, Estaboga Bee Company, Noke's Granola, Great Bear

Wax Co., Back 40 Beer Company and Priester Pecan Company. Goodwyn, Mills and Cawood is a collaborative firm of Architects & Engineers that design to make life better, according to their website. Founded in Alabama, GMC has grown to include offices across the southeast in Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina and Georgia.

Southern Makers, Red Mountain Makers, Gumption Fund and MAKEbhm are only a few of the maker organizations in the state following a national trend that started more than a decade ago. Some researchers even call the movement a resurrection of the Arts and Craft Movement that died out just as World War II broke out. This time, the movement is following on the heels of creative tech industry advances spurred by Apple and others, advances borne in home-based garages where creative ideas took off.

According to recent figures reported in Time magazine, an estimated 135 million adults currently participate in the Maker Movement. By the published estimates, some \$6 billion in business will flow through maker hands in 2017 in the U.S. and more than \$8 billion by 2020.

Maker spaces where creative business owners collaborate and share costs are popping up in cities like Birmingham and Montgomery with maker events as far flung as Atlanta, Mobile, Hendersonville and Franklin, Tenn., and Waverly, Ala. The market seems hungry for the products, Crowley said.

At Southern Makers, the economic benefit is tangible and spurring growth, Crowley said.

"Since we started, the events have been sold out every year," she said. "We host conversations and workshops and we don't charge vendors for booth space. It gives small businesses a boost so they can grow at a healthy pace, just like Flannel and Floral. They are really just now blowing up."

At their home-based workshop, the Brantleys keep busy making t-shirts, carving wood and producing working and exposure tactile, useful art.

> "What is really driving this is people want quality handmade goods," Shannon Brantley said. "The quality in most retail stores has people looking for something better. One of the best compliments we get is 'I've never seen anything like this."" \Box

Quarterly review - Southeast Louisiana

Low energy prices having split impact

BATON ROUGE, La.

he sustained low energy prices are having a split effect on the Southeast Louisiana economy. Areas that are dependent on the oil industry, such as Lafayette, Houma-Thibodaux and New Orleans, have seen major job losses because of a decline in drilling activity.

The U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that Lafayette lost 5,100 jobs in the 12 months ending in November 2015, the biggest loss of any U.S. metro area. And of the 51 metro areas with populations of more than 1 million, only New Orleans saw a decrease in the number of jobs over the 12 months.

Q4 summaries

Nucor halts Convent production

Low steel prices forced Nucor Corp. to temporarily halt production at its Convent direct reduced iron plant in mid-December. While St. James Parish officials said they were reassured by Nucor that the slowdown won't mean layoffs for any of the 170 people that work at the facility, the move puts a cloud over the future development of the plant. Nucor has said the direct reduced iron plant, which opened two years ago, would be the first phase of a \$3.4 billion steel complex. The direct reduced iron plant uses natural gas to make high-purity steel pellets from iron ore. Nucor mixes the pellets with scrap metal to make steel. (**Source**: The Advocate, 12/16/15)

Shell to expand at Geismar

Shell Chemical LP said in late November it would spend \$717 million to build a fourth alpha olefins manufacturing unit at its Geismar complex. Once the unit begins operations in 2018, Shell Geismar will be the largest production site in the world for alpha olefins, chemicals that are used for producing products ranging from household detergent to drilling fluids. The expansion is projected to add 20 jobs with an Major employers such as Shell and Chevron cut hundreds of New Orleans workers.

But low natural gas prices are fueling an industrial construction boom at the chemical plants in metro Baton Rouge, which are dependent upon ample supplies of cheap natural gas both as a feed stock and as a fuel source.



