

DEKALB MARKET SPOTLIGHT

WORKFORCE OPERATIONS

County carries out plan to support small businesses

BY TONYA LAYMAN
Contributing Writer

With 70 to 80 percent of the workforce in DeKalb County employed by small businesses and entrepreneurs, efforts are underway to help grow these operations and help put people to work.

The **Decide DeKalb Development Authority** was tasked with managing implementation of the 2014 DeKalb County Economic Development Strategic Plan. Seven groups, including the Existing Business and Entrepreneurship (EE) taskforce, were established to identify recommendations, timeframes, primary owners and costs.

Approximately 100 partners and stakeholders participated in the overall process, resulting in the DeKalb Thrives work plan, unveiled last summer. Several action items in the plan have moved forward, with others due to be completed by the end of 2018.

The EE taskforce addressed nine recommendations to bolster economic development and diversification while encouraging and promoting small business success and entrepreneurship, said **Ray Gilley**, Decide DeKalb president.

Gilley said about 80 percent of the EE recommendations have been worked on, and by the end of 2018, they hope to have a solid understanding of which projects are viable.



Ray Gilley

“Unlike a lot of strategic plans that sit on the shelf, this has been executed with the stakeholders taking responsibility and ownership for the [action items] relevant to them,” he said.

The county and its economic development leaders have shored up partnerships with organizations including **Georgia Tech** Research Corporation, **University of Georgia** Small Business Development Center (SBDC), **Georgia Piedmont Technical College** and **Emory’s** Goizueta Business School.

Recommendations in DeKalb Thrives included: considering a technology/life-science incubator in partnership with higher education assets; organizing “robust” visitation and outreach programs with existing businesses; and using online platforms to periodically survey businesses. Partners also are exploring the need for more co-working space and implementing new financial incentives for entrepreneurs.

“There are multiple resources [for entrepreneurs] throughout the region, and, being in DeKalb County, we are within a short drive to many of them,” Gilley said. “Our objective is to help fill in the gaps with both private- and



Left photo: Mitch Jaffe, left, founder and CEO of PREP food business incubator, watches the salsa-making process. Right photo: Tracy Gribbon, owner and founder of Georgia Sourdough Company (launched out of PREP), makes crackers.



JOANN VITELLI

► CLOSER LOOK

DEKALB COUNTY EMPLOYMENT NUMBERS AT A GLANCE

Unemployment rate (as of May 4):	4.2 percent
Total Labor Force:	404,339
Employed:	387,178
Unemployed:	17,161
Median Income in DeKalb as of 2013:	\$48,671

► Between 2003-2013, the number of unemployed people fell by 2 percent.

SOURCE: WORKSOURCE DEKALB VIA GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

public-sector solutions, and give people information about where resources can be accessed.”

The county also offers a Community Development Business Loan program, which can be used to make direct loans to small businesses, as well as provide financing of up to \$35,000 for companies located in, moving to or expanding within DeKalb.

The county partners with **Access to Capital for Entrepreneurs** (ACE), a nonprofit that provides loans and business development resources to help business owners create and grow sustainable businesses.

Eva Jane Bunkley, founder of The Makeup Bullet HiDef Cosmetic Finger Sponge, said she has relied on ACE for both financial support and guidance. As the leader of a women-led/minority-owned business, she said, the support she received from ACE has been invaluable.

“ACE has helped me understand that building my brand is the most important thing I can do. [The program] has helped me gain more confidence in my business,” said Bunkley, a **DeKalb Chamber** member who also received financial assistance from ACE last year as its Entrepreneur of the Year.



ERIK VOSS

Entrepreneur Eva Jane Bunkley received a loan from the nonprofit Access to Capital for Entrepreneurs.

DeKalb County economic development leaders also have been tasked with engaging angel investors and finding crowdfunding sources. **Toyasha Vaughn**, Decide DeKalb project manager, said she accomplished this by working with UGA’s SBDC to create a Small Business Resource List to help entrepreneurs start or expand their business. It includes links and references to programs and services geared to help businesses thrive.

“It is a wonderful starting point for someone who just needs to know where they should go as they create their business,” Vaughn said. At Decide DeKalb, “we work as convener and facilitator to streamline and create synergy to attack some of those tasks that need to be done.”

The plan also matches workforce training programs to existing business needs through **WorkSource DeKalb**, which offers employment and training programs.

According to **Katerina Taylor**, DeKalb Chamber president and CEO, as well as chair of the DeKalb Thrives steering committee, another action item in the plan is to create a “makerspace,” or community creative space, for manufacturing entrepreneurs. **STEAM Truck**, a DeKalb County-based nonprofit, is providing mobile makerspaces within its six vehicles, which are equipped with 3D printers, laser cutters, bandsaws and soldering irons. STEAM Truck has been working with WorkSource DeKalb to encourage the area’s residents who are ages 18 to 24 to engage with the state’s top trades, Taylor said.

