

TVA planners working to help small communities

BY BEN ALEXANDER

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STARKVILLE - When Tim Weston was a rural economic developer in North Mississippi, he knew little about Tennessee Valley Authority's ability to assist him in his job. Weston says if he only knew then what he knows now ...

Now working with TVA himself as an economic development field specialist, Weston said requesting help from TVA would have made his life simpler when it came to recruiting industry.

"I never really used (TVA) as much as I should have," he said. "I think about times I was pulling my hair out trying to get certain things done and in many cases I could have just picked up the phone and had TVA help me."

Weston, who worked for seven years as the executive director of the Itawamba County Development Council, said he and Chandler Russ, another TVA economic development field specialist for Mississippi, want more communities to take advantage of that opportunity with TVA.

"I think in the past several years we've done a better job of letting local economic development agencies know what services can be provided, but there's more to do in that area."

In many small, rural communities where economic development officials may not

have extensive experience, Weston and Russ said they could help teach basic lessons in economic development.

Even compiling information on a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a potential industry can be difficult for smaller counties.

"Some of them may not have technical programs available to show clients the location of water and sewer lines or other logistical information," Russ said.

"That's where we can get involved."

TVA's community preparedness program also helps guide some of those community leaders through properly preparing those RFPs. When communities learn about those small intangibles, they have a better chance of landing an industry, according to Weston.

"Instead of us simply holding their hands and doing it for them, we can teach them how to do it themselves and in the process, teach them how to determine what a company is looking for in your area. For example, if you've got a company that

doesn't request a lot about water capacity, you can assume that won't be a big selling point for the county," Weston said.

In addition to experience, local developers have access to TVA's wide array of human resources. Often a written proposal

must be accompanied by specific data, such as engineering studies, economic statistics and demographic information.

"If there's something out there that's related to large capital investment,

we've got two economists on staff, as well as engineers and graphic artists who can give any proposal all the necessary bells and whistles," Russ said.

Larger counties with larger budgets are more often in better positions when it comes to luring large manufacturers, but that doesn't mean smaller communities do not have opportunities as well.

"There's no doubt that every time a large company comes calling some of these small communities may not have the resources on their own, but in some cases, there are opportunities out there," Weston

said. "We want to make certain if opportunity knocks, they are prepared to answer the door."

Russ said the way to ensure those communities are at the top of their game is by working directly with the local leadership.

"It involves calling them on a weekly basis, asking how things are going and offering help with anything, large or small."

Weston and Russ have recently been working with several communities compiling existing industry data as part of a statewide initiative, E-Synchronist.

This Mississippi Development Authority program is a comprehensive survey of each county's industrial resources.

A survey of Lowndes County has been completed with 10 volunteer teams surveying 34 industries. The cities of Philadelphia and Louisville have also begun the survey process.

Once the data is compiled, officials with the state and organizations such as TVA can track trends in existing industry and see potential problems that may be hurting existing industry.

"One of the questions might be something like, 'Have you had any sister plants located elsewhere expand recently?' If we've got several companies answer yes, we have to start asking ourselves why those companies aren't expanding in

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TVA, Economic development**

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Mississippi," Russ said.

The two are also looking at the economic development field in general to see what problems may be on the horizon that could impact industrial recruitment, such as the state's lack of updated incentives to recruit new, high-tech companies.

Traditional manufacturers, who intend to spend hundreds of millions on equipment and infrastructure, are quickly given property tax abatements and millions for guaranteed loans by state officials, but new, high-tech companies are often overlooked for valuable incentives despite offering high-paying jobs.

"The truth is most state programs in the South are geared toward jobs that require intensive capital investment, like manufacturers," Russ said. "If a technically-heavy company comes calling and is touting 100 high-paying jobs, but less than \$1 million in capital investment, it probably won't get very good incentives. In this instance, something like property tax abatement isn't a big deal for them."

Weston said more and more tech companies are looking at Mississippi.

"We've got some opportunities out there for several communities who could benefit from these companies, if we can fix these problems. The goal here is to create a better quality of life through better jobs. This could go a long way in doing that."