



The Monroe Journal

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2022 **3B**

MMCEDA focuses on ‘diversification’

Monroe County continues to make steps toward improving the lives of its citizens. Like every other organization, the pandemic has forced the Monroeville/Monroe County Economic Development Authority (MMCEDA) to be creative, recruit differently and assist local companies differently than ever before.

Since being named executive director of the MMCEDA in May 2019, Darlene Thompson has assisted many start-up businesses and worked with existing businesses and industries to help them thrive.

“Diversification is key to growing an economy,” states Thompson. “As I commented when I accepted the position, my goal for recruitment continues to be attracting industries with 50-100 employees. However, that doesn’t mean we’ll ignore other companies, especially smaller companies—they are the backbone of any economy.”

How does 50 new jobs make a difference to the local economy or in the lives of citizens? According to Kathy Johnson, it made a substantial difference to her.

“The new job growth in Monroeville is exciting for our community,” she says. “As a person experiencing a recent job loss, I was able to find a new career path with a fast-paced job in logistics with a great company. Vanity Fair’s sister company, Russell Brands, is an asset for our community and to the workforce. I never imagined I would be working in a field other than retail.”

Thompson said sometimes a company that makes a substantial investment in the area can make a significant impact on the local economy with few or even no employees.

An example of that is one of the first economic development projects in 2021 that involved the sale of Monroeville’s vacant building in the Industrial Park to Kelly and Company Disaster Relief.

“The sale not only reduced the city’s debt significantly, it also provided funds to reroof another city-owned building,” states Thompson. “In addition, the company’s decision to locate here has been mutually beneficial to the company and Barnes Enterprises, a local trucking company. Kelly and Company contracted with Barnes to transport 28 emergency relief trailers from Monroeville to Montegut, La. and then back to Monroeville. This was also a great example of local companies working together to provide relief facilities to an area devastated by Hurricane Ida.”

According to Thompson, there is often a misconception that an economic development project begins when it is made public, but nothing could be further from reality.

“Economic development starts with the availability of natural resources, workforce development and community development,” says Thompson. “All these factors work hand-in-hand. For example, a company that relies on forestry products will naturally first look for a location like Monroe County. Their next consideration is probably related to a skilled workforce. If the skilled workforce isn’t available, companies may consider whether the community can provide the necessary training. That’s why having community and technical colleges in our area is very important.”

“The prospect may also consider whether or not the community demonstrated a willingness to work together to provide training. Their next consideration is likely to be related to quality of life for their employees. While we as a community cannot create natural resources, we can work to affect change and improvements to workforce development and community development. That is why workforce development and community development equals economic development is so true.”

Thompson notes that Reid State Technical College (RSTC) Commercial Driver's training program that launched last year in Monroeville will affect the local economy for years to come.

"First, it demonstrated a community of leaders willing to work together to provide solutions for our local industries," says Thompson. "Second, every industry will benefit from having more local licensed truck drivers. The underlying value of having that as a model of a community of leaders' willingness to do whatever is necessary to support industry is immeasurable."



Kelly and Company building in Monroeville.

Thompson says that in response to what the citizens and leaders of Monroeville and Monroe County have communicated to her, MMCEDA will also focus on identifying opportunities for community development.

"We are currently facilitating meetings with community leaders to discuss a potential multi-purpose center," says Thompson. "As with all projects, there will be a substantial amount of research, both in need, interest and ability to leverage funding for the project. A second focus will be to complete projects that were started earlier and were hampered by the pandemic. Of course, another important focus will be on recruiting more jobs. The public may not be aware of the recruitment efforts, but be assured efforts are always ongoing —whether in workforce development, community development or recruitment efforts."