



NEW ROADS PAVE THE WAY FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

BRING ON THE OPPORTUNITIES

By Nikki Perry

There is a phrase that characterizes the city of Richmond Hill's careful methodology to create a haven for economic development along I-95.

“‘Infrastructure prior to development’ has been our mantra, and the city strives to take a proactive approach to the development of infrastructure in the area,” said City Manager Chris Lovell.

It is a vision that many local governments adopt but few can achieve, especially when transportation and economic development projects commonly span a decade. However, successful cities, and the industries they attract, reaffirm the importance of long-range infrastructure planning that paves the way for private investment.

INTERSTATE 95, RICHMOND HILL

Though construction will not be completed until 2021, a new Interstate 95 interchange in Richmond Hill already has secured 1 million square feet of industrial development and 150 new jobs.

Medline, the nation's largest privately held manufacturer and distributor of medical supplies, announced plans in March to build a \$70 million distribution center in Belfast Commerce Park. The 1,000-acre industrial park is adjacent to the new Exit 82 interchange at Belfast Keller Road, and is made even more attractive by direct rail access into the Port of Savannah.

The Medline announcement is an early reward for years of patient investment and planning by the city of Richmond Hill. Since 2013, the city has purchased and annexed more than 5,000 acres that could hold at least a dozen more commercial-industrial developments as large as Medline.

"With the opening of Exit 82, Richmond Hill will have three exits on I-95. The economic impact of the new interchange will be phenomenal, but not just more hotels, restaurants and other retail businesses. The exit will provide essential transportation to our adjoining industrial park," said Richmond Hill Mayor Russ Carpenter.

"Already, with the recent site selection by Medline, this investment is paying off. This means more plants, factories and jobs. Bring on the opportunities!" Carpenter said.

The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) expects to open the new Exit 82 in the second quarter of 2021. Funding for the interchange project came from the city of Richmond Hill, Bryan County, GDOT and Rayonier, one of the country's largest timber real estate investments trusts, that owns land near the project site.

Rayonier also donated \$450,000 in land to a companion project on the east side of the new interchange, the Richmond Hill Regional Connector Road. In April, the city of Richmond Hill awarded the contract for the \$4 million TSPLOST project, and construction is slated to begin in May. To be known as Great Ogeechee Parkway, the road will work together with the interchange and serve as an east-west connector for the 11,000 homes projected for the immediate area.

Including a public-private partnership in the city's long-term vision has proven to be critical to Richmond Hill's budding success. In addition to land donations for transportation, Rayonier has contributed \$4.5 million (50 percent of the cost) for critical water, sewer and reuse infrastructure, land for a new elementary and high school to accompany the existing middle school, and a fire station and police sub-station in the interchange area, Lovell said.

"The infrastructure payment and land donations that the city will receive from Rayonier in the previous and current agreements are in excess of \$8 million. To put that into perspective, if the city was to try and get that amount of money by another means like

impact fees, it would require close to 2,250 homes to be constructed and 15 more years of impact fee collections," Lovell said.

ROME-CARTERSVILLE DEVELOPMENT CORRIDOR

After decades of land battles and clearing environmental hurdles, GDOT kicked off the Rome-Cartersville Development Corridor (RCDC) project design, holding the first public open house in 2018. Less than a year later, economic development along the corridor gained traction when a developer announced plans for the 700-acre Busch Commerce Park in Bartow County.

The property will have access to the RCDC, which will connect I-75 to US 411 in Bartow County. The connection will streamline freight movement between I-75 and Rome in the west, and between I-75 and the Appalachian Regional Port only 30 miles north in Murray County.

Foxfield Company President Harry Kitchen Jr. said that it took only eight months for his team to purchase the Busch Commerce Park near I-75 Exit 296, sell three parcels, and begin the process of obtaining land disturbance permits for \$200 million in vertical development. His swift success is due to decades of work on the part of Bartow County to provide transportation infrastructure, utilities and entitlements to a prime piece of real estate, he said.

"It goes back to Bartow County having a vision 10 years ago for who they are going to attract," Kitchen said.

Kitchen, who has invested all over Georgia, credits Bartow County Commissioner Steve Taylor with creating a "forward-thinking and supportive" environment for development.

"When everyone has a common goal, you can create tax revenue and jobs that strengthen the economy in Georgia," Kitchen said.

On the other end of the RCDC in Rome, City Manager Sammy Rich said the connector would open doors for industrial recruitment.

"As the community has continued to grow and develop, raw land has become increasingly more difficult to find and prepare for future development. Our Highway 411 corridor has virtually remained a last frontier as our community has waited patiently for the Rome-Cartersville Development Corridor to finally come to fruition," Rich said.

This long-awaited transportation project will be the catalyst of land development that previously was not considered due to lack of a direct connection to I-75.

"As industrial recruitment has become increasingly fierce with more global competition, every available tool and advantage needs to be deployed on behalf of a community to remain competitive," Rich said. 