

# Thomson/McDuffie County: Cooperation And Consolidation

Sharing services and saving money

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In rural McDuffie County, things don't work quite the same way they do in big cities like Atlanta. For example, city and county governments know how to get along – even when all the terms of an agreement aren't necessarily set down in writing.

The county and the city of Thomson recently collaborated to build the Thomson-McDuffie County Government and Judicial Center, a joint administrative facility that opened last August and put workers for both city and county within the same building. The city council and the county commission share a meeting chamber, and so far there have been no conflicts over who gets to use it. When an issue needs to be worked out, the commission chair and mayor know where to find each other.

The cooperation between governing bodies has allowed city and county to save money and resources by sharing services.

“Over the years we've tried to consolidate some services and create a better working environment,” says Thomson Mayor Kenneth Usry of the recently opened building, which sits next to a new modern courthouse. “There was a spirit of cooperation to keep the downtown area alive.”

The two governments have combined recreation, planning and zoning and information technology departments and jointly own the water and sewer system as well as the local airport. County Commission Chair Charlie Newton sees even more benefits to be had by combining other functions such as finance.

“What Kenneth [Usry] and I are seeing is that in order to give our employees any kind of meaningful raise, it has to come through efficiency,” he explains. “I don’t see any possibility of a tax increase in the next few years anyway.”

McDuffie did not follow the path of many counties, which found their historic courthouses inadequate for modern needs and moved out of town to an open spot of land on the interstate. Instead, the county selected a rundown section of abandoned buildings just a couple of blocks away as the spot for its new government center.

That proved to be a very good thing for keeping Thomson’s downtown alive, adds the mayor.

“Our downtown had died, but this facility located where it is became part of bringing it back to life,” he says.

The county demolished several abandoned buildings and cleared more than 20 acres of property that would have never been redeveloped by private sources, explains City Manager Don Powers.

From this forsaken corner of Thomson has risen a \$17-million facility financed by bonds and funding from a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST). The cost was a bargain, according to Newton.

“The economy being what it is, we came in under budget,” he explains. “[The savings] allowed us to make other improvements such as adding additional parking and running fiber-optic from the courthouse to the sheriff’s office for more security. We were also able to make significant repairs to the old courthouse so it’ll be sustainable for the next 20 years.”

All this cooperation takes place because local leaders talk to each other and understand what needs to be done – even if everything isn’t spelled out in a memorandum of understanding. This approach might not work so well if the personalities were different, concedes Newton.

## **Good Location**

Upsetting the apple cart doesn’t seem to be high on most folks’ agenda. Locals are glad that the economy has fared better than many surrounding counties, owing largely to location. Travelers along Interstate 20, which cuts through the community, have helped keep retail sales high – about \$360 million annually.

While McDuffie’s small businesses have been battered by the recession and unemployment rates have crept above the state average, the county’s larger industries have continued to expand, according to Forward McDuffie, a group of local leaders formed to promote economic development.

When Detroit’s big auto manufacturers went through their near-death experience, it had a profound impact on HP Pelzer Automotive Systems. Its Thomson plant, which made molded resinated cotton fiber automotive components including hoodliners, package trays and trunk parts, suddenly saw orders from Ford and Chrysler dry up. Employment fell to just 40 workers.

During this bleak time, the organization conducted a series of informal meetings with managers of the German-owned company to identify other potential customers and was able to convince them there was a “Southern auto company” market they could tap into that included unsouthern names such as BMW, Kia and Volkswagen that have plants in the region.

Today, Pelzer is again running three shifts and has added 175 jobs, according to Forward McDuffie.

Thomson Plastics, which makes parts for Augusta’s golf cart builder Club Car, is another reliable employer with more than 270 on its payroll. The firm underwent a \$3.5-million expansion that created 160 new jobs in the last couple of years. Amcor, a maker of packaging, doubled the size of its space and is starting a \$2.5-million expansion.

Forward McDuffie claims three new industries and five expansions in three and a half years.

Riley Stamey, a retired banker and long-time civic leader, is interim director of Forward McDuffie, replacing Mike Carrington, who died suddenly in January.

Local leaders also foresee the promise of more development and jobs with the announcement that McDuffie Regional Hospital Authority agreed to sell its Thomson-based facility to University Health Care System. With a resolution of understanding in hand, the big Augusta-based health system has been busy scouting for a location for a projected \$30-million replacement hospital near the bustling U.S. Highway 78 exit on Interstate 20.

“That’s going to be great for us not only for the increased capabilities and services, but also [because] they don’t just come by themselves. Other [medical providers] like to group around them,” Newton says.

