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Bibb is Seeing Economic Gains
Linda S. Morris, TELEGRAPH STAFF WRITER

This summer, the latest in a string of recent **economic** successes is expected to help Bibb County rebound from a trio of corporate shutdowns. Construction of a \$24 million cold-storage distribution center for Sara Lee Food & Beverage - creating between 120 and 150 jobs - is on target to be complete in August, officials said.

The Sara Lee operation comes on the heels of several other high-profile ventures making a presence in the county, including Kohl's, Bass Pro Shops and various retail **developments**. Those businesses made a push into Bibb as the county was losing some of its once-bedrock businesses: Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp., Keebler bakery and the First Data back-office operation.

January's announcement that Chicago-based Sara Lee Corp. would build a facility here was welcomed in the midstate. These days, said Chip Cherry, president and CEO of the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce and the Macon **Economic Development** Commission, "everything seems to be on a roll." "The community is doing really well," he said.

The 214,000-square-foot building for Sara Lee is situated on 33 acres in the I-75 Business Park at Hartley Bridge Road and will be sold to Sara Lee once completed by the Tippmann Group of Fort Wayne, Ind. It is the first building in the business park.

Larry Rogers, the company's vice president of integrated logistics, said the company will start hiring this summer. "Most of the positions will be filled in July and August," he said. "There will be everything from clerical to warehouse to customer service to management (positions)." Rogers would not disclose salaries for those jobs.

The distribution center will be part of a five-distribution center network in the United States. As Sara Lee's first distribution center in the Southeast, it will serve grocery store warehouses such as Kroger, Winn-Dixie and Wal-Mart from Louisiana to Virginia, company officials have said. The Bibb County facility will warehouse and distribute frozen bakery items as well as refrigerated and frozen meats including Jimmy Dean sausages and Sara Lee cheesecakes. Cherry said he's been surprised by the speed with which the facility has taken shape.

"It's amazing the transformation of that site and how quickly they will be able to occupy it," Cherry said. "(Sara Lee) knew they wanted to build a distribution center, so they had contracts on steel and some of the components before they finished the site selection."

Sara Lee had considered locations from Atlanta to Houston County, but particularly from McDonough to Forsyth. Rogers said two primary factors - location and labor force - led the company to choose Bibb County. Sara Lee Corp., which employs 137,000 workers worldwide, has operations in 58 countries and markets products in nearly 200 nations.

OTHER BUSINESSES OPERATIONAL OR UNDER CONSTRUCTION

With the Keebler plant, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco (formerly Brown & Williamson) and First Data closing this year - representing a loss of about 2,800 total employees - new businesses have opened or are in the process of building facilities here.

Kohl's built a 550,000-square-foot distribution center in 2005 on about 80 acres in Airport East Industrial Park on Ga. 247 in south Bibb County employing about 120 employees. The company also opened a department store off Zebulon Road. Bass Pro Shops' 450,000-square-foot distribution center received its first truck load of goods in March. Meanwhile, work on the company's 130,000-square-foot retail center has begun and is expected to be completed by the end of October. The outdoor retailer is expected to employ about 400 people at the adjoining facilities at Bass and New Forsyth roads off Interstate 75 in north Bibb County.

Bass Pro will be the anchor for a 200-acre site where Macon real estate firm Fickling & Co. plans to build an additional 400,000 square feet of upscale retail shops, restaurants and a hotel.

Once completed, the entire complex - including the Bass Pro store and distribution center - is expected to generate about 1,000 jobs. Other **economic** possibilities are in the works.

Project Walden, officials said, is the code name for an international manufacturer of fiber cement panels that is eyeing a 57-acre parcel in south Bibb County.

Economic development officials use project names while negotiating with companies looking for a facility or location. The company, which has been working with local **economic development** officials since May 2005, had planned to build a 300,000-square-foot facility in Airport South Industrial Park, but that might change, Cherry said.

"The project has expanded in scope and we are working through some of the final issues, and hopefully we'll be able to make an announcement sometime this summer," he said.

Last October, the company expected to make a \$50 million to \$70 million investment and create 50 to 70 new jobs. "It will be larger with more investment," Cherry said, declining to say how much the project had expanded. "It will be the largest single investment in a new facility we've had in at least 10 years."

Another project on the drawing board - Project Yancey - is moving forward, Cherry confirmed. But Pat Topping, senior vice president of the **development** commission, who has taken the lead on the project, could not be reached Wednesday.

"We anticipate an announcement shortly," Cherry said.

Economic officials have said **economic-development** interest in Bibb County has been strong in 2006. "With any degree of luck, we will have significant second- and third-quarter announcements, something we haven't seen in a very long time," Cherry said.