

## EDC looks to the future

*The Albany-Dougherty Economic Development Commission staff brings youth and experience to the job.*

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ALBANY — When changes are made at the top of an organization, uncertainty naturally trickles down to remaining staff.

The recent separation of the Albany Area Chamber of Commerce and the Albany-Dougherty Economic Development Commission and the subsequent search for permanent heads of each organization might logically be cause for alarm for those who served under the former head of both organizations, Tim Martin. But if interim EDC President Bob McKinney has his say, the young guns serving in that organization can go to bed each night with no worries.

"I'll just say up front, if the folks we talk to about the (president's) position aren't interested in keeping the staff we have in place right now, I don't want them," McKinney said. "When we filled those positions, we were looking for talent and skills that would translate into economic development. I think we've got that with this group."

This group is EDC Vice President Andrea Schruijer, Director of Special Projects Justin Strickland, Marketing Director Barbara Rivera Holmes and Executive Assistant Rhonda Ware. All bring a youthful enthusiasm to their positions that local officials say will help bring new industry and additional jobs to existing businesses in Albany and Dougherty County.

"What we have at the EDC now is a staff focused on economic development," Dougherty County Commission Chair Jeff Sinyard said. "These are people who are prepared to give 100 percent to facilitating business retention and expansion. To truly help businesses in this area, we've got to have people dedicated to business issues. We've got a group now that works hand-in-hand with the business community."

Albany City Manager Alfred Lott said the separation of the Chamber and EDC has eliminated the confusion that existed under the previous setup in which Martin served as president of both organizations as well as the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"We're elated that we can now look forward to having a quality economic development president and staff who are expert in economic development matters," Lott said. "The EDC will be more prepared to work with the city and county to bring jobs, industry and retail to the area."

Shruijer, a Cordele native who came to Albany from a position with the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain, said she and her young colleagues share a belief that Albany and Dougherty County are loaded with untapped potential.

"Albany has long struggled with a negative air around it, and I really don't understand why," Shruijer said. "If you look at other cities of comparable size in the region — Valdosta, Columbus, places like that — they don't have a lot of the things we do. From Fortune 500 companies to smaller businesses that are known around the world to the Marine base to our quail plantations to Chehaw to a thriving arts scene to our colleges ... We have a lot to be proud of."

"There are tremendous assets here, and there is tremendous potential. We want to see Albany and Dougherty County succeed; we don't want to see our city and county not reach their potential."

With strong ties to the region — Strickland is an Albany native who came to the EDC after a stint at Albany Bank and Trust; Holmes worked for the past six years at The Albany Herald; and Ware is a native of Dawson and an Albany State University graduate — the EDC's young staff has extra incentive to see the region succeed.

"All of us have extensive ties here," Strickland said. "We have a vested interest in what's going on, from a career standpoint and from a personal standpoint. We bring a young energy to the EDC, but we also have a wealth of experience that we bring to the table."

That, McKinney says, is why he is so high on the EDC staff.

"There's such a great mix there on so many levels," he said. "We've got young kids from various backgrounds and ethnicities who all come in to work each morning and get down to business. There are challenges and there's a steep learning curve, but these guys are eager to learn what they can do to do their jobs well."

The city and county contribute \$250,000 each to the Economic Development Commission's \$750,000 budget (the other third comes from area businesses), so the openness of the "new" EDC has struck a chord with local officials.

"That's one of the problems we had with the way things were before," Lott said. "This organization is funded through taxpayer money, so its activity and budget should be open. Things should not happen in a vacuum."

That, Holmes says, is no problem because the EDC shares common goals with local government entities.

"We're an innovative, proactive team tasked with creating jobs and expanding industry; that's our vision statement," she said. "We share a similar vision with the city and county, and they've made it clear that they want to work with us."

"It makes sense that we would work together; we all share an interest in helping Albany be the best it can be."

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