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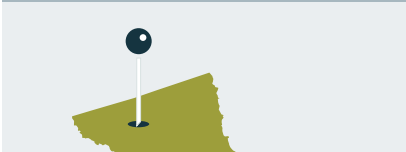
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FRANK FORTUNE

Major Investments:
Carter Infinger, chair of the Bryan County Board of Commissioners

BRYAN COUNTY



COUNTY SEAT
Pembroke

LOCAL LEADERS

★ ANNA CHAFIN
CEO
Development Authority of Bryan County
912.653.4967
anna.chafin@bryan-county.org

★ CARTER INFINGER
CHAIR
Bryan County Board of Commissioners
912.713.9509
carterinfinger@bryan-county.org

★ KATHRYN JOHNSON
CEO
Richmond Hill Bryan County Chamber of Commerce
912.756.3444
kjohnson@rhbcchamber.org

Distinct Identities

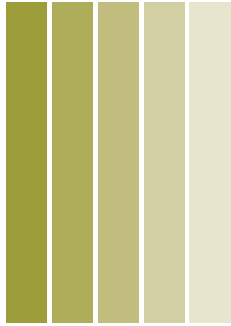
Infrastructure, manufacturing and planned development

[By Betty Darby]

Georgia boasts a staggering 159 counties, but Bryan County stands alone as the state’s sole non-contiguous county.

Of course, it doesn’t look that way on a map. But in reality, the sprawling land mass of the U.S. Army’s Fort Stewart consumes the middle third of Bryan County, essentially dividing it into separate northern and southern portions. Each has a distinct identity: the northern part home to Pembroke, the small town that serves as the county seat and anchors a classic rural community; and the southern part marked by the massive growth of Richmond Hill, a modern bedroom community for Savannah largely carved out of pine trees over the past 40 years and just launching an industrial presence.

“We’re basically running two counties – the demographics are different, the economics are different. Bryan County is the only county in Georgia with two ends and no



SNAPSHOT



POPULATION

(2019 estimate)

County	39,627
Pembroke	2,481

PER CAPITA INCOME

(2019)

County	\$31,623
Georgia	\$31,067

UNEMPLOYMENT

(June 2021)

County	3.3%
Georgia	4.4%

TOP EMPLOYERS

- Caesrstone
- Dorel Home Furnishings
- Daniel Defense
- Kroger
- Publix

SOURCES

- + U.S. Census Bureau
- + Georgia Department of Labor
- + Development Authority of Bryan County



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Calculated Move: Bill Cunningham, director of community development for Raydient Places + Properties, at the company's mixed-use planned unit development

middle,” says Carter Infinger, chair of the Bryan County Board of Commissioners.

Despite their differences, North and South Bryan County are each home to recent major investments likely to reap additional growth and development. In the northern portion, state funding and local cooperation created the Bryan County megasite, a speculative public investment aimed at recruiting a prime, large-scale manufacturer. And in the southern portion, a new interchange off Interstate 95 has opened up a big part of the county to a planned mixed-use development whose first industrial section is already under construction and where the first spec houses in a sprawling new subdivision should hit the market next spring.

State Acquisition

The 2,284-acre economic development site was the largest such purchase in state history, so noted when Gov. Brian Kemp’s office announced the acquisition in May. Aside from a small clearing large enough for the governor’s helicopter to land for the announcement press conference, an abandoned farmhouse near one of the entrances and the occasional deer stand, there’s nothing but immature pine trees as far as the eye can see.

The decision to compile real estate from at least three different landholders has its roots in two previous attempts to secure a major vehicle manufacturer. The same site – with its multiple private owners – was Georgia’s bid for a Volvo plant six years ago. That plant went to South Carolina instead. Funding for the land purchase came from Amazon’s



CONTRIBUTED

Pitching the Megasite: Ralph Forbes, regional director and vice president at Thomas & Hutton presents the megasite to Gov. Brian Kemp and other state officials



CONTRIBUTED

Open for Business: Gov. Brian Kemp announces the acquisition of the Bryan County megasite

purchase of a state-owned swath of acreage in neighboring Chatham County.

The Volvo disappointment was a factor in the formation of the Savannah Harbor-Interstate 16 Corridor Joint Development Authority, better known as the Savannah JDA. The group harnesses the collective recruiting resources of Bryan, Bulloch, Chatham and Effingham counties. When the Volvo prospect evaporated, officials asked themselves what had gone wrong and came to the conclusion that perhaps they were selling cake mix in a market that wanted to buy cake.

