

Chamber's point man on helping businesses

By ERNEST HOOPER

Published September 7, 2007

As vice president of economic development for the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce, you might think Myron Hughes spends a lot of time chasing major corporations.

But what I discovered over breakfast at The Brunchery is that economic development means more than just major relocations. Pull up a chair and join us.

What are you working on? Are we getting a Toyota plant in Lithia?

I doubt that laughs. Big manufacturers like that are hard to attract down here in the state of Florida just due to the location.

Because we're so far south?

It's south and when you start to look at 500 miles on either side, you're basically are in the water. Most of them look at a certain geographic area and that's the reason they're located in the heartland of America. Is this a great location for a manufacturing operation? That may not be true. But is this a decent location for a manufacturing location? Yes. Our ports help transport parts and if you're trying to sell to an overseas market then the Port Authority being here helps out a great deal.

So if not big companies, what do you focus on?

One of the primary things we're trying to focus on is to make sure people understand local economic development is extremely important. It's great to attract new companies here, but it's more important to see local companies growing and expanding. From time to time, we get away from that.

But we want the big headline-making companies.

For the newspaper, that's great. But, for the local economy, you want to see 500 businesses creating two to five additional jobs and hiring local people.

How do you spur that?

Right now, we have a local business and retention and expansion program. We're trying to get the word out to as many people as we possibly can to let them know we're here to help. Unfortunately, their first inclination is, 'Oh, they're calling me to join the chamber (of commerce)'. My phone call, from an economic development standpoint, is that you can be a chamber member or not. We're here to help.

What can you offer a small business?

Depending on what kind of operation you have, we can help you with finding employees. We can help you with permitting issues. Sometimes we can assist with training grants for your operation. Or if you're looking to relocate somewhere here in the Hillsborough County area, we can help with that.

What about finding qualified employees? Do you work with some of the agencies in town?

We work closely with the Tampa Bay WorkForce Alliance as well as other Chamber member employee agencies as well. We also have a strong working relationship with the University of Tampa, the University of South Florida and Hillsborough Community College to make sure we know the type of programs they have. Unfortunately, a lot of employers don't realize the resources that exist here locally. A lot of people spend a lot of money, a lot of time, a lot of resources trying to recruit from outside the region and in some cases outside the country.

Is there any chance of locating a major company? I hear a lot about biotech.

We're working with hundreds of companies. The success ratio doesn't always look that great in getting companies to relocate here or expand here, but I think the market is primed to continue to grow. In the life sciences industry, there's a lot of growth opportunity for the Tampa area. As most people know, Moffitt and Merck recently did a joint venture called M2Gen. That puts us on the map with other liked companies throughout the world. Once you have the first success, you see others following.

What's the area's best selling point?

From my standpoint, there's a collection of things. I can't say there's one thing that helps Tampa stand out over any other place. The education system, the interstate system, the airport, the Port Authority, all those things are part of the collection of what makes Tampa great. We used to tout that the cost of living and the cost of doing business here as one of the cheapest, but we can't necessarily say that any more.

You didn't mention sunshine or beaches.

Well that's a given (laughs). Quality of life is very important. Actually, we are having what we call an economic

development breakfast series coming up on Sept. 12 in which we talk about tourism being part of your life, part of economic development.

Do you like living in Valrico?

Love it. It's a great place. It's sort of like being in the country, but it's not too far from downtown. I couldn't think of a better place in the entire area to live.

DESSERT: A postscript from Ernest

Hughes has a great appreciation for the fine arts, especially jazz music. Longtime college basketball fans also may recognize his name. He played four years at the University of Cincinnati and professionally in Europe.

Ernest Hooper also writes a column for the Tampa & State section. He can be reached at hooper@sptimes.com or 226-3406.

© 2007 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111
[Contact the Times](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)