

Mississippi's Gray Swoope: Living the Dream

BY MEGAN MCCANN

Gray Swoope, Executive Director of the Mississippi Development Authority, is a really fortunate man. He's doing what many of us never will: Swoope is living his lifelong dream of leading his home state in its economic development efforts.

As the head of Mississippi's economic development agency, Swoope oversees more than 300 employees – each engaged in providing services to businesses, communities and leaders throughout Mississippi. He has been a big part in securing important projects for the state, including Toyota's eighth North American automotive manufacturing plant, Severstal's steel mini mill, GE Aviation's composite engine parts facility, PACCAR's engine manufacturing plant, and Automated Data Processing's solutions center.

In this current difficult economic

environment, Swoope talks a lot about innovation. He says finding new ways to attract – and more important – retain businesses in the state is extraordinarily essential, especially now.

An example of the kind of innovation he's talking about came in late 2008, when Cooper Tire & Rubber Co. announced it was undertaking a network capacity study that would likely result in the consolidation of its operations and the closure of one of its four U.S. plants. Swoope and his team wanted to do everything they could to keep Mississippi's existing Cooper Tire plant in Tupelo.

"We had to think of the long-term health of not only the county it was located in, but the five counties around that plant," he says.

Cooper's Tupelo plant employs 1,500 people with an annual payroll of \$81 million. Something not easily replaced. All the economic development partners working to keep the Cooper Tire

facility in Mississippi faced the question of what assistance they could offer. Mississippi state and local officials, along with the Tennessee Valley Authority, worked to address Cooper Tire's needs and concerns, resulting in a combined incentive package valued at \$30 million to retain and grow the Cooper Tire facility.

This package primarily provides assistance with workforce training and infrastructure improvements. The Mississippi Legislature approved \$19 million of these incentives, which included \$7 million for building expansion needs, a \$6 million loan and a rebate of up to \$6 million in Mississippi payroll taxes. Also included in the state's package were funds for workforce training.

The result? A plant in another state closed. The Tupelo plant remains open. Swoope stresses how well the different groups in Mississippi worked together to retain this important business.

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“We are not immune to the effects of the global economic situation,” he explains. “But we see the opportunities and we are relentless in pursuing those opportunities.”

The key is working together and understanding the markets, he says. “All economic development agencies at all levels must be prepared for what the market is telling us,” he advises.

In fact, his agency saw the economy softening a few years ago and began to prepare for the inevitable downturn. The MDA began beefing up its efforts to support its existing industry base, shifting resources so that MDA could “touch” every company with more than 50 employees in the state. By staying “plugged in,” MDA is able to work with companies considering shutting their doors and help – and that assistance might come in the form of locating buyers for the closing facility.

Prior to joining MDA, Swoope served as president of the Area Development Partnership (ADP), a three-county economic development agency based in Hattiesburg, Miss. He has served on the board of directors of the Southern



Economic Development Council and as president of the Mississippi Economic Development Council. He received both his undergraduate and graduate degrees in business administration from Mississippi State University.

In fact, in February 2008, Swoope was selected as the Mississippi State

University Alumni Association Central Chapter “Alumni of the Year” for his contributions to economic development in Mississippi and his efforts to link development to research and development partnerships at the university.