Gilley said the county supports the area’s coworking spaces. For example, county leaders have built a strong relationship with **Mitch Jaffe**, CEO of **PREP**, a food business incubator that helps food entrepreneurs scale their business. Developed in 2014, PREP has launched 275 food companies out of DeKalb County.

“DeKalb County has been very helpful to us, and we have received a lot of guidance from them,” Jaffe said. “They are really proud of what we have accomplished here. We have created a ton of jobs and business licenses and sales tax revenue, and the county recognizes this. I certainly get the feeling they want us in DeKalb County and they advocate for us.”

Soon, the county and its partners will begin a new economic development plan, since this current one expires in 2019.

“We recognize we have done a decent job investigating and completing some of these [tasks], but we know we need more makerspace, more collaborative workspaces and more workforce development initiatives,” Taylor said. “We want to make sure people can earn a livable wage, not just minimum wage. That may mean they create their own revenues and profits to do that, and we have to make sure they know how to do that.”

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VIEWPOINT

Chamber celebrates 80 years driving change

In 1938, DeKalb County's primary business was agriculture. Business leaders then knew the value of supporting local businesses, and founded the DeKalb Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce. From the early days of the Chamber, it was important for businesses to have a unified voice, as this shaped the way businesses make an impact in DeKalb County.

As we reflect on our 80 years as an organization, we remember what we symbolize to our business members, DeKalb County and the metro Atlanta region. We represent a vision of DeKalb County, and at the root of that vision is a prosperous and thriving community.

Throughout our history, we've worked toward that vision. In the 1950s, DeKalb was the fastest growing county in the nation. In the 1960s, we led efforts to establish DeKalb Medical, the county's first hospital, to drive economic development and keep our residents healthy. In the 1990s, we supported education efforts at DeKalb College, now Perimeter College at Georgia State University, to strengthen our talent pipeline. In 2010, we convened community leaders and formed eduKalb, a grassroots effort that trained school board candidates, drove community awareness and endorsed quality candidates. In 2017, we garnered support to pass a county-wide SPLOST that addresses infrastructure, public safety and other needs.

Our work is still important today. DeKalb Chamber works with economic development partners to find ways to sustain our existing businesses, support and diversify emerging small businesses, and attract new businesses to DeKalb. We work with education leaders to ensure our workforce is equipped with the knowledge and skills for future jobs. We collaborate with local and state leaders to ensure the concerns of our business members are addressed and to keep DeKalb a business-friendly county. To better serve our business members, we seek out unique partnerships that help make the most impact.

Currently, DeKalb is the fourth largest county in Georgia, with 750,000 residents. More than 40 percent of our residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and, thanks to the nine higher-education institutions in DeKalb, we are able to offer a qualified talent pool. Our accessibility to highways, MARTA and Peachtree DeKalb Airport help move our residents, workers and goods.

We expect to see our numbers grow. By 2030, we will add nearly 2 million to Georgia's population and many



Katerina Taylor is president and CEO of the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce.

will reside in DeKalb County. When a business or an individual is looking to relocate, they take into consideration the following: availability of jobs; quality of education; affordability of homes and access to transit. How we respond now will impact how we prepare for this future growth.

As our aging workforce heads into retirement, we will be considerate of ensuring smart development so that DeKalb residents can age in place. We will focus on innovation, and create makerspaces that help fill current workforce gaps and teach future skills that don't yet exist. With advances in technology, we expect to see a growth in small businesses and entrepreneurs. More than 70 percent of our workforce will be employed by small businesses, and we will continue to cultivate and help incubate small business for smart and strategic growth. Equally important, we want to be thoughtful partners for leaders and influencers around the region and the state.

With ride-sharing services more ingrained in our communities and a growing desire for bicycle-friendly communities, we must reexamine how we alleviate our congested roads and find solutions to connect our community. We are on our way to unify the region. HB-930 will establish a regional transit plan and allow better coordination of transit services like MARTA across the Atlanta region.

As we've witnessed the film and entertainment industry flourish, our leaders have proven time and again our openness to work with new industries. We will continue to review the incentives we offer to businesses. We will work to help families achieve the American dream through our work to address affordable housing, and, in the same vein, we will push to increase wages that better reflect the nation.

We carry the same torch as the business leaders who first established DeKalb Chamber 80 years ago. We believe our work is one of the most important undertakings for DeKalb. We remain motivated by our possibilities for progress and potential to shape DeKalb into the county we envision. At the end of the day, we are only as strong as our business members and supporters.



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