



Written by Claire Suttles

# SOUTH CAROLINA'S MANUFACTURING HUB

Laurens County, South Carolina is growing at an astronomical rate. “We have been very successful at getting jobs,” says Jonathan Coleman, President and CEO of Laurens County Development Corporation. “That’s the number one driver of people moving here—not just in our county, but the region as a whole. We’re the manufacturing hub of the state of South Carolina. At last count, it was 80 people a day moving to upstate South Carolina.”

Located on the interstate just south of the city of Greenville, Laurens County enjoys an ideal spot within this booming hub, with access to all of the region’s

amenities as well as abundant outdoor recreation. “Within 45 minutes, you can be hiking in the mountains, boating on a lake, playing golf on a world-class golf course, kayaking down a river, you name it,” says Coleman. “We’re right in the heart of all of that.”

With so many people eager to take advantage of all the area has to offer, Laurens County, which currently has a population of 69,000, is planning ahead to accommodate the newcomers. “We’ve got over 6,000 new rooftops that have been approved by the County Planning Commission over the last couple of years,” Coleman says. “We’re looking at a 30 percent population

increase just in our county. There is a lot of residential growth.”

The county is also welcoming plenty of commuters. “You can be a lot of places in 30 minutes,” he points out, which makes it easy to work in Laurens County while living elsewhere.

Residential projects are not the only developments underway. “We’ve got several larger infrastructure projects that have been completed or are in the planning stages,” says Coleman. “There is a lot to do to get to where we want to be, but we’re trying to do it in a smart way, a sustainable way, and not ruin the reason why people are moving here.” ▶▶





► This means keeping Laurens County's small-town advantages while accommodating an increasing population. "There is a certain quality of life being in a more rural area compared to a larger metro area," Coleman points out.

Whitney Lagrange, Director of Marketing for Laurens County Development Corporation, knows this firsthand. "I live in the metro area, but I try to do my shopping and running around while I'm in my office here in Laurens, just because I appreciate less traffic, the slower pace," she says.

*"Manufacturing is booming in Laurens County, creating the bulk of the opportunities for incoming workers... 'We make things and we're proud of that.'"*



"We want to make sure we can sustain and maintain a certain element of that because that's why people want to be here," Coleman agrees. "It's a balancing act for sure, because everybody wants growth until it's in your backyard. We've got to do it in a smart way."

Manufacturing is booming in Laurens County, creating the bulk of the opportunities for incoming workers. "50 percent of our workforce in our county works in the manufacturing sector, which is the highest percentage for any county in the state of South Carolina," Coleman says. "We make things and we're proud of that." This diverse manufacturing base has a large automotive presence, including the Tier 1 automotive supplier ZF Transmissions, which is the largest employer in the county. ►



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Local leaders understand the importance of developing the workforce to meet the needs of these employers. They have a number of workforce initiatives in place, from recruiting out-of-town talent to training students at the county's high schools and technical college, "to keep that talent pipeline flowing," Coleman says.

These training opportunities give secondary students a head start on their future career. "We work closely with our high schools, and they partner with the technical college to do a lot of dual enrollment classes, whether it be in mechatronics or robotics or welding or machine," Coleman explains. "These kids are taking these college level classes in high school, so they are ready to go to work when they graduate."

Students who want more training can access the Laurens County Future Scholarship to cover the cost of technical school, which puts them on a path to additional opportunities as well. "We have a private nonprofit that pays for any student that graduates high school in Laurens County," Coleman tells us. "They can go to our technical college for two years tuition-free and then transfer to Presbyterian College, which is a liberal arts college here in the county. They can go there and finish up a bachelor's degree if they want to. So, there is opportunity here for free education that's not available in a lot of places."

Through the Higher Opportunity Initiative, residents learn about the employment opportunities in Laurens County and "how you can succeed right here at home," Lagrange says. "We've got jobs right here in Laurens County." To be sure that everyone has access to information about these opportunities, Lagrange created the website [higheropportunity.com](http://higheropportunity.com) which features the tagline, "Students don't have to leave to achieve." Users can browse by category or by company, "and when you click 'see opportunities,' it will list whatever jobs are available here in Laurens County," she says. "And then there's a resources page which has tons of information for students and parents. We did that [to put information] all in one place to try and help build the workforce."

The team also maintains a presence in schools, speaking directly to students through career showcases and other educational initiatives. The goal is to "get these students thinking about careers and what they may want to do," says Lagrange. The most recent career showcase, hosted at Piedmont Technical College's Newberry County Campus, introduced eighth graders to opportunities within 16 different career clusters. "We encouraged [companies] to come and set up there and speak with students," Lagrange says. This exposes students to opportunities within the manufacturing sector that they may not have realized existed. For example, "you wouldn't normally think there are marketing jobs at a paper mill, but it's not just manufacturing; there is also a finance department, there's this, there's that."



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When it comes to job creation, local leaders plan to maintain current recruitment strategies for the long term. "For right now, we've got more jobs than we do people, but at some point, that's going to change," says Coleman. "And so we're going to have to keep up recruiting, bringing in investment jobs so people, as they move here, will have a place to work."

The team will also continue to focus on workforce development and upskilling local employees. "I think, as we move forward, manufacturing—and not just manufacturing, but any kind of business really—is becoming more and more automated, with less people," Coleman explains. "And with that comes a higher skill level. And so, our goal is to recruit for those high-skill jobs, but also be able to provide those employers with employees that have the skills to succeed. And with those higher skilled jobs comes higher pay too, which helps our whole economy in our county."

Moving forward, local leaders will continue to be discerning about which industries to bring into the county as they advance their recruitment efforts. "We don't incentivize industries that don't pay at or above the current county average wage, because if we recruit jobs that are going backwards, our economy is going backwards," says Coleman. "So,

when you look at a macro sense of our economy, we want the wage rate to grow; we want more money in our community for people to spend in our small businesses that help the whole county succeed."

With a booming job market and local leaders strategizing for the future, Laurens County is well placed for ongoing success. The community will be one to watch as the Upstate of South Carolina continues to grow. ■

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