

6-25-2014

Research Express News

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Recommended Citation

Georgia Southern University, "Research Express News" (2014). *Research Express News Blog (2013-present)*. 25.
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Inside Bulloch Business with DeWayne Grice – Dr. Keel: How to attract more biz to Statesboro

June 25, 2014

Reprinted from the Statesboro Herald Article:

Recently, I toured the site of the proposed Medient Studios off of I-16 in Effingham – A “field of dreams” idea of constructing the world’s largest movie studio 30 minutes from Statesboro.

Since the tour, the company’s stock has tanked, the CEO ousted and the project has been scaled back dramatically. There is still a lot of “what if’s” that have to fall in place for this project to formally break ground. I am pulling for its success, because our community and Georgia Southern University have a lot to gain from it.

I reached out to Dr. Brooks Keel, president of GS, to get his take on Medient project and how we as a community can position ourselves to attract future projects. Before coming to GS, Keel served as vice chancellor of Research and Economic Development at LSU. In that position, he played a key role in recruiting Electronic Arts (EA), the largest video gaming company in the world, to Baton Rouge.

Even if the Medient deal doesn’t come to fruition, it presents an interesting case for strategically positioning GS and the Boro from an economic development perspective. Dr. Keel explained in the EA deal they were looking for a site to do quality control of the video games.

“They had been outsourcing this to India and China,” he said. “Obviously, these countries provided great technical expertise but neither had a good grasp for the culture of football. Basically, they needed gamers to play the games and get the bugs worked out before they went to mass production. What better person to do that than a college student.”

They quickly realized that EA was interested in other aspects that LSU, uniquely, could provide, including computer scientists, electrical engineers, music, arts, literature and English.

Because of EA’s success, and many others like them, a new focus on development has been created dubbed “Rural Sourcing.” This is a focus on recruiting technology based companies that are not restricted to a large metropolitan base to do business. They are looking at rural areas to set up business for a variety of reasons.

“Land is cheap, labor is affordable, quality of life is great and no traffic or smog,” Keel said. “They can live in a gated community or 60-acre farm and still be at work in 10 minutes. That is very attractive these days, especially if you sit in traffic in Atlanta for 45 minutes each way to work.”

In the past, the power of a university from an economic development point of view was focused primarily on the workforce that it trains and produces, which is very important, and the technology transfer. Now, equally important is the expertise of the university employees that industries can take advantage of. All of which are in one place and they do not have to try to go out searching to hire all of their talent.

Properly leveraging Georgia Southern is critical to our region’s economic success. Georgia Southern is a city within a city. GS has an annual budget of \$300 million plus, which is two and half times the budget of the city and county combined. They employ more than 2,400, which is almost four times as many employees as the city and county governments combined.

Because of the sheer magnitude, I like to refer to Dr. Keel as the “Mayor” of GS. Every decision he makes, is as critical to the success of our region as Statesboro Mayor Jan Moore or County Commission Chairman Garrett Nevil.

I asked “Mayor” Keel, removing politics, budget or any other barriers, what are three things he would do immediately that would accelerate our growth.

- First, he would clean up all of the entrances of our community including the gateways. He would include widening Highway 67 to the interstate and complete the redesign and development of the “Blue Mile” (South Main from the entrance of GS to the Courthouse). This should be done with a goal in mind of creating an entertainment district downtown that gives students a reason to come downtown. He applauded the committee that has formed to focus on this and Mayor Moore’s partnership with

the university in surveying the students to learn more about what would attract them to downtown.

- Second, he would create a centralized single point of contact for Bulloch County and everything within its confines. He has done this at GS by hiring Dr. Charles Patterson and elevating his position to one of vice president for Research and Economic Development. Thus creating a “one stop shop” for economic development.

- Third, he would get a little more creative about focusing on strengths GS has that we can tie into growth areas for the city and county. Then he would aggressively go after companies that have those needs like information technology and logistics. “The reason GS merged the information technology computer sciences with engineering and created the college of engineering and information technology is to marry the digital sciences with the engineering sciences,” Keel said. “It is this cross disciplinary program I think that is going to make us very attractive from everything from mechanical engineering firms to digital media.”

Currently GS has submitted to the board of regents a proposal to bring Manufacturing Engineering to GS. Industry leaders from companies like Gulfstream, JCB and Daniel Defense are requesting workers with this expertise. Currently, they have to recruit from Virginia or Texas as they are the only two states offering the program.

Keel stressed that the success of GS is a direct reflection of the community and vice versa. He reminded me that it is just as important to expose the community to the campus as it is to expose the community to the students and staff.

“It is a two-way street,” Keel said.

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