

Develop new bait



Written by Michael Willard (O-N-E Publisher)

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During 2009, 41 percent of all new industrial investment announcements in North Carolina came from Catawba County.

"The reason why Catawba County has been so successful is that we have the best product to sell," Catawba County Economic Development Corp. President Scott Millar said, adding the "bootstrap mentality" of the workforce is a big part of that product. "(The people) believe in a hard day's work for a good day's pay, and that is what has gotten us to this point."

Also, part of the "product" has been available land and spec buildings designed to lure industries to the county. However, when Apple Inc. announced plans for Catawba County, it consumed more than 165 acres intended for a multi-jurisdictional park. Fiserv's occupation of a building built by Adevco at McDonald Crossings filled another building created to lure jobs and industry. Even a spec building in Claremont's business park is filled with a temporary tenant using it as a data center.

"We the announcements we have had over the past few months, we have absorbed all of the product that we have on the market," Millar said.

During a town hall meeting sponsored by the Catawba County Chamber of Commerce, Millar delivered an economic forecast for the year ahead. Much of that forecast he said relies not just on the county taking advantage of unique opportunities, but of also finding new ways to be appealing.

"We have to develop new bait," he said.

With the arrival first of Google in Caldwell County and then Apple in Maiden, new industries are helping economic recruiters decide which bait is working well.

"We want to go more directly toward this being a data center corridor," he said adding opportunities similar to Google and Apple are "developing."

Millar said as Progress Energy and Duke Energy begin establishing data centers to manage client information, an nearby, existing data corridor might appeal to such an initiative.

Opportunities are also available in developing and researching new ways to produce, sell and distribute energy. Specifically, the county's history in the communications field could position to play a role in the development of "Smart Grids" throughout the nation.

The U.S. Department of Energy's Grid 2030 vision is to construct a 21st century electric system that connects everyone to abundant, affordable, clean, efficient and reliable electric power. That goal, according to DOE, would be achieved by modernizing the electric grid with information-age technologies.

"We've been doing communications for a long time. We do make things well, we make things cheaply in a non-union environment," Millar said. "Seventeen billion dollars will be spent on (smart grids) in the next two years. What can we do?"

CCEDC's team will also continue creating an online directory of Catawba County businesses. This type of communication tool will serve existing industries by detailing the products and services they offer, while also connecting them with other in-county businesses that might fulfill supply or service needs.

"This county has created more jobs in the last few months than quite a few states," Millar said. "We have been awfully successful ... We want to continue to foster an environment where manufacturers will be allowed to operate."

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