

NCEDA lists expansions, hirings, recognitions as 2013 highlights

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County Judge-Executive Dean Watts, Nelson County Economic Development Agency President Kim Huston, President and CEO of the Sazerac Company Mark Brown, Vice President and Plant Manager Johnnie Colwell, Lana Richardson, widow of Glen Richardson and Nathan Richardson, son of Glen Richardson cut the ribbon at the Barton 1792 Distillery new distribution center grand opening in July 2013.

Rather than gaining big businesses in 2013, Bardstown and Nelson County experienced businesses making big gains.

That's what the Nelson County Economic Development Agency's annual "Partners for Progress" economic development highlights report shows.

NCEDA reported that bourbon's renewed popularity resulted in expansions at Barton 1792 Distillery in Bardstown, Heaven Hill Distilleries' Nelson County warehouses, the Willett craft distillery and Jim Beam, which just this week was sold to a Japanese company, Suntory, for \$16 billion. Beam's distillery is in Clermont, but also has operations in Nelson County.

Barton opened a new distribution center in July and purchased a warehouse support center.

Hiring by the spirits companies and other businesses resulted in the county's unemployment rate falling to its lowest level in four years.

Occupational taxes, as well as restaurant and lodging taxes collected, are at their highest levels in that same four-year period.

New business licenses were actually down from 2012 and a fraction of what they were in 2009, and, as a recent report by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce showed, Nelson County's employment isn't growing as fast as most other counties — but that's because not as many people here lost their jobs as in some counties, and part of the reason is that the bourbon industry weathered the recession better than most and has been expanding.

What all the indicators show, said Kim Huston, director of NCEDA, is that Nelson County's economy is growing, and she expects that growth to continue this year.

“A lot of people are always looking for that home run — the new industry to come into town. But our focus a lot this year will be on our existing industry and their expansions and growth,” she said. “They’re adding workforce and adding facilities. That time has come. I think the confidence level has returned after several years, and business is good. They’re getting a lot of new contracts.”

Huston said she is currently working with three industrial companies that will be expanding this year.

“In 2014, one industry alone will probably grow by over 150 employees. Another one we’re working with will probably expand by 20 or 25, and a smaller one we’re working with will probably expand by two or three,” she noted.

Regional employers, including GE, Ford and Toyota are also making gains, and “our companies are getting pieces of those,” she said. Local companies will be making new products and doing more hiring, and NCEDA will be helping recruit good hires through job fairs, she added.

Although most of the growth will be through existing businesses, the agency is “still in the running,” she said, for two international companies that are considering locating here. One is an automotive company, the other isn’t.

“We have made the final cuts, and a couple of these international projects, and it’s just a matter of waiting now to see what they choose. They have visited our community. They have visited our sites. They have met our corporate leaders. And it’s just a matter of them going back now and crunching the numbers.”

Unfortunately, she said, Bardstown is in competition with Mexico for those companies. The cost of doing business south of the border is much less than here, so the agency must convince the decision-makers that “quality of life” is at least as important as cost savings, she said.

Another highlight of the 2013 report is all the “accolades” Bardstown and Nelson County have received. The report mentioned that in May, Gov. Steve Beshear named Bardstown a Kentucky Certified Cultural District — one of only five cities to achieve the honor. The U.S. Census Bureau designated Bardstown its own “micropolitan,” whereas it had been only considered part of Louisville’s metropolitan area.

National and international media recognized Bardstown. Southern Business and Development magazine named it one of the top 10 small towns in which to do business, and Travel and Leisure named it one of the top 20 American small towns and said it had the most beautiful town square in America.

Just last week, Dawn Przystal, the county’s tourism director, did a half-hour interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and on Jan. 20 at 11:30, the TLC Network will show a “Fabulous Baker Brothers” episode filmed in Bardstown at Mammy’s Kitchen and Buttermilk Days.

One of the honors that Huston said is a big deal is Bardstown’s designation as a Kentucky Work Ready Community in Progress by the state Workforce Investment Board. It is the first community in the Lincoln Trail Development District to receive that honor.

“That’s one of the ones I’m probably most proud of because it brought together for the first time industry leaders, education leaders and economic development,” she said. “People were all sitting around the table determining how we were going to combat the issue of the future workforce. It has already, by virtue of us meeting together and getting to know each other and forging these relationships, the two school systems and several other groups are already working on a future program that will link up the business community and students in the school system to have a mentorship program.”

Other highlights of the report included:

- Rand McNally's 2013 atlas featured Bardstown as the Most Beautiful Small Town in America, an honor it earned in 2012.
- The Bardstown-Nelson County Chamber of Commerce welcomed 50 new members and hosted 26 ribbon-cuttings for members.
- The Bardstown Arts and Crafts Fair included for the first time a beer festival.
- Bardstown was named an official trailhead of the Kentucky Bourbon Trail.