

Focusing on development

By ANDIE BRYMER

Economic development has a long history in Cherryville.

Community members, city officials and the chamber of commerce have all worked toward a shared goal of growing Cherryville's business and industrial communities. Coordinating those efforts has been the role of an economic development director.

In the early 1970s, the city hired its first economic development director. After approximately a decade that position became part of the chamber but still received financial support from the city. In the early 1990s the position again became part of the city and was housed in the planning department. In approximately 2000, the city, chamber of commerce and a downtown development group opted to move that position to the chamber. Current EDC Director Richard Randall describes the changes as part of process that is "ever changing, always working to do better."

As the state puts a growing emphasis on doing economic development at the county level, Randall has made getting to know EDC professionals at the county level a big part of his job.

He's also working with the state to get a site at or near the Sunbeam Industrial Park certified by the Department of Commerce. This means a buyer can be guaranteed that the land survey, engineering and environmental specifications have already been met. Having a certified site also benefits sites which have not yet been certified.

Sunbeam was formed by the Cherryville Community Development Corporation which was established in 1977. Also in the 1970s, Cherryville Development Corporation formed to offer low interest loans to help finance industrial plants.

Because they all benefit from new business and

industry, ElectriCities, a cooperative of municipal power providers, Duke Power and CSX Railroad have their own economic developing departments.

Cherryville along with many smaller Gaston County cities has adopted the same economic incentive program as the county, offering tax rebates.

The Chamber has invested in people to make its growth goals a reality. There are two full-time employees, Randall and Assistant Director Diana Beam.

"You don't see too many chambers with full-time staff this size," Randall said.

Randall credits both foresight and geography for Cherryville's long-time EDC efforts. Because the city doesn't have the benefit of being on an interstate or major highway, it has had to work harder to bring industry and business here.

Economic development efforts also focus on keeping and expanding existing business and industry. Since 2004, several businesses have participated in a storefront rehabilitation program including Flowers and More, McGinnis Furniture, Mabry Supply, Cherryville Historical Museum, C. Grier Beam Truck Museum, Carpenter's Real Estate.

While many small towns across the nation struggle with losing businesses, downtown Cherryville has been spared that fate. Because there are no large, outlying shopping centers, downtown has remained vital. Another component to success is the high number of family owned businesses which are sticking to the downtown tradition.

To capitalize on that, in the 1990s the city has begun a beautification project installing planters, planting trees and removing overhead electric lines. Shopping and professional services aren't the only lures to downtown. The YMCA and Curves attract folks trying to stay in

shape. Last year, the city built a skate park one block from Main Street.

City leaders are confident Cherryville's retail sector has growth potential. There are 19,200 people in the area which Cherryville's schools serve. Some 34,400 people call the seven-mile radius of Cherryville.

"If we place the right retail business in Cherryville, the people will come," Austell said.

Recreation is another vital part of keeping and bringing people to Cherryville. Expansion of Rudisill Park should play a key role here.

"We want to make it one of the better youth programs in our area," Austell said. "Changes have to follow infrastructure to make it the program we want it to be."

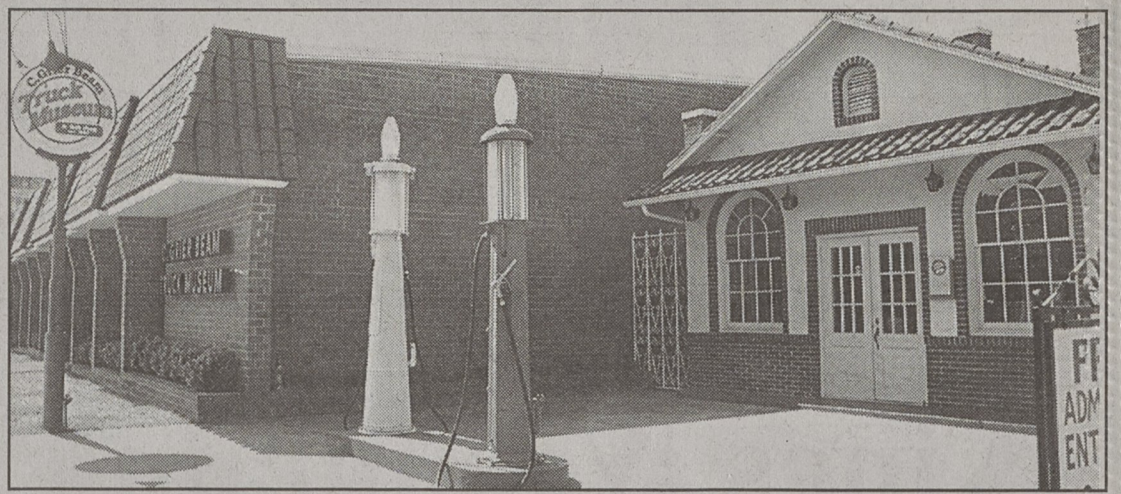
Never content to stop trying, the next goal is to increase residential development. Time-Warner has produced a 20-minute video marketing Cherryville. The video is being sent to human resources professionals around the region.