“I think it didn’t help that the site had multiple owners,” says Anna Chafin, CEO of the Development Authority of Bryan County. “When you’re talking about these projects, speed to market is essential.”

In addition to consolidating the acreage under state ownership, the government stakeholders intend to clear the way for some infrastructure installation on a site that already offers industrial perks including access to Interstate 16, a location within 30 miles of the Port of Savannah, and short line rail that links to CSX and Norfolk Southern, plus state incentives that accrue from being in a military zone (thanks to the proximity of Fort Stewart).

The investment is speculative, not specific to any particular prospect – or at least not yet, according to Chafin and Infinger, who chairs the Savannah JDA.

“We want to attract a project of significant regional impact,” Infinger says. “That’s a primo site, a primo site in the whole United States, and it could mean 5,000 to 10,000 jobs.”

Translation: They want a major manufacturer, not a collection of smaller ones. Nor are they in the market, at least at this site, for a distribution center, which

provides jobs, but not as many as a manufacturer and lacks satellite suppliers.

Reports surfaced in late July that the state is hoping to lure Rivian, an electric vehicle manufacturer, to the site.

Pembroke Mayor Judy Cook says her city is preparing for the expected growth, with streetscape improvements, a water service expansion, a City Hall that is nearing completion and renovation of the building it replaces to house public safety offices.

“It is important for our city to seek out the advice of similarly sized municipalities that have experienced a build-out of this scale so that we can use their experience as a blueprint for our next steps,” she says.

Stepped-up Production

Bryan County already boasts a significant manufacturing presence, including an international footprint that ranges from Germany (ORAFOL Americas, manufacturer of graphics, films and industrial tape) to Israel (Caesarstone, manufacturer of quartz surfaces).



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Speed to Market: Anna Chafin, CEO of the Development Authority of Bryan County



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Manufacturing Might: Daniel Defense's production facility

The county's largest manufacturer is Daniel Defense, a family-owned company that makes AR-style and bolt-action rifles and related accessories. The company has grown rapidly from spare space in Marty Daniel's former overhead door business to a larger facility to a brand-new 300,000-square-foot facility with frontage on I-16 – all in under 20 years.

"We basically take raw material and make high-quality guns," says Steve Reed, vice president of marketing for the company. "Just about everything in our guns we make in-house."

Their customers are American consumers and U.S. and international military and law enforcement. Reed says since March 2020, high demand has driven the company to step up production. It now employs about 250 people over three weekday shifts and a weekend shift.

The national spotlight on critical infrastructure, meanwhile, plays right into the wheelhouse of another homegrown business, EOM, an operations, engineering and

industrial service firm that manages and monitors critical infrastructures for local governments and industry throughout the Southeast.

Game-changing Interchange

When I-95's Exit 82, the Belfast Keller interchange, opened early this year, it was "a game changer," as Chafin puts it.

It's been a while coming. "When I moved here 25 years ago, they told me we'd have an interchange there in two years," Infinger says. To make it finally happen took the combined efforts of the state, Bryan County, the city of Richmond Hill and Rayonier, an industrial and forestry company acting through its property development arm, Raydient Places + Properties.

At present, the interchange doesn't look particularly impactful – although Infinger says its ramps leading to roundabouts instead of stops are the first of their kind in Georgia and will prevent



Roundabout: I-95's Belfast Keller Interchange

dangerous backups onto I-95. The only currently visible development from the road? Property-for-sale signs. But it's coming.

Raydient is the major landholder in that part of the county, and it's been crafting a mixed-use planned unit development for at least the past 10 years. The industrial component is Belfast Commerce Park, where an early tenant, medical supply manufacturer and distributor Medline Industries, expects to open a warehousing/distribution facility next year, creating an initial 150 jobs. Long term, Raydient's plan includes 15 million square feet of industrial space, 3.1 million square feet of office/retail/commercial buildings, and an entire planned neighborhood with a projected 10,600 homes,



Bryan County – Fastest Growing County in Georgia

Strategically positioned between I-16 and I-95, Bryan County is well-connected to global markets, and just 30 minutes away from the Port of Savannah and the Savannah-Hilton Head International Airport, with available land for a variety of uses including manufacturing and distribution.

