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June 2022

From the Director's Desk

By Nathan Sparks, CEcD

While the true start of summer may still be a few weeks away, it only requires a visit to one of our local eateries, a stroll on our beaches or a short drive down Highway 98 to confirm that summer is already in full swing. Here at One Okaloosa EDC, spring went by in the blink of an eye but left many good memories and new opportunities in its wake. Since my last “Director’s Desk” piece in March, One Okaloosa hosted our 5th annual Technology Coast Manufacturing & Engineering Network Industry Day (TID) at the Destin Fort Walton Beach Convention Center on April 26. Thanks to the support of our 17 event sponsors and the tireless dedication of our staff and TID Planning Committee, this was easily our best one yet. All told, the 5th iteration of TeCMEN Industry Day featured 23 speakers / panelists, showcased 51 exhibitor booths, and welcomed 366 total attendees. Thanks to support from the HSU Educational Foundation, 42 of our 366 attendees were School Ambassadors representing Okaloosa County School District and Rocky Bayou Christian School.



As if all the positive momentum generated by a successful TeCMEN Industry Day was not enough, a May 18 visit by Governor DeSantis to personally award Okaloosa County a \$3.2 million grant from the Florida Jobs Growth Grant Fund provided even more reason for celebration. These funds will be combined with funds from the Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners and Triumph Gulf Coast to make significant site improvements at the Shoal River Ranch Gigasite, setting the stage for game changing economic development to occur. In addressing the crowd in Crestview, Governor DeSantis said “Today’s grant will lay the foundation for a dramatic expansion of manufacturing in Okaloosa County”. We couldn’t have said it better ourselves. (See article on page 3 for more info).

Lastly, many of you know that we utilize objective, third party rankings to gauge how our local economy is faring overall. One of those is the “Best Performing Cities” list compiled by the Milken Institute. Milken’s 2022 Best Performing Cities list was recently released, and the Crestview-Destin-Fort Walton Beach Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) clocked in at #29 in the nation on Milken’s “Large Cities” list. While we were down one spot from last year, we remain the highest ranked Northwest Florida MSA on the list. We also outrank some pretty heady competition – including Charlotte (#31), San Diego (#42), Orlando (#57), Miami (#98), Birmingham (#104) and Mobile (#122). Not to say there aren’t reasons for concern, however. In particular, we have work to do in the areas of Housing Affordability (#155) and Broadband Access (#182) – thankfully, two areas where renewed community-wide efforts are underway.

Defense Support Initiatives

By Bob Marinan, Chairman

As we enter the summer months hopeful for some family vacations and slower times, the DSI spring has been anything but relaxing. Several members have been very busy working the FY22 Congressional budget needs for our area with the appropriate people in the Congress and Senate. As you would expect when dealing with Washington, each office has their own unique form to be used and different timelines for submittal which further complicates the process.



Our major focus for our inputs are:

- Permanently sustaining the Military Mission Line (MML) in the Gulf
- Support & fund the Eglin Test & Training Range required upgrades
- Support & fund the construction of a Childcare Development Center
- Support construction of additional housing on Eglin AFB
- Fund the needed road capacity improvements

Unfortunately, the proposed Crestview Wellplex, to include the KinderCare center appears to have stalled. Fortunately, the Higher Ground Education (HGE) group has stepped in and committed to building two childcare development centers locally: one in Crestview and the other in Navarre. HGE focuses on the military communities and prefers to hire military spouses and will pay for them to obtain the required certifications for child development. Both locations will be able to accommodate approximately 175 children, infant to six years old. These facilities, albeit sorely needed and an excellent start, will not meet the full needs of the community.

VPS Airport and the Okaloosa BOCC in partnership with the Air Force have agreed to and signed a Joint Use Agreement extending Okaloosa County use of the airfield through 2063 for commercial aviation. Passenger growth since 2015 has grown by 157%; a majority of which are tourists.

On 30 June 2022, BGen Scott Cain will relinquish his command to his replacement, BGen Jeffery Geraghty. BGen Cain's next assignment is at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. Please join me in thanking BGen Cain for his service to our community!