As it turns 125 this year, the city is purchasing the historic, three-story BB&T building located next to the current city hall.

"It would be a sad day that the building wasn't here for downtown," Austell said. "The bank made such a desirable offer it made it difficult for us not to pick that property up."

Thanks to federal money, the figures may keep looking better. The city stands to get 40 percent of the purchase back through a grant tied into historic properties. Billing and collections, finance, planning, the mayor, city manager and clerk will move one-door down into the new city hall and the police department is slated to move into the space they vacate.

"I think our police department needs a presence downtown," Austell said. "We're excited we're going to be able to accomplish that."



C. Grier Beam Truck Museum

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If that is successful, more purchases will follow. The city nor county are attempting to make a profit on the land. Instead, the goal is to create more jobs, establish more water and sewer customers and increase the tax base, according to Cherryville City Manager David Hodgkins.

The former Carolina Freight Carriers complex located on N.C. 150 is being eyed for development as a shopping center. It is owned by C.W. Smith of Gastonia. A combination Taco-Bell/KFC has been constructed on an out parcel. Using grant money from the Rural Economic Development Center, the city ran utility connections to the fast food restaurant.

The mayor, city manager, clerk, billing and collections, planning and finance offices will move one-door down in 2007 into the historic BB&T building at the corner of Mountain and Main streets. The inside-teller station will be nearer to the outside-teller station. Both will accept utility payments. The city has the option to purchase the building on or before May 7.

The police department will then occupy what is now city hall. Only minor, cosmetic changes are expected for that structure. There has been some discussion of using the current police department headquarters for public works.

Construction on a proposed \$2.4 million fire station across from Rudisill

Stadium is slated to begin in the fall. Fire Chief Jeff Cash said the 14,668-square-foot building would include administrative offices, sleeping areas for firemen, a living room, kitchen, day room, shop, decontamination room, room for Gaston Emergency Medical Services and Gaston Life Saving, maintenance, storage areas and four bays for emergency vehicles. A large training room would also be available for use by the public. The project means 85 additional parking spaces for the high school stadium.

City residents now have additional emergency medical services. Gaston County began stationing a GEMS paramedic unit at the rescue squad building in 2005.

The county also contracted with Gaston Lifesaving Crew to station a unit at the current Cherryville Fire Department for non-emergency transports. Both the GEMS and Gaston Lifesaving units are paid for by the county.

In early March work began on the installation of a generator adjacent to the Cherryville Rescue Squad building. When completed, this generator will provide a supplemental back-up power source for the city in the event of a power outage.

Hodgkins said the generator is at no cost to the city due to a lease agreement with the city and ElectriCities. The city is paid \$10,000 annually for this agreement which assists the city in providing reliable back-up gen-

eration to Cherryville, a member of Municipal Power Agency 1.

In mid-March city council okayed an option and structure lease agreement with Cingular Wireless to install an antenna and related equipment at the West Academy Street water tank site.

To avoid a water crisis like it faced in the summer of 2002, Cherryville entered into a contract with the City of Lincolnton to purchase up to two million gallons of treated water each day for a pre-determined price. A connection is in place between the two entities though weather conditions have not required it be used.

During normal weather, the city continues to get its water from Indian Creek. The city has an existing 10 million gallon reservoir at the water plant and has considered building a second 10 million gallon reservoir at the plant but we will likely pursue a water impoundment on the creek before pursuing another reservoir. The plant can treat 3.2 million gallons a day.

In the midst of these plans, the city and its people remain devoted to preserving the past.

The former city hall on Main Street is now the home of Cherryville's historical museum. Carolina Freight Carriers history is being preserved in the C. Grier Beam Truck Museum. Railroad history is kept alive at the Cherryville History Museum's depot annex.

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