Focus on Health Care, Entrepreneurs and Tourism Rejuvenates Paris, Tenn.

By Susan C. Thomson

In 1991, the Henry County Commission spurned bids from out-of-town chains for its county-owned, money-bleeding hospital in Paris, Tenn. In deciding to keep and expand it rather than sell it, the commission took a risk—one that, as County Mayor Brent Greer observes, has “paid off tremendously well.”

The renamed Henry County Medical Center has gone on to become a powerhouse, economic as well as medical. The hospital—twice its former space, patient capacity and physician staff—is now but one part of a complex enterprise. Also included are a cancer clinic, home health agency, hospice service, nursing home, wellness and rehabilitation center, and the county’s ambulance operation.

The center has succeeded not just in operating in the black. It has also attracted to town a number of unaffiliated new medical clinics, pharmacies, home-health agencies, assisted-living facilities and other health-related businesses.

The emergence of health care as an industry has been a godsend for a community suffering a decline in manufacturing, which was its economic engine well into the last half of the 20th century. Mayor Greer observes, has “paid off tremendously well.”

Changing times have left the small city and surrounding county on their own for growth. Greer says it’s been “at least 30 years” since the community has reeled in a major employer from beyond its borders.

Holder describes today’s pickings as smaller and fewer than in the heydays of 1950s and 1960s, when Rust Belt companies were eagerly opening plants of several hundred employees across the South.

Many of the rural communities that prospered from the trend don’t recognize that the era has passed, he says. “They’re more conservative socially, tend not to let go of any old paradigm and are slow to embrace where the economy is moving. They want more of what they used to have.”

Yet his organization keeps the welcome mat out for plants on the move. Earlier this year, an American manufacturer was poised to bring expansion and 150 jobs back from China in exchange for low rent on a 60,000-square foot, city-owned industrial building. Because the company was planning on buying its equipment in Italy, the deal snagged on the dollar’s decline against the euro.

Meanwhile, a maker of all-terrain vehicles and a producer of kits for assembling small aircraft have arrived, both from Canada. Each employs just a handful of workers.

Entrepreneurial Spirit

In creating most of its own jobs, the area has built on a history embodied in Harold Plumley. He expanded the company that Dana bought in 1995. In 1988, he started auto-parts maker PML Inc. as a joint venture with the Japanese company that now owns all of it.

Plumley retired to Florida, but the entrepreneurial spirit flourishes in businesses created by the likes of Jim Arthurs, identical twin brothers Ronnie and Johnny Allen and husband-wife teams Barry and Tammy Revel and Lisa and Roggero Carrocchi.

Arthurs presides over Institutional Case- work Inc., the reincarnation of a maker of school and laboratory furniture founded in Paris in 1951. After a tornado flattened part of the plant in November 2005, new owners decided to close the whole operation.

An employee for more than 20 years, Arthurs got a semblance of the company up and running in time. He now serves as president of PML Inc. (below), Candace Steele works a machine that sizes, glues and trims the edging of doors and drawers. At PML Inc. (opposite), Craig Moore inspect metal automotive parts after they’ve been coated with adhesive.
tools is forgiveness of local property taxes for employers that agree to maintain a certain number of jobs. The Ciarrocchis have not asked for any such incentives, just advice from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, for the Paris Winery they are developing on 120 acres a few miles south of Paris. The couple happened to land their two-engine Beech Bonanza at the Henry County airport a few years ago when they were out-flying a hurricane bearing down on their Florida home. Smitten with what they saw on their Tennessee stopover, the Ciarrocchis returned to put down their personal roots and then to sink their retirement savings into their venture in viticulture. They planted 7,000 vines and around them created a working farm with pigs, cows, ducks and rabbits, as well as a stand of Christmas trees. They plan a restaurant, cabins and carriage tours of the premises—in Lisa Ciarrocchi’s vision, “a tourist destination.” As such, it will figure into what is shaping up as the area’s new growth industry.

The winery opened the last weekend in April, piggybacking on Paris’ current big claim to tourism fame—“The World’s Biggest Fish Fry.” Every year on the same weekend, the Paris-Henry County Jaycees stage a parade, rodeo and carnival and fry five tons of catfish for crowds they’ve estimated at up to 85,000. Hotel and motel rooms book up for miles around months in advance.

Of those rooms, 130 are in the hotel at Paris Landing State Park on Kentucky Lake, Henry County’s eastern boundary. The 841-acre recreational complex boasts 1.25 million visitors a year. Many come to fish a lake famous for bass, and many more are expected in coming years as the park plays host to more and bigger bass fishing tournaments. These are being made possible by state sales-tax rebates, targeted to tourist areas and marked for tourism promotion. After starting the givebacks in the Smoky Mountain region, Tennessee extended them in 2006 to counties bordering Kentucky Lake. Henry became the first new county to qualify. For two years in a row now, the county has received a $1 million refund. About half of it has gone to develop a new tourism plan, expand tourism marketing, improve the Paris Landing marina and promote attractions and events like the fish fry and the Fourth of July fireworks on the lake. The rest has gone to promote fishing tournaments for crappie, catfish and, especially, bass. Holder says the investment has already lifted the county into the tournaments’ “regional big leagues” and, based on his research, holds promise of “a return of 20-, 30-, 40-to-one on the dollar.”

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