Timothy Boone

In November 2015, the BLS said there were 412,000 jobs in Baton Rouge, a record for the area. The area has seen 59 consecutive months of year-to-year job growth. \Box



average annual salary of more than \$104,000, plus benefits, along with creating 1,000 construction jobs. (**Source**: Louisiana Economic Development, 11/30/15)

Trinity Marine in Madisonville closes

Trinity Marine Products Inc. shut down its barge manufacturing plant in Madisonville in December, a move that put 336 people out of work. Trinity had announced plans to close its Brusly plant in October, a move that would have left 282 employees out of work. But the company decided to keep the Brusly plant open after it won a new contract. Trinity has previously shut down its plants only to reopen them once demand picked up. (**Source**: The New Orleans Advocate, 10/6/15)

Quarterly review - Southeast Louisiana

Amedisys headquarters sold

The Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady Health System, parent of Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center, bought the Amedisys headquarters building in Baton Rouge for \$20 million. FMOL, which operates four hospitals across Louisiana, plans to consolidate administrative support offices in the building. The move will eliminate a need to rent several office buildings around the main Our Lady of the Lake campus, an area that is beset with traffic congestion. Amedisys announced during the summer it was putting the headquarters building for sale because the 110,000-square-foot property was too big for the home healthcare company's current needs. Amedisys recently opened a satellite office in Nashville, Tenn., a move the company said was needed to attract top talent. (Source: The Advocate, 11/30/15, 12/1/15)

New Orleans to add cruise ship terminal

Plans for a new cruise ship terminal and parking garage at the Port of New Orleans got a boost in December, when the state Bond Commission approved plans to sell up to \$45 million in bonds to finance the project. New Orleans port officials hope the terminal near the Poland Avenue Wharf will be open by late 2017. The terminal would give one more cruise ship berth at the port. In 2014, the port handled more than 1 million cruise ship passengers for the first time. (**Sources**: The New Orleans Advocate, 10/24/15; Louisiana State Bond Commission, 12/17/15)

Forecast: Steady growth in Baton Rouge

The Baton Rouge metro economy is projected to add between 5,000 and 9,000 jobs in 2016, continuing the steady pace of growth that has been going on for several years. That's according to the Baton Rouge Area Chamber's annual economic outlook, which was released in November. The report, based on data analysis and a survey of BRAC members, projects job growth between 1.4 and 2.2 percent for 2016. The growth forecast is slightly lower than the 3.5 percent job growth that happened in 2014 and the 3.3 percent growth that has occurred through the first nine months of 2015. (**Sources**: Baton Rouge Area chamber, 11/18/15; The Advocate, 11/18/15)

New Orleans OK plans for movie studio

The New Orleans City Council approved plans to convert a former railroad yard in Algiers into a \$63.5 million movie studio. Scott Niemeyer, who produced the hit "Pitch Perfect" movies, said the Deep South Studios will be the largest production facility between Atlanta and Albuquerque, N.M. The first phase of construction will include 291,500 square feet of space, spread out among administrative buildings, five enclosed stages and a storage warehouse. (**Source**: The New Orleans Advocate, 12/1/15)

More tech firms for New Orleans

Two technology companies announced plans to open offices in New Orleans. Video game developer inXile Entertainment opened a development studio that will create 50 new jobs over the next 5 years, with an average annual salary of \$75,000, plus benefits. This is inXile's first expansion outside of its California headquarters. The company makes games for systems ranging from the PlayStation 4 to Android smart phones. Smashing Boxes, which develops custom web and mobile applications for businesses, plans to open an office in New Orleans in early 2016, a move that will create 85 new jobs. The jobs will have an average annual salary of \$75,000, plus benefits. State and New Orleans officials have concentrated on bringing in digital media and software firms to the Crescent City in recent years, attracting operations from companies such as GE Capital, Gameloft and Performance Software. (Source: Louisiana Economic Development, 10/21/15, 11/4/15)

Terminal project planned for St. John

Pin Oak Terminals said it will spend \$600 million to build a petroleum liquids storage terminal on the east bank of the Mississippi River, near the St. John the Baptist/St. James Parish line. The facility, set to open in late 2016, will create 70 full time and contractor jobs, with an average annual salary of more than \$60,000, plus benefits. The terminal will receive, blend and store various petroleum liquid products. (**Source**: Louisiana Economic Development, 10/21/15)

Quarterly review - South Mississippi

South Mississippi's 2016 looking good

BAY ST. LOUIS, Miss.

illions of dollars, mainly resulting from the 2010 BP oil spill, will be pouring into South Mississippi in the new year and much of it was announced as 2015 was winding down. The funding is aimed at restoring natural resources and the economic environment.

