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GEORGIA TREND / GEORGIA TREND OCTOBER 2010 / GAINESVILLE/HALL COUNTY: HAVING IT BOTH WAYS

EMAIL PRINT FEED

# Gainesville/Hall County: Having It Both Ways

A healthy mix

**Bobby L. Hickman**



**A Smacking Success: Gainesville Factory Director Jim Fitzgerald at his Hall County Wrigley Manufacturing chewing gum plant**  
Jennifer Stalcup

Since its earliest days as a manufacturing and poultry center, Hall County and Gainesville have always looked ahead to the future. The result is a highly diversified economic mix that still draws new industries, workers and residents to the area and provides the quality of life found in a small town with the urban benefits of nearby Atlanta.

Hall County's geography blends suburban, small-town and rural settings, notes Kit Dunlap, president and CEO of the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce. Southern Hall near Gwinnett County features rapid growth typical of the neighboring metropolitan Atlanta area. Northern Hall is still dominated by farms and large tracts of land, she says, "and those folks want to keep it that way." In between is the county seat of Gainesville and Lake Sidney Lanier.

"We're fortunate to be in a good location," Dunlap says.

Hall County is only an hour away from Atlanta via Interstates 85 and 985. Yet there are as many people commuting from other counties to Hall as there are those driving south to work in Atlanta. Recreation, healthcare, a wide array of manufacturing and the poultry industry are among the main drivers for the local economy.

Tim Evans, vice president of economic development for the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce, says the diverse growth in the area is evident in the recent string of announcements for new plants and expansions. "Last year we had one million square feet of industrial space absorbed," he says. ZF Windpower – which is locating its regional headquarters in Hall and bringing some 200 new jobs – is adding another half-million square feet. "There is a constant demand for medical space," Evans adds. The result is vacancy rates below the national and Metro Atlanta averages. "Buildings don't stay vacant long."

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Still, Hall is not resting on its laurels. Dunlap says the community has raised \$1.7 million towards the \$2.1 million HALLmark Vision project, a five-year economic development initiative for the city and county. Hall leaders have engaged their peers in such cities as Greenville, S.C., and Chattanooga, Tenn., on how they reinvented their cities – gleaning lessons about how they should plan the future of Hall County. Change and growth are inevitable, yet “you still want to retain the uniqueness in your city and county,” Dunlap says. “We want to keep what makes us the place people want to live and work.”

## Recreation Rebounding

For many Georgians, Hall County and Gainesville are synonymous with Lake Lanier. At Lake Lanier Islands Resort, the first phase of a 15-year redevelopment plan is nearing completion, according to Grier Todd, chief operating officer. The \$70-million Phase I included remodeling the former Emerald Pointe Hotel as the Legacy Lodge; building new villas; and making infrastructure improvements such as new roads and a sewer plant. “No taxpayer dollars have been invested in this,” Todd says, noting all the work is being funded through private investment.

Todd says the resort is “waiting for the credit markets to open back up” so it can begin Phase II. The first priority for the next phase is building a new hotel on the site of the former Pine Isle Hotel. The leaseholders have identified some additional hotel sites, some restaurant sites, a harbor yacht club and other recreational opportunities,” Todd notes.

One upgrade that is not waiting for funding is improvements at the old amphitheater, which the resort will renovate in 2011 in a joint venture with the Lake Lanier Islands Development Authority. The \$2-million-plus project will increase the current 1,200 seats and make other improvements so the facility can be used for concerts and community events. “We can tackle that now, regardless of market conditions,” Todd says.

“It’s been a tough three years,” he acknowledges. Lake Lanier Islands has dealt with its construction headaches; low lake levels for 18 months during the recent drought; and reduced tourism from the economic downturn that began in September 2008.

“We’re starting to see some daylight with our group business picking up,” Todd says. “I don’t think we’re going to see a big spike like we’ve had in previous years coming out of a downturn. It is going to be a more gradual recovery.” Todd has noticed an upturn in the recreation side of the business, a trend echoed by boat dealers and marina owners. “There’s a lot of pent-up demand out there for people to enjoy the lake,” Todd says.