Technology Coast Manufacturing & Engineering Network

By Nic Dezinski, Chairman

April was a busy but rewarding month for TeCMEN. First, one of our signature efforts, TeCMEN Industry Day (TID) was held on April 26th. TID celebrated its 5th Anniversary this year! The event was commemorated with a wonderful challenge coin machined and donated by Aerohead Inc. Made possible by our Signature Sponsor, Destin Fort Walton Beach Airport – Fly VPS, we had pint glasses produced with our 5th Anniversary logo designed by Holly Karr of MAG Aerospace. Attendees received one of each. We had record attendance this year with over 50 booths sold and almost 400 in attendance. 42 student ambassadors attended from surrounding Okaloosa County high schools, two of which presented at the Business Leadership Council this month. Everyone enjoyed interacting with the students and if this is any preview to the future students entering the workforce we are all in for a treat, some very bright individuals coming out of the Okaloosa County School system and Rocky Bayou Christian School. The success of the event is in thanks to all the sponsors, speakers/panelists, exhibitors, attendees, and the One



Okaloosa EDC staff. A special thank you goes out to the volunteer TID Planning Committee that generously gave of their time to provide valued event input and guidance.

In addition to the TID event, at our April TeCMEN meeting the guest speaker was Matt Schwalb with Matrix Design Group, Inc. Matt provided timely information regarding the recent developed Florida Defense Supply Chain Mapping Tool program. Matrix implemented the program with support from Enterprise Florida and the Florida Defense Support Task force. The program is a defense contract supply chain mapping tool that identifies where Florida-based prime and sub-contracting activity has occurred since 2015. The program is a valuable information tool for the TeCMEN membership that will enable future growth and contracting opportunities. Thanks to Kratos Defense for sponsoring the April meeting.

The May TeCMEN meeting was equally informative. Diane Fraser, Director, Emerald Coast Science Center, provided an inspiring and exciting update to the numerous positive opportunities for the Center now and planned. All attendees agreed that Diane's enthusiasm is admirable and contagious. Thanks to the May meeting sponsor, Aerohead, Inc.

Thank you to our renewing TeCMEN members, DEFENSEWERX, Kratos Defense, and Landrum HR.

Business Expansion and Support Team

By Kevin Lovelace, Director of Business Success

On May 17, 2022, at a press conference held at Hub City Smokehouse in downtown Crestview, Governor Ron DeSantis awarded Okaloosa County a \$3.2 million grant from the Florida Jobs Growth Grant Fund to assist with critical infrastructure needs at the 10,500 acre Shoal River Ranch Gigasite . The \$3.2 million, along with an additional \$1.7 million added by the County, will allow One Okaloosa EDC to market the site as "shovel ready".

The grant dollars will be used to extend water, wastewater, and fiber conduit 2,400 feet to have all utilities adjacent to both county-owned parcels at the Shoal River Ranch Gigasite. In addition to the utilities, the now-dirt Jericho Road will be paved the same distance, along with a now unnamed road just south of the county-owned 88 acre parcel, perpendicular to Jericho. The southern parcel owned by the county, to which the improvements will be extended, is 500 acres.

Previously in 2018, Triumph Gulf Coast awarded a \$1.5 million grant to Okaloosa County that was used to extend water and sewer lines along Hwy 90 to the intersection of Jericho Road. Thanks to the County's good fiscal management, that project was completed \$408,000 under budget. On May 25, 2022, the Triumph Gulf Coast Board of Directors approved amending the prior Grant Award Agreement to allow the \$408,000 of unspent funds to be utilized for further water/sewer improvements. As a result, these funds will be included with the County's match for the \$3.2 million Florida Jobs Growth Grant Fund award.

Closer to Hwy 90, you'll see some changes more noticeable than underground utilities. The road crossing the rail line will be improved to be able to handle more vehicles, rail signalization will be added, monument-style signage will replace the aged wrought-iron entrance gate, and landscaping will be added. These improvements will greatly improve the curb-appeal of the Shoal River Ranch Gigasite.

We are very grateful for the hard work put in by County staff, the Department of Economic Opportunity, Enterprise Florida, Triumph Gulf Coast, and Governor DeSantis for the opportunity to market the Shoal River Ranch Gigasite as truly "shovel ready".

The Florida Jobs Growth Grant Fund is an economic development program designed to

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Educational Partners: Dr. Devin Stephenson, Dr. Melinda Bowers, Mr. Marcus Chambers

Utility Partners: Steve Rhodes, Gordon King, Bernard Johnson

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