There were no hurricanes during the 2015 season,

which ended Nov. 30, but a red tide unlike any marine scientists have seen in the Mississippi Sound has disrupted oyster season in Mississippi and other Gulf Coast states.

The tourism industry may feel the effects of the red tide but it got a boost from the opening of a new casino plus numerous

restaurants and other attractions, as well as news that more are planned for the coming year. In the shipbuilding sector, major contracts were awarded to Pascagoula yards to keep workers busy for years.

Gov. Phil Bryant announced several projects designed to help restore and protect the state's environment and economy following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The four ecosystem restoration projects totaling \$20.7 million are in addition to more than \$180 million of oil spill related funds for ecosystem restoration projects received to date.

Bryant also announced nine proposed projects totaling more than \$54.1 million, including a Stennis International Airport hangar, completion of the Port Bienville trans-loading dock, ultra-high speed Internet access, the Mississippi Aquarium in Gulfport and the Jackson County corridor connector.

"On the Mississippi Gulf Coast, multiple positive economic events that occurred in the fourth quarter



Q4 summaries

- Biloxi Mayor FoFo Gilich and Gulfport Mayor Billy Hewes are leading the formation of the Gulf Coast Broadband Commission to plan and oversee ultra high-speed Internet service to replace service now available through various companies to businesses, homes, schools and public spaces. (Source: City of Biloxi, 10/2/15)
- The city of Biloxi received remodeling plans for total upgrades to the lobby and 499 guest rooms at Harrah's Casino. The \$14 million project will involve \$4 million in permitted renovations. (**Source**: City of Biloxi, 10/30/15)
- Towanda Metadyne Inc., a manufacturer of precision high -tech materials and components, acquired the former Hydro Carbide facility in Gulfport and formed Metadyn Gulfport LLC which will be staffed by 20 employees. (Source: Mississippi Development Authority, 11/2/15)
- NASA took the next big step on the journey to Mars by placing the first RS-25 flight engine on the A-1 test stand at Stennis Space Center. The engine will be tested in the first part of 2016 to certify it for use on SLS. (Source: NASA/ Stennis, 11/5/15)
- Tissue paper manufacturer Sofidel America acquired the new 400,000-square-foot Green Bay Converting facility in the Hattiesburg-Forrest County Industrial Park and is investing \$120 million to locate operations in Hattiesburg. It will create 230 jobs. (**Source**: Mississippi Development Authority, 11/5/15)
- Huntington Ingalls Shipbuilding christened the sixth U.S. Coast Guard National Security Cutter, *Munro*, the sixth Legend-class cutter built by Ingalls. (**Source**: HII, 11/10/15)
- Jackson County reached an agreement with Northrop Grumman to extend the lease for the Moss Point Unmanned Systems Center for eight years to 2023. The plant at Trent Lott International Airport does finishing work on the Fire Scout unmanned helicopter and fuselage work on all variants of the Global Hawk unmanned surveillance aircraft. (**Source**: Sun Herald, 11/18/15)

(Continued on page 69)



Quarterly review - South Mississippi

of 2015 have laid a foundation for a possible windfall in 2016," said Dr. Greg Bradley, a clinical professor in the College of Business at the University of Southern Mississippi.

While officials were looking forward to restoring coastal assets, Mother Nature delivered an unexpected setback to the seafood and tourism industries. An unprecedented toxic algae bloom shut down Mississippi's beaches and oyster reefs. The state Department of Marine Resources declared the seafood was safe to eat, although the oyster reefs may not reopen until March 2016.

The Scarlet Pearl became the 12th casino to open on the Mississippi Coast and the first in the city of D'Iberville. The \$290 million casino has 1,200 employees, four restaurants, 300 hotel rooms and a 36-hole miniature golf course among its amenities.

"This is good news for the gaming industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast," said Bradley. "It sends a message to the rest of the country that the industry is healthy, with potential room for growth. New gaming development in mature regions is scarce."

Tourism got another major boost with the opening of the Pascagoula River Audubon Center in Moss Point. The 10-acre facility cost \$2.3 million and features native plant landscaping, a fine art gallery, interactive and aquarium displays, boat tours, nature trail and observation deck over a bayou.