Lake lovers will also have a new way to enjoy Lake Lanier when Georgia’s newest state park opens on the north end of the lake, according to Doug Carter, president of Don Carter Realty and chairman-elect of the Georgia Chamber of Commerce. Carter says officials broke ground this summer on the 1,000-acre park. The park will be named for his father, Don, who served on the state Department of Natural Resources board for 27 years. “It’s an ‘everyday person’ park,” Doug Carter says. The park features two miles of shoreline, with plans for campsites, cabins and an equestrian trail. Funds for the park were appropriated by the General Assembly in 2009.

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## Water Supply

While Lake Lanier's economic impact as a recreational asset is well known, much of the recent attention has been on its value as the main water source for the Metro Atlanta area. Local officials are hopeful negotiations will produce a resolution to the "water wars" – the ongoing legal conflict among Georgia, Alabama and Florida over how much water the states can draw from Lanier and the Chattahoochee River. A federal judge has given the three states until mid-2012 to resolve the issue.

However, Hall County and Gainesville are taking steps so "we won't have to depend on the federal government for our water supply," according to Phil Wilheit, president of Wilheit Packaging and a former Georgia Chamber of Commerce chair. "We're concerned about the court case, but we've got initiatives in place to generate water volume not just for Hall County, but possibly for Forsyth and portions of Gwinnett as well."

Tom Oliver, Hall County Commission Chairman, says, "We're going to have the water, and economic development is going to follow the water." Oliver says the county built the Cedar Creek reservoir 15 years ago, later turning it over to the city of Gainesville. Hall has also obtained more than 850 acres that will include a second reservoir at Glades Farm.

"Cedar Creek Reservoir is built; it just needs a treatment plant," adds Danny Dunagan, Gainesville's mayor pro tem. Dunagan says the county already had a permit to draw two million gallons a day from Cedar Creek, and the city is seeking approval for another 9.5 million gallons.

The city council recently approved beginning design on a \$20-million water treatment plant, which should come online within two years.

"The city and the county are on the same page in dealing with the water issue."

The Glades Farm reservoir will produce 70 million to 90 million gallons, Oliver says. The county expects to receive a state permit for the reservoir within 12 months. "Then we'll decide on the dam and other facilities," he adds. The project will run \$40 million to \$60 million and take several years to complete, "but the economic engine could be billions over a span of time." A mixed-use development planned around the reservoir is also expected to draw more companies to the area.

Oliver says Hall County is finding that both private and publicly traded companies are interested in pursuing joint ventures for Glades Farm. "Water is the future."

## More Diversification

Hall County's determination to diversify its water source and control its own destiny reflects trends that date back for generations. While Gainesville is known as the "Poultry Capital of the World" – and poultry remains a key part of today's economy – the area has never been totally dependent on any one industry. Manufacturing dates back more than a century, with products ranging from textile, which once flourished in downtown Gainesville, to a variety of industrial and consumer goods produced today. Community leaders have been proactively working to

diversify the mix of companies and industries since the late 1960s.

One of the best examples of that approach is Wrigley Manufacturing, which has a long history in Hall County. Jim Fitzgerald, Gainesville factory director, said the company built its plant near Flowery Branch in 1971 and hired 100 employees to make sugar stick gum. The facility now employs more than 800 and runs 80 different high-speed production lines. The plant produces more than 200 million units of sugar-free stick and pellet gum, plus gum base for all the factories in the Americas. The Hall County plant is now the largest by volume in the Wrigley global network, Fitzgerald says.

“Wrigley is here for the long term,” Fitzgerald says. “This is a good business environment. There are great educational, social and recreational opportunities. Plus we’re close to Atlanta and two hours from the mountains. All those things are helpful when we bring people here from other Wrigley locations.”

Fitzgerald says training supplied by Lanier Technical College has been key to training the workforce and improving productivity at the Wrigley plant. He says the company has partnered with Lanier Tech to train its electricians and mechanics in electrical skills, allowing the company to add more complex automated systems. “If not for those programs, we would not have been able to take on that new technology,” he says.

