

FINDING NEW FOOTING

POLK COUNTY'S BLOSSOMING RESURGENCE HAS ROOTS PLANTED SQUARELY IN THE CENTRAL FLORIDA DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL.

by Kevin Fritz



> // **RETAIL**
and many other parts of
the county's economy
are picking up

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> // Tom Patton, executive director,
Central Florida Development Council

Once thriving, Polk had fallen victim to back-to-back major citrus freezes and the loss of the Lakeland Piper Aircraft manufacturing facility during the 1980s. Those events set the county into a tailspin. Unemployment rose to double digits, and those who did stick around found jobs outside its borders.

In 1985, the Central Florida Development Council came to the rescue. A concerned group of business and county officials formed the public/private partnership to stop the bleeding. Today, a united Polk County, with its 17 municipalities, is basking in success as new initiatives are launched and new business continues to arrive.

Just look at the numbers. The CFDC has helped generate more than 19,000 jobs for county citizens and more than \$3.2 billion in capital investment. Fortune 500 companies such as Ford Motor Co., McKesson Pharmaceutical, Lockheed

Martin, GEICO, Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart and Sherwin-Williams each has put facilities in Polk since the CFDC's inception.

Meanwhile, the CFDC is getting ready to announce the arrival of two more major business entities, although at press time officials wouldn't reveal their names. One of them, however, will offer 240 jobs, with wages roughly 150 percent above the average in Polk, which is now in the neighborhood of \$33,000. The second company will employ 400 to 500 people and likely build a structure encompassing about 1 million square feet.

Tom Patton, executive director for the CFDC, speaks quite passionately about the resurgence of Polk as a player in the Central Florida economy and credits the region's visionary initiative myregion.org as being the catalyst.

“Myregion has been talking about higher-density development,” says Patton, “and we are going to the bank with it.”

Patton says more than 500 acres have been set aside in unincorporated Polk County for an “employment center,” which will be zoned for high-density, high-rise and mixed-use development. Patton adds that some 8,000 residents each day are commuting to jobs outside of Polk County, and comments, “We need to be able to keep them at home.” At the same time, he believes high density makes sense for preservation of the county's precious natural habitat appeal. “To preserve our open spaces, we need to be very focused,” he says. “This is one of the greatest initiatives we have going now.”

Another high priority on the CFDC's to-do list is the campus expansion of the University of South Florida into Lakeland, slated to be located at Interstate 4 and the Polk Parkway. “We need a research university,” Patton asserts. “It is paramount if we want to elevate the income level in Polk County.”

He notes that research universities are usually followed by business incubators along with high-tech and high-wage jobs. Essentially, an incubator provides start-up companies with an environment and variety of services to help them grow more quickly and successfully. Indeed, the University of Central Florida Technology Incubator is one of the big success stories for UCF and the community. Since opening its doors in 1999, UCF's version has served more than 80 emerging technology companies.

To that end, Polk County has set aside \$5 million for securing the campus, and money has also been set aside for an incubator.

In terms of land infrastructure, Patton says the CFDC is focusing on the establishment of “certified sites” for development in each municipality. According to Patton, this will allow a developer to come to the county and begin work in an area immediately, because the land will development ready.

All in all, Patton concludes, the CFDC's mission is centered on creating the right opportunities for new businesses to call Polk County home.

Clearly, progress is being made.