Progress also is being made on developing the Mississippi Aquarium on 10 acres along the Gulfport waterfront. The Gulfport Redevelopment Commission, which is guiding the project, hired a St. Louis company to design the \$40 million aquarium. Construction is set to kick off in 2017 with opening targeted for 2019.

"This project has the potential to, again, shift upward the economic paradigm in the region. It is highly likely that this development would yield a significant economic impact as tourists from out of state spend money on the Coast. Other industry sectors would also significantly benefit from this project. Moreover, the aquarium would help fill a current tourism amenity gap on the Coast - familyoriented entertainment," Bradley said.

In the shipbuilding sector, Huntington Ingalls Inc. in Pascagoula was awarded a \$200 million contract

- The Department of Defense has granted strategic seaport designation to the Port of Gulfport, making it one of 17 ports in the nation that will handle shipments of military cargo and equipment to support the deployment of armed forces in case of war or a disaster. (**Source**: WLOX, 11/19/15)
- VT Halter Marine Inc. launched the second of two articulated tug barge units built for Bouchard Transportation Co. It's 628 feet by 91 feet by 47 feet, with a 250,000-barrel capacity. (Source: Sun Herald, 11/24/15)
- Soprema, a manufacturer of waterproof roofing membranes, is expanding its plant in the Bernard Bayou Industrial District of Gulfport by adding 21,000-square-feet of warehouse space. Yates Construction is the contractor on the \$1 million project which will be completed in spring 2016. (Source: Sun Herald, 12/1/15)
- The USS Jackson was commissioned Dec. 5 in Gulfport. Built in Mobile, it is the third in its class of littoral combat ships and will carry a crew of 50. (**Source**: Sun Herald, 12/4/15)
- Jackson County supervisors gave Chevron a major tax break on a new base oil plant that cost the company \$1.56 billion. Instead of the Chevron refinery paying the county \$14.3 million in taxes on that new piece of the refinery next year, it will pay \$4.2 million. (**Source**: Sun Herald 12/8/15)
- The new pier on Deer Island should be open within two months and possibly sooner, opening the island to visitors. The 170-foot pier cost about \$360,000, paid for by Tidelands Funds. (**Source**: Sun Herald 12/10/15)

in December for LPD 28 amphibious transport deck vessel's material and engineering and design activities. Work will be performed in Pascagoula and is expected to be completed by April 2022.

Also in December, Huntington Ingalls was awarded a \$34.8 million cost-plus-fixed fee contract for life cycle engineering and support services for the LPD 17 Class Amphibious Transport Dock Ship program. Work will be performed in Pascagoula and is expected to be completed by December 2016.

"It is vitally important to the Mississippi Gulf Coast economy that HII continue its success in obtaining government contracts," Bradley said.

"Our representatives in Washington will again play a critical future role in lobbying on the region's behalf. The 2016 presidential election could also have a significant impact on the outlook of shipbuilding in the country, which will quickly trickle down to HII."

Quarterly review - South Alabama

Retail rocking in Mobile

DAPHNE, Ala.

hink, now. When was the last time you saw the words "Mobile" and "boom" in the same sentence?

Semoon Chang, the former economics professor at the University of South Alabama who is well known for collecting statistics and making prognostications, inserts one crucial word between "Mobile" and "boom." That word is "retail."

"I call 2015 a year of retail boom," Chang said. And sales tax revenue reported by the city backs him up. Just go to Chang's website, www.semoonchang.com, and see for yourself.

For example, in the most recent month for which comparisons can be made, city sales tax collections were about \$12.6 million in September 2015 vs. about \$10.6 million in September 2014. Every single month from January through September showed similarly impressive gains.

Business developments in the most recent quarter reflect several projects coming on line over the last year. In the retail arena, Chang cites three shopping centers as major contributors to the retail boom.

McGowin Park is a new development near Hank Aaron Stadium, featuring the first and so far only Costco in the area. Westwood Plaza in west Mobile has been renovated and includes Gander Mountain, an outdoors store that is another newcomer. And the Pinebrook shopping center renovation has brought in the first Whole Foods Market, eagerly anticipated by lovers of high-end groceries.

