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Florence, South Carolina — Far More Than a Snowbird Stopover

By TJ Sullivan / www.TJSullivanLA.com

At nightfall on Interstate 95, Florence, S.C., can appear to be little more than a fortuitous place for a pit stop, an easy exit marked by the usual reflective general-service signs and the promise of gas, food and lodging.

Such is the onus of occupying the unofficial midpoint between New York City and Miami, a distinction that's led generations of snowbirds and vacationers to the doors of Florence's 3,700 hotel rooms, then right back to the Interstate as soon as the sun is up. And therein lays the daily mission of professionals like Kyle Edney, assistant director of the Florence County Economic Development Partnership.

"Our biggest challenge is making people aware of Florence," he says. "Once we get people to look around, they see why so many companies have chosen to locate here."

Plenty of people are looking. Some are even pointing the way for others.

Much to the delight of the Florence business community, Site Selection magazine recently ranked the city fifth on its list of top metropolitan areas for new and expanding facilities, recognition due in part to a series of private investments announced in 2008, projects expected to total more than \$160 million in capital investments and to create another 1,500 jobs.

Among the many companies involved are H.J. Heinz Co., and Monster.com, ventures courted by both economic-development officials and existing employers in the area.

In the case of Monster.com, for example, Edney says credit for helping seal the deal goes to multimedia retailer QVC, which operates a 1.4 million square-foot distribution center in Florence.

"As we work with companies on corporate expansions, they often times want to meet with existing employers," says Edney. "We'll let the company take them into the boardroom and we'll stay outside."

The result is further proof of the city's appeal. "The consensus with everybody is that this is a very competitive location to do business," he says.

As for what kinds of businesses work best in Florence, the answer appears to be "yes."

The industries represented in the Florence business community are as diverse as can be imagined, ranging from companies like ESAB Welding & Cutting Equipment, which employs 650 people, to healthcare insurers like Blue Cross and Blue Shield of South Carolina, which boasts a workforce of about 1,600.

In fact, within the healthcare industry, Florence is considered a major biomedical center.

The city's largest employer is McLeod Regional Medical Center, with 3,150 employees. HealthSouth also has a facility in Florence — an 88-bed acute medical rehab facility. And GE Medical Systems makes much of its magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machinery there.

Determining the appeal of the place, however, depends on the particular business, says Tom Marschel, president of the Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce.

For some, Marschel says, the relatively low cost of housing wins out. For others, the prospect of locating at the junction of two major interstates — I-95 and I-20 — ranks at or near the top.

Still others find the area's skilled workforce a major reason to set up shop, an attribute that was recently enhanced by the addition of the Southeastern Institute of Manufacturing and Technology, part of the South Carolina Technical College System. Not only does the SIMT offer unmatched, customized training services — courses that teach just about everything from computer numeric control (CNC) machine operation to the business management strategy of Six Sigma — it also includes a business incubator and consulting services capable of taking most any product from conception to market.

"This facility was constructed by the college, but college students are not the focus," says Jack Roach, director of SIMT. "This facility was built to serve the needs of business and industry, particularly manufacturing."

Besides that, the state of South Carolina sponsors a program through SIMT to subsidize the cost of training for expanding companies that add at least 12 jobs and cover at least half the cost of their employees' benefits.

Michael Hackman, founder and chief executive officer of Hackman Capital Partners, LLC, says such complementary relationships are part of the reason chose to invest in the region.

"Arrangements such as this benefit everyone involved," says Hackman, an investor in the joint venture which purchased Florence Industrial Center, which is located less than half a mile from the SIMT facility. "Not only does the employer creating the jobs get the assistance he or she needs to train employees, but workers also benefit by furthering their education and technical skills at no cost, obtaining the qualifications necessary to increase earning potential by as much as 50 percent, or more."

Hackman says Florence's proximity to Interstate 95 was also a factor in the joint venture owner's decision to purchase a 422,000-square-foot industrial facility, along with another 35 adjacent acres of vacant interstate frontage. Several improvements have since been made to

the property, and HCP, the asset manager for the joint venture, is in the process of marketing it to potential tenants.

“You’re in the middle of the main north-south interstate along the coast, and you’ve got I-20 connecting you to Atlanta, Dallas, and beyond to the west,” says Hackman. “The appeal of that aspect is evident in the wide range of manufacturers you find here.”

Among those manufacturers is Smurfit-Stone Container Corp., which has 550 workers, and Nucor Corp.’s Vulcraft Group, which employs 400 people to build steel joists, girders and decking.

Moreover, less than 10 miles away, in Timmonsville, Honda of South Carolina employs more than 1,600 at its plant. And about 20 miles away, in Lake City, Nan Ya Plastics Corporation employs 860 workers.

Of course, Florence is also still a stopover, and no one appears unhappy about continuing to fulfill that role as well. Far from it.

The Greater Florence Chamber of Commerce’s Tom Marschel not only touts Florence as a prime location for an overnight stay between Miami and New York City, he’s also proud to welcome the many race fans who stay in Florence while visiting the nearby Darlington Raceway, one of the pillars of NASCAR and host to the Sprint Cup Series.

“That’s millions of dollars,” Marschel says of the series set for Mother’s Day weekend. “All the hotels sell out.”

Indeed, a study conducted this year by The Washington Economics Group reveals that the track at Darlington draws \$54 million in spending to the state each year, and creates 874 jobs.

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Florence Industrial Center has space available for lease at 1500 Range Way in Florence, SC. For leasing information, visit www.FlorenceIndustrialCenter.com or call David Barber for Binswanger at (404) 892-4100.