Bryan County also offers a quality of life that includes abundant recreational opportunities, a rich arts and cultural environment, and a top-performing public school system that serves two growing communities, Pembroke and Richmond Hill. With all of these assets, it's no wonder the county grew 48 percent from 2010 to 2020!



Come grow with us!





FRANK FORTUNE

Home Grown Businesses: Kathryn Johnson, CEO of the Richmond Hill Bryan County Chamber of Commerce

according to Bill Cunningham, Raydient Places’ director of community development.

“It’s a calculated move. We’re still a timber company first and foremost, but this is land that was in the path of growth,” he says about Raydient’s move into development.

The neighborhood – already annexed into Richmond Hill despite the fact the current population consists almost exclusively of pine trees – will include, in phases, multifamily, active adult and single family homes. That will make it “a true mixed-use community with retail, trails and commercial,” Cunningham says, adding it is comparable to the company’s Wildlight development just over the Florida line.

The development will consume about a third of the 20,000 acres the company owns in Bryan County, and he anticipates the opening of an amenity center, models and spec homes next March or April.

In addition, Infinger says, the new exit – coupled with a \$32 million widening project completed this summer on Highway 144 – will ease hurricane evacuation and lessen

commuter headaches. That’s significant in south Bryan, where he estimates between 70% and 80% of the workforce commutes either to Savannah or Fort Stewart.

South Bryan County doesn’t lack for established neighborhoods. Consider the Ford Field & River Club (newly renamed from the Ford Plantation), which is a prized asset on the Bryan County tax digest. A third of property owners there are year-round residents and the others are second or third homeowners, according to Danielle Hopper, director of sales and marketing for the development.

The site is the previous estate of auto magnate Henry Ford, which after various ownership changes began its life as a members-only enclave more than 20 years ago. Hopper says that the maximum buildout is 400 homesites, with some sites remaining. She cites lot prices beginning at \$125,000 and home prices ranging from \$500,000 to \$6 million. The property is clustered along the Ogeechee River and Sterling Creek and includes a golf course and shooting, fishing and spa amenities.

Tale of Two Cities

Nothing exemplifies the differences between north and south Bryan County as much as the municipalities that anchor them.

Pembroke in north Bryan has been eclipsed in population and growth by Richmond Hill to the south, but it remains the county seat. It also remains a prime example of a classic rural small town, with an older retail section spread out along railroad tracks that clearly defines the downtown area.

“Pembroke has a nice balance of rural peacefulness while being near big-city



CONTRIBUTED

Resort Amenities: Ford Field & River Club

BRYAN COUNTY

conveniences,” says Cook. “We are centrally located to Pooler, Hinesville, Statesboro and Savannah, with easy commutes to large employers. But our bedroom community is also nestled in a rural area with one traffic light, a historic commercial district listed on the National Register of Historic Places and community members filled with pride for our town.”



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Downtown Dining: Renee Hernandez, executive director of the Pembroke Downtown Development Authority, top; and, from left, Kenneth Solomon, Pembroke Mayor Judy Cook and Brittany Solomon at the ribbon cutting of the Solomon’s restaurant, Twelve 07 Bistro

“We are a Main Street community,” says Renee Hernandez, executive director of Pembroke’s Downtown Development Authority (DDA). “That means we work within the Main Street approach to bring awareness to our town. We grow our organization by partnering with other groups and try to make downtown Pembroke the hub of the community.”

In Richmond Hill, by contrast, commercial development spills out from the



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Savannah Harbor-Interstate 16 Corridor
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Enticing Industry: Belfast Commerce Park is growing the industrial base in South Bryan County

intersection of Highway 144 and U.S. Highway 17. While there is a definite community identity, there is not much in the way of a downtown.

“You have a lot of services here – banking, real estate, salons and a lot of locally owned restaurants versus chains. It’s definitely a closely knit community,” says Kathryn Johnson, CEO of the Richmond Hill Bryan County Chamber of Commerce. “There are no big-box stores, aside from Walgreen’s and CVS – people are willing to drive down 17 for a Walmart in Savannah.”

Perhaps reflective of the cosmopolitan nature of military communities, Richmond Hill’s restaurant stock includes an Indian buffet and a Peruvian restaurant to go with local waterfront seafood restaurants like Fish Tales and Marker 107.

Back in Pembroke, Twelve 07 Bistro has opened to serve soul food, classics and weekend seafood. You catch a bit of the flavor of the town when Hernandez points out it was the first restaurant within the city with a license to pour alcohol.

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