The Shoppes at Bel Air is billed as a transformation of the old Bel Air Mall on Airport Boulevard. It will include an expanded Belk department store. With so many new retailers and restaurants in the market and existing ones relocating for their own reasons, Mobilians practically need a shopping guide to find their favorites. This is great news for Mobile city government, which is so dependent on



Q4 summaries

- Defense Secretary Ashton Carter wants to cut back the Littoral Combat Ship program from 52 ships to 40, and he wants only one of the current two designs to be built by 2019. That means a choice between the LCS built by Austal USA in Mobile and the LCS built by Marinette Marine in Wisconsin. U.S. Rep. Bradley Byrne, R-Montrose, blamed "the weak and impotent Obama Administration," and said, "this will not stand." U.S. Sens. Jeff Sessions and Richard Shelby, both Alabama Republicans, can also be expected to fight any attempted cutback.
- The Navy christened the 12th LCS at Austal in late December. It will be named the *USS Omaha*. Soon after, Austal was awarded a \$51.7 million contract which includes design services for upgrades to the LCS and preliminary design for the Navy's future frigate. The contract could expand to \$198 million over three years.
- As Airbus ramps up its assembly plant at the Mobile Aerospace at Brookley, the Airport Authority has been working on \$39 million in upgrades. The projects include a \$32 million two-phase realignment, lengthening and widening of the main taxiway, a \$6 million engine run-up facility and a \$1 million compass compensation area.
- A maritime museum in Mobile was on the drawing boards for 20 years before the GulfQuest National Maritime Museum of the Gulf of Mexico opened in late September. Over the years the proposed museum continually took a back seat to other projects, economic downturns and funding shortages. Once ground was broken, construction delays ensued in part because of GulfQuest's riverfront location. The final price tag was about \$62 million, but even skeptics admit the museum, built like a ship, looks gorgeous when lit up at night. It's also a major addition to a cluster of cultural attractions downtown, including the city

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Quarterly review - South Alabama

sales tax revenue that its financial position swings dramatically with the economy.

But adjacent Baldwin County has not seen the same retail tax boom, Chang said. Some large retailers have relocated. Appearances matter, and Daphne's Jubilee Square seems busier than ever while *Fox10 News* reported that the Eastern Shore Centre defaulted on a loan payment in 2014.

Chang noted that the Spanish Fort Town Center ran into similar problems but is gradually working its way out of them. Jubilee Square also did not meet expectations in its early years but is now bustling.

"One very interesting thing is Baldwin County sales tax rates. They caught up Mobile County sales tax rates, so they are not cheaper anymore," Chang said. "They don't have any major advantage in terms of tax rates."

While retail may not be booming in Baldwin County, neither is there a danger of the Eastern Shore Centre failing, he said. What's happening is more of a stage.

"Baldwin County is still growing very fast. In fact, it's the fastest growing county in the entire state of Alabama at this moment. They are growing faster than even Shelby County."

Cruise ship

Ever since Carnival Cruise Line abruptly pulled out of Mobile in 2011, city officials have been trying to get another ship both to bolster the tourism industry and cover the payments on the cruise ship terminal that essentially became an empty concrete parking deck on the Mobile River.

In late September, Mayor Sandy Stimpson happily announced that Carnival would be back with the Fantasy in 2016.

Carnival's departure rankled in 2011, as city leaders said they were given no notice or chance to negotiate to keep the cruise line in Mobile. Full cruises were routine, yet Carnival said the numbers didn't work.

The cruise terminal was still available in 2013 when Carnival's Triumph was stranded in the Gulf of Mexico after an engine fire. The ship and its infuriated passengers were towed to Mobile, which rehistory museum, Mardi Gras museum and the Exploreum. Parking is available at the cruise ship terminal.

