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PRESENTS
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DIRECTED BY
TOMMY WOOTEN

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It's been almost two years since John Marek came to Anson County as executive director of the Anson Economic Development Partnership (AnsonEDP), the county's primary business recruiting and marketing agency, so we thought this would be a good time to check in and see how things were progressing. We caught up with him right after a dedication event for the new Anson 74 Rail Park, the latest in a series of positive announcements AnsonEDP has made over the past six months.

Dressed in tan khakis and a denim shirt with the silver and chartreuse AnsonEDP logo - he typically eschews the more traditional coat and tie approach to public events - Marek shakes hands with the last of the two dozen elected officials and community and civic leaders who stopped by to learn more about the county's latest success story and to be part of the new winning attitude that that has rippled through the community over the past year.

• The Anson 74 Rail Park announcement recently was the most recent in a stream of positive news stories coming from Anson County this year. To what do you attribute the turn-around in a county where positive economic news has generally been the exception?

Economic development is not one-size-fits-all. Different communities need to approach development in different ways, and there needs to be a good fit between the methodology and the community. I feel like Anson County has traditionally struggled to find the right way to go about developing its economy and promoting its unique advantages. In 2016, several months before my arrival, the County Commissioners, AEDC and Chamber came together with other public and private sector leaders and formed the Anson Economic Development Partnership. That, I think, was the turning point, and everything we have achieved since then points back to that.

• So you don't take credit, personally, for the turn-around?

No, I'm just a guy doing a job. The success story is the organization and the credit goes to the elected officials and community leaders who had the guts to stand up and say, "this isn't working." I don't believe in "rainmakers." I don't think that in a well-conceived organization with the right processes in place, the individual at the top makes all that much difference, given a base level of competency. I've seen too many economic development organizations who say, "if we could only get so and so it would make all the difference." It won't, not if there isn't a strong organization behind them.

• But you have to be enjoying the success the organization has had.

I will admit that my first year here in Anson County was a difficult transition. In my last job, I was used to making major announcements every four or five weeks, so this current pace, this level of success, is more like what I am used to. Having said that, I was surprised at the level of activity here, right from the start. We were getting opportunities, we just needed to put a process in place that allowed us to capitalize on more of them.

• Speaking of your last job in Statesville, what prompted you to leave a place where you had been so successful and come to Anson County, where you had to start over from scratch?

First of all, I want to go on record because I think my reasons for leaving Statesville have been misrepresented by some there as a way to justify how things turned out with Statesville Regional Development. I did not want to leave Statesville and did not leave because someone else got the top job. I would have welcomed the chance to stay on in a secondary role and help finish the job Mike Smith and I started. I was not offered that opportunity by the board, despite what some of them may now claim. On two separate occasions I asked what my role in the new organization would be and was told, "we don't know" and "we haven't figured that out yet," and was further told, and this is pretty much verbatim, "you'll just have to show up and see how things work out."

Well, no, actually, I didn't. I had many other opportunities. I believe I was treated poorly and there was no reason for it.

But, back to your question, I chose Anson precisely because it was a chance to start from scratch. When I came to work on October 3, 2016, I had a manila folder with a couple dozen pieces of correspondence on my desk and that was pretty much it. A clean slate. That's an opportunity most economic developers either dream of or have nightmares about. I welcomed the challenge. And I'd done my homework; I knew that several things were about to change that could make Anson County a hot spot for development over the next decade.

• And those things are?

Three things, primarily: The opening of the Monroe Expressway; the increased emphasis on the Port of Wilmington and the critical logistics corridor between it and Charlotte, and the natural flow of residential and commercial development out from Charlotte. Those things, combined with a strong national economy are allowing Anson County to finally participate in the prosperity that other exurban Charlotte communities have enjoyed over the past two decades.

• The alcohol referendum; you have been very public in your support of that. Why?

Early on, I suggested the tag line for the campaign to allow county-wide alcohol sales should be, "Is this 2018 or 1820?" While that might be a little too "in your face," it's the essential point of the thing. Practically, it has nothing to do with the availability of beer and wine in the rural parts of the county, and everything to do with how people, businesses and developers perceive our community. Unfortunately, we are still thought of in the development community — the people who make decisions about where hotels, restaurants and apartments should go — as a somewhat "backward" place. Arguing about whether consenting adults should be allowed to buy a six-pack of beer in a convenience store in Peachland does nothing to contradict that impression. This is a significant issue. Failure to pass the alcohol referendum will negatively impact the economy of the county for years to come.

• Bringing new jobs to Anson County has been a focus of AnsonEDP's efforts. You have, by my count, announced about 100 new jobs so far this year. Do you consider that a win?

Absolutely. I think 100 or so new jobs per year is about what our community can support. Going back to something I said earlier, economic development strategy must be in tune with the community. Anson is not a populous county. While the total available laborshed, workers within a 30-mile radius, is more than 250,000, the actual number of Ansonians in the workforce is about 10,500. With unemployment rates below 5%, that means there are only a few hundred people actively looking for work in the county. We currently have more jobs available on the county's NCWorks job posting site than we have unemployed people looking for a job. Our "ace in the hole" from a business recruiting standpoint is that about a third of our workers currently leave the county on a daily basis, many of them for high skill and professional positions, and they would gladly switch to a job closer to home if more good jobs were available.

• How does that correspond to the county losing population over the past several years?

The county has definitely lost population over the last 25 years, but it's not the mass exodus some people claim. In truth, the actual decline in population from 1995 to now has been a few hundred people. That's not a good thing, obviously, but it's also not the 25% or 30% decline that some rural counties have experienced. One new housing development on the western side of the county would completely change those figures, and with the opening of the Monroe Expressway creating a viable commuting pattern into the city, I believe we will reverse the county's population decline by the 2030 census, if not sooner.

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October 2, 2018

Dear Individual, Business, or Group:

Our office has been receiving questions recently in regards to signage, advertisements, newspaper articles, and more pertaining to the Anson County Referendums that are on the November 6th, 2018 Election Ballot.

With that being said and to clarify some information, we are enclosing information and forms necessary to be a referendum committee. A referendum committee by NC General Statute is defined as:

Referendum Committee:

A combination of two or more individuals or entities, or two or more business entities that have a major purpose to support or oppose the passage of any referendum on the ballot.

An entity remains a referendum committee as long as it receives contributions or makes expenditures or maintains assets. It may cease to exist when it winds up its operations, disposes of its assets, and files a final report.

A referendum committee may accept contributions from businesses with no limitations. However, a referendum committee may not contribute to any other political committee if it accepts contributions from businesses, corporations, labor unions, insurance companies or professional associations. (See N.C.G.S. § 163A-1425.

Any person(s) or groups who are engaging in support or opposition of referendum should be registered as a committee.

Our goal as a local elections office is to ensure that all voters who have the opportunity and right to vote can do so. In addition, our function is to ensure compliance and adherence to all Federal and State statutes in regards to campaigning, campaign finance reporting, and committees.

Please feel free to reach our office at 704-994-3223 or via email at sadams@co.anson.nc.us if we can further assist or answer any questions.

Rochelle Williams
Board Chair

Anson County Board of Elections

Respectfully,
Steve Adams
Elections Director

Links: <https://www.ncsbe.gov/Campaign-Finance/reporting-forms#S2>
<https://www.ncsbe.gov/campaign-finance>

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