

SANFORD – The task of economic development in Lee County once rested on the shoulders of just one man.

And that man, Hal Siler – who was also the face of Sanford’s Chamber of Commerce for parts of three decades – had a profound impact on the economic landscape of the community.

“Hal Siler was our chamber executive and the lead recruiter for new business,” said SAGA Economic Development Executive Director Bob Joyce, who now coordinates Lee County’s economic development efforts. “His 25-year record of success here is unmatched by any other similar size community in America.”

Siler and the other leaders who held the post – including Scott Swindell and Bob Heuts – collectively recruited an impressive and lengthy list of industries and business to the area and helped existing industry expand. But in a global economy more competitive than ever, the modern economic development effort is a complex and nuanced puzzle requiring much more than just a good location and a ready work force. Today, high levels of coordination, communication and sophistication are the bare requisites. In the Sanford area, that work is done by a team with a new face, a new mission and new home, driven by strategically-integrated goals and objectives.

The creation of the team had its genesis back in 2008 when a committee of private citizens, who called themselves “The Second Century Project,” recognized the need for a broad-based effort to actively promote Lee County’s unique attributes. Second Century privately raised some \$125,000 to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive marketing campaign to create state-wide and regional awareness of Lee County’s quality of life.

Joyce, who was a part of the team of nearly 50 people involved in Second Century, said the group also developed a business plan for the area. And Kirk Bradley, a Second Century Project leader, said that without the Second Century Project, it’s doubtful Sanford and Lee County would be positioned as well as they are today.

“Besides the Well-Centered brand, our community got a complete assessment of where we stood from an economic development standpoint—the good, the bad and the ugly,” Bradley said. “A third party provided an objective scorecard of where we ranked on important quality of life metrics. This provided impetus to galvanize our business community into action to make our community more competitive and to create an entity that could drive it forward.”

Phase I involved a community branding strategy, the aim of which was the telling of a consistent story about Lee County to help reach potential industries, employers, residents and visitors. Phase II involved a multi-year marketing campaign and the execution of specific economic development action plan goals, using teams of community leaders to develop multiple growth and development metrics linked with action items and what those involved described as “key deliverables.”

One of the most significant of those deliverables became the largest initiative birthed from Second Century: the realization that one public/private, non-profit enterprise for Lee County’s economic development could drastically shift the area’s marketing and growth potentials. A merger of the Lee County Economic Development Corporation (EDC), which had been tasked with recruiting and retaining industry, and the Sanford Area Chamber of Commerce, which focused more on small business and

quality of life issues, the leaders envisioned, would improve funding, coordination and leadership of economic development efforts and support long-term sustainable growth.

After a successful capital campaign was held to jump-start funding, an entity called the Sanford-Lee County Partnership for Prosperity was created and a detailed program of work was developed for the partnership to execute. This program of work focused on goals in nine vital areas: New Business Recruitment; the Marketing of Lee County; Education Workforce and Leadership Development; the Retention and Expansion of Existing Business; Small Business and Entrepreneur Development; Visitor Services; Enhancement of Quality of Life; Product and Infrastructure Development; and Agriculture Development.

“Building blocks were put in place that focused on school facilities and workforce development,” Bradley said. “But Bob Heuts’s retirement made it apparent that our community needed a different economic development approach. Most importantly, we needed an organization with more horsepower in terms of funding and head count. The elected leadership and civic leadership came together to create that organization—a true public-private partnership for the good of our community.”

The Sanford-Lee County Partnership for Prosperity hired professional staff (including Joyce, who had been the chamber’s top executive) and morphed into the Sanford Area Growth Alliance, commonly known as SAGA. Now utilizing the talents of a staff of seven, SAGA’s work is governed by a local board of directors and its stakeholders and investors. It includes a separate chamber of commerce and visitors services group, along with numerous working committees and an untold number of volunteers.

“The formation of this organization is the culmination of seven years of hard work by literally hundreds of community leaders from all parts of this community,” Joyce said.

SAGA CEO Joy Thrash officially became the organization’s leader in May 2016. SAGA’s strength, Thrash says, comes from the public-private partnership, the fact that all involved entities are collaborating to move forward SAGA’s vision.

“SAGA’s greatest achievements include moving into the renovated Buggy Factory and being fully staffed, so we can more actively fulfill our program of work,” she said. “This can be achieved with our fully-functioning economic development, chamber of commerce and visitor services all housed under one entity, one roof.”

Obviously, Thrash says, SAGA is the culmination of many hands focused on one work. It’s evidence of many partners – the city, county, Town of Broadway, EDC, Chamber, private investors – joining forces to achieve one goal.

COMING SUNDAY: Part 2 of the Prelude to Progress series will continue to look at the 15+ year history of private and public investments for the active development and intentional growth of the Lee County community.