• BayFest died suddenly at the age of 19, just 15 days before the 20th downtown Mobile music festival was to begin. Organizers said they didn't have enough money to put on the festival based on advance ticket sales. BayFest sometimes packed crowds into downtown to the point that it was difficult to move around. And the first weekend in October sometimes offered spectacular weather. But in other years festival attendance suffered badly from rotten weather that included predicted hurricanes, leaving organizers with little or no cushion for pre-festival expenses the following year. Ticket prices rose, but lower prices this year didn't seem to improve sales. Private parties and Mobile city leaders scrambled to put together a small, free festival with mostly local performers. The 10-65 Festival got good reviews, and if it goes forward in 2016 there will be a reasonable amount of time for planning.

ceived invaluable publicity from the national news media for its efficient hospitality.

Carnival's history in Mobile leaves Chang uneasy. "I'm not as much excited about that as many other people, because of the way they left," Chang said. "I don't know. It's partially our fault. When they left we did not have a contract to tie them down. It was our mistake." \Box

About the author



Jane Nicholes is a freelance writer and editor with more than 30 years of experience in daily newspapers, alternative newspapers and specialty publications in Alabama, Louisiana, Kentucky, Arkansas and South Carolina. Former editorial writer for the

Mobile Press-Register and former managing editor of *The Times of Acadiana* in Lafayette, La., she won more than 70 state and national awards for editorial writing, investigative reporting, freedom of information, beat reporting, breaking news, editing, columns, news writing and feature writing. A graduate of Northwestern University, she lives in Daphne, Ala. □

Quarterly review - Northwest Florida

State's largest solar complex being built

PENSACOLA, Fla.

onstruction of the largest photovoltaic arrays in Florida has begun with ground breaking on three large-scale solar electric generating facilities, thanks to a partnership between the U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force and Gulf Power.

The Northwest Florida project at three military sites will include about 1.5 million solar panels that could generate up to 157 megawatts of direct current, or 120 MW of alternating current power. This could power nearly 18,000 homes on a sunny day. The facilities, which are expected to become operational in December 2016, are:

- NAS Pensacola: 65 MW DC or 50 MW AC to power about 7,400 Escambia County homes;
- NAS Whiting Field: 52 MW DC or 40 MW AC to power about 6,100 Santa Rosa County homes:
- Eglin Air Force Base: 40 MW DC or 30 MW AC to power about 4,500 Okaloosa County homes.

The sites have the potential to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by more than 4.6 million tons.

Dennis V. McGinn, the assistant secretary of the Navy for energy, installations and environment, said constructing new solar facilities offers a myriad of benefits.

"Together, we can provide physical security to the assets, increase the regional grid resiliency and upgrade the energy infrastructure where our sailors and aviators live and work, as well as stimulate economic activity through development," McGinn said.

"Energy, the economy, the environment and our national security are bound together; you cannot affect one without affecting the others, and these projects have positive benefits in all four."

Duwayne Escobedo and Tom McLaughlin



Q4 summaries

- Walton County Commissioners voted to pay out a maximum of \$1.5 million to secure installation of an estimated \$25 million to \$30 million worth of fiber optic cable. Inking a deal with Information Transport Solutions, a South Alabama company with designs on expanding into Northwest Florida, will allow the county to install high speed Internet service at 50 county office buildings within a year. Those will include schools, college facilities, libraries, county buildings and emergency service structures. It is predicted the installation will upgrade historically weak county government broadband capacity and lead to private partnerships that will allow the county to expand Internet services to even the most rural areas of Walton County. (Source: Northwest Florida Daily News 10/15/15)
- The five-member Triumph Gulf Coast board of directors met for just the second time and began creating the framework through which it will coordinate paying out an estimated \$1.6 billion in BP fines and forfeitures to enhance economic development in eight Northwest Florida counties judged "disproportionately affected" by the 2010 BP oil spill. Board members were told they could expect the first infusion of cash, in the amount of some \$300 million sometime in the first quarter of 2016. (**Source**: Northwest Florida Daily News 10/25/15)
- The Santa Rosa Island Authority announced a \$17 million renourishment and restoration project that will spread 1.75 million cubic yards over 8.1 miles of the shoreline at Pensacola Beach. The project began the week of Nov. 16 and is scheduled to last an estimated three months. (**Source**: Pensacola News Journal 11/3/2015)
- At an event called SWARM, seven veteran and militaryfamily owned businesses were given the opportunity to present their bonafides to the Fort Walton Beach community and potential investors. The businesses had worked

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Quarterly review - Northwest Florida

The Bluffs Industrial Park

FloridaWest, the lead economic development alliance for Pensacola, announced plans to develop The Bluffs, a proposed, four-parcel, 1,750-acre industrial park site near Cantonment. The Bluffs could host up to 60 industrial sites and employ up to 5,000 people.