With easy and rapid access to surrounding counties, the hospital could double its potential patient draw from a current 40,000 a year. Many people, such as residents of fast-growing and increasingly affluent Columbia County, might choose to come here rather than drive to downtown Augusta for care, leaders predict.

The deal has crept steadily closer to finality after more than a year of ongoing talks between the two boards. The move is driven by economic forces that have made financial life for smaller hospitals such as McDuffie Regional tough. Its directors were all too aware that rural hospitals across the country have been closing at a rapid clip. Little wonder then that rather than face that unenviable fate, this rural hospital became part of a trend that has seen mergers and acquisitions in health systems rise by 300 percent this year, according to one study.

“They’ve [University Health Care System] got a lot of money in the bank and a strong track record of going to smaller communities and partnering with them,” adds Newton. “That gave us a real comfort with them coming here. They are going to be good for us. Some of the for-profit hospitals have gone to communities, gotten what they could get and taken off. [University Health Care’s] track record is one of being a good community steward.”

Locals say that is why the health system pledged to build a replacement hospital of the same size while also retaining current employees at equivalent wages and providing at least the same level of services. Better still, from the perspective of city manager Powers, they won’t just leave the old hospital an empty hole in the ground.

“The university people have been very receptive to understanding the dynamics of downtown, and they’re not interested in just bulldozing the old hospital,” he explains. “They want it to be used for something.”

New uses could mean leasing the space to one of their partner medical provider groups as office space or to provide services directly to patients.

## **Lots Of Visitors**

In addition to industry, McDuffie’s location has made it something of a tourist attraction. It’s a convenient jumping-off point for hunters and fishermen and outdoor enthusiasts on their way to nearby Thurmond Lake (Just don’t call it Thurmond on the Georgia side of the state line, where locals use the name Clarks-Hill.)

The Thomson-McDuffie County Airport is also a favorite landing strip for private jets ferrying the affluent and their guests during Masters week. Typically about 325 aircraft touch down at the newly lengthened runway to disembark into a terminal recently remodeled in the antebellum style.

“It’s the busiest time of the year for our airport that week with the Masters going on,” says Elizabeth Vance, executive director of Thomson-McDuffie County Convention & Visitors Bureau. It does have a big impact on us with our airport and hotels – they’re full.”

The county’s 375 hotel rooms turn over every two days as visitors arrive to see the practice rounds at the Augusta National course. Planes often arrive early in the morning to drop off passengers to waiting rental vehicles and then ferry them home that evening. When tournament play starts, guests tend to stay longer because they usually have tickets for the entire event.

McDuffie is home to another pastime of the landed gentry, the Belle Meade Hunt. On a crisp November Saturday, this colorful foxhunting event gets under way with the ritualized blessing of the hounds. Then riders decked out in distinctive red riding jackets, brown breeches and black boots take off across woods and through streams in pursuit of their quarry. In these parts, the coyote is usually a stand-in for the wily fox. Riders are followed on the hunt by several hundred spectators in tally-ho wagons that provide an audience for what is on this day primarily a staged event. Belle Meade’s opening day is reputed to be the world’s largest, according to Vance.

“The foxhunt is a big draw, but it’s a little bit invisible,” she explains, adding that about 200 riders usually participate in each hunt over the next few months. The hunts continue through March, but this is the one day that the public is invited to see what it’s all about.

Thomson is also the site of the stately final home of the senator and populist presidential candidate Tom Watson. Known as Hickory Hill, the estate has been lovingly preserved by the Watson-Brown Foundation as a memorial to the man and his era. In fact, inside and out it looks much like it did when the grand old man of Georgia politics was entertaining guests in the front parlor. Wallpaper and even rugs have been reproduced from photographs taken in the 1920s when the family lived here.

“If Tom Watson came back here, he would feel at home,” says Curator Michelle Zupan. “More than 90 percent of the furnishings [in the home] were originally purchased by the Watson family.”

Tourism at these attractions infuses about \$17 million into the local economy from visitors staying in hotels, eating in restaurants and shopping in local stores, according to the CVB.

## Community Snapshot

### Local Leaders

#### **Charlie Newton**

Chairman

McDuffie County Commission

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#### **Kenneth Usry**

Mayor

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#### **Elizabeth Vance**

Executive Director

Thomson-McDuffie County CVB

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### **Population**

(2010)

County, 21,875; Thomson (county seat), 6,853; Dearing, 437

### **Per Capita Income**

(2010)

County, \$31,028

Georgia, \$34,849

### **Unemployment**

(October 2011)

County, 11.3 percent

Georgia, 10 percent

### **Top Employers**

McDuffie County School System, Advance Auto Parts,

Walmart, McDuffie

Regional Medical Center

### **Sources**

U.S. Census Bureau, Georgia Department of Labor, Forward McDuffie