Connie Mixon, chief executive officer of MyCelx Technology in Gainesville, says community resources allowed her company to ramp up its production over the summer. MyCelx has commercialized a unique molecule that separates oil from water, which has a number of industrial applications. When the company saw an opportunity to supply mats in the Gulf of Mexico to assist in cleaning up the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, it turned to Rehabilitation Industries of North Georgia (RING) to increase production.

MyCelx sprays its mats with a chemical compound that permanently removes oil from water, Mixon says. The MyCelx process does not require a lot of labor. However, as the company began to produce more mats, “we found our bottleneck was with the sewing,” she says. “RING solved that for us.” RING added two more shifts to sew the mats, and MyCelx bought additional sewing machines for the nonprofit to use. Mixon says RING has done sewing and other work for her company for many years. “It has been a lifesaver having that resource in Gainesville.”

While the Gulf oil spill response presented a unique opportunity, most of the MyCelx work is focused on more normal operations in the oil and gas and petrochemical industries. “When you’re drilling for oil, there are five to 10 barrels of water that come up with every barrel of oil,” Mixon explains. “You have to treat that water before you can discharge it into the ground or back into the ocean.” The company does work with Gulf of Mexico producers, and it sees even larger opportunities in the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia, where reclaiming water from refining and petrochemical operations is a high priority. Companies in those regions are just starting to embrace the technology, she adds, so MyCelx is positioning itself for a major expansion in those markets.

Another sector experiencing rapid growth in Hall is healthcare, illustrated most dramatically at Northeast Georgia Health System. Tracy Vardeman, vice president of strategic planning and marketing, says the system recently tripled capacity at its Gainesville campus, with projects including a \$180-million patient tower and a \$150-million women’s and children’s center. The private not-for-profit community hospital serves a 13-county region through a variety of inpatient and outpatient facilities.

“Gainesville has always served as a hub for medical care,” Vardeman says. She notes that the health system’s Northeast Georgia Medical Center was named a “Top 100 U.S. Hospital” in April 2010 by Thompson Reuters – one of only two in Georgia to make the list. The hospital was one of 23 in the county to receive that group’s “Everest Award,” which recognizes achievements over the past five years.

The next major capital undertaking is Northeast Georgia Medical Center Braselton at River Place, a new hospital in fast-growing south Hall County.

Those growth stories are part of the mostly positive economic picture in Hall County. “2010 has been a good year for the city of Gainesville,” says Dunagan, the mayor pro tem. By mid-year, the city had seen \$168 million in new investment, creating 650 jobs and retaining 100 other positions. Companies such as Kubota, American Yazaki, Cargill, LaserCraft, GMI, Victory Foods and Pilgrim’s Pride have either announced expansions or relocated in Gainesville.

Private redevelopment of the Midtown area – including a new hotel and two new office towers – has been delayed by the economic slowdown. However, the city is moving into its new Public Safety Center this fall, and the private developer is going ahead with a new pedestrian bridge to the Georgia Mountain Center. “We’re glad to have renewed interest in development within the city,” Dunagan says.

Gainesville and Hall County are not without challenges. An adverse “water wars” ruling could bring Lake Lanier’s levels back down. Local leaders acknowledge state and national issues such as transportation, immigration and the slow economic recovery are taking its toll here. With unemployment over 9 percent, “There are plenty of good workers available here,” Wilheit says. “But at the same time, this is where the jobs are.”

## **Community Snapshot**

### **Local Leaders**

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Tom Oliver

Chairman, Hall County Commission

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Danny Dunagan

Mayor Pro Tem, City of Gainesville

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### **Population**

(2007, estimated)

County, 176,932

Gainesville, 30,769

### **Per Capita Income**

(2007)

County \$24,324

### **Unemployment**

(June 2010)

County, 9.3 percent

Georgia, 10.3 percent

### Top Employers

Northeast Georgia Health System, Hall County School System, Fieldale Farms, Gainesville School System, Hall County Government, Pilgrim's Pride, Mar-Jac, Coleman Natural Foods, Wrigley, Kubota Manufacturing of America

### Sources

Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce, Georgia Department of Labor

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