The economic development project is a collaboration of the University of West Florida, Emerald Coast Utilities Authority, Ascend Performance Materials and Gulf Power.

GSA to Repair Courthouse

The General Services Administration determined the U.S. District Courthouse in downtown Pensacola, plagued by water intrusion since its construction, is structurally sound and the agency plans to fund the \$32 million in repairs.

Bricks used in the buildings construction failed to have proper backing to prevent water from creating

for three months prior to the event to develop business products and ideas through an organization called Venture Hive, a business incubator program brought to Fort Walton Beach to attract small veteran-owned businesses to the area and help them grow by offering training and a year's worth of office space. (**Source**: Northwest Florida Daily News 11/8/15)

- Zachary Jenkins was named the new director of the Haas Center for the University of West Florida Center for Research and Economic Opportunity. Jenkins will be responsible for increasing the center's research activity and leading a team of experts that has played a vital role in economic development strategies across the region and state since 1993. (**Source**: UWF 12/03/15)
- The VT Mobile Aerospace Engineering maintenance, repair and overhaul facility is in the design phase and construction is slated to start in the second half of 2016. The \$37.4 million hangar will be up to 173,000 square feet and about 80 feet high to fit four 757 or two 777 airplanes. VTMAE forecasts it will service between 48 and 60 aircraft per year, once construction is completed between 12 and 16 months. (**Source**: Pensacola News Journal 12/17/2015)
- Pensacola International Airport plans to spend \$7.7 million to double the size of its cargo ramp next month, providing more capacity for current tenant UPS Inc. and opening the door to attract a second cargo carrier. To avoid interfering with UPS operations, the ramp will be completed over 345 days and 10 phases. Last year, about 13 million pounds came to Pensacola, compared to 2011 when about 614,000

the problem. GSA agreed to replace bricks, windows, gutters, roofing and other materials that were letting water enter the building. The agency also agreed to eliminate mold throughout the building.

GSA's lease with the city of Pensacola building expires in 2017. But GSA Regional Commissioner Mike Goodwin sent a Dec. 16 letter to Pensacola Mayor Ashton Hayward stating the federal government's intent to take over the courthouse.

Sassano retiring

Larry Sassano plans to leave Florida's Great Northwest as president. He was hired in 2012 to head the group that promotes 16 Panhandle counties after serving as head of the Okaloosa County Economic Development Council. He expects to remain through at least the end of January. An advisory group headed by Gray Swoope, former Enterprise Florida CEO, will seek a replacement. \Box

pounds of freight passed through the airport. (Source: Pensacola News Journal 12/20/2015)

- The Pensacola International Airport's 32-acre, \$2.7 million regional storm water facility expansion is near completion. Reshaping the basin and removing dirt increased storage capacity from 19 million cubic feet to 26 million cubic feet. (Source: Pensacola News Journal 12/20/2015)
- Tallahassee officials in December were celebrating a year when 12 major construction projects were being planned or had gotten underway. Major works in progress included renovation of a major mall that had been close to closing, construction of a 100,000 square foot conference center that would be used in combination with existing structures to create 250,000 square feet of overall conference space, a new hotel, a high-end residential development and "entrepreneurial space." (**Source**: Tallahassee Democrat 12/27/15)
- After selling off 380,000 acres of "non-strategic timberland" real estate giant St. Joe Company announced moving forward with plans to develop 110,000 acres in the West Bay area of Bay County and extending into eastern Walton County. The company's Bay-Walton Sector Plan was approved at the state and local levels this summer. The largescale "active adult" retirement community is similar to The Villages in Central Florida. The development includes plans for about 170,000 homes and more than 22-million square feet of retail, commercial and industrial uses. (**Source**: Panama City News Herald 12/29/15)

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