

# Business Review

LOWCOUNTRY  
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## Job search

As manufacturing wanes, struggling Colleton County looks for new employment base | Page 10E



Colleton County Economic Alliance Executive Director Peter Arnoti stands outside the \$3 million Colleton Quick Jobs Development Center, which will be completed in March. The center will provide technical skills to adults wanting to further their high school education without having to travel to Charleston or Beaufort.

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## Big-box buy

Northwest-based logistics firm acquires Charleston warehouse.

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### ON BUSINESS

## Taking stock

First Federal owner seeks OK from investors to issue more shares.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN POLLOCK/STAFF

Colleton County's largest manufacturer, New York Wire, will close within a few weeks, putting its last 224 workers out of a job.



Colleton County has added a 100,000-square-foot speculative building at its new Commerce Center at the juncture of Interstate 95 and McLeod Road.



The new \$70 million Colleton High School complex, which opens in the fall of 2011, is built to provide specific career paths for about 2,000 students.

# Colleton seeks traction

Charleston's next-door neighbor eyes distribution centers as key to job growth

BY WARREN WISE  
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**W**ALTERBORO — Peter Arnoti arrived in a county with a poor self-image, a lack of basic infrastructure for new industry and no organized plan to create jobs six years ago as the new economic development director in Colleton County.

"I knew it would be challenging," he said. "I had been to this rodeo before."

As head of job recruitment in other struggling, rural counties such as Greenwood, Marion and McCormick over the previous 25 years, Arnoti was all too familiar with the difficulties of building an economic engine from fractured parts that often didn't work together.

"The biggest problem is changing attitudes and expectations," he said. "We think we don't have to do anything because we are next to Charleston. We are waiting for a sugar daddy to fall out of the sky and bail us out. That's not going to happen. You don't just hire somebody, and all of a sudden all of your problems are solved."

Arnoti will retire at the end of January, but he feels he has nudged the county from the abyss of falling behind to at least getting its foot in the door for new job prospects.

With an unemployment rate of 12.3 percent, Colleton will need even more help soon.

Its largest manufacturer, New York Wire, will close in a few weeks and throw its remaining 224 people

## County line

Colleton County at a glance

- ▶ County seat: Walterboro.
- ▶ Population: 39,246 (2009).
- ▶ White: 57.8% (2009).
- ▶ Black: 40.2% (2009).
- ▶ High school graduates: 69.6%; state average is 76.3% (2000).
- ▶ College graduates: 11.5%; state average is 20.4% (2000).
- ▶ Travel time to work: 32.7 minutes; state average is 24.3 minutes (2000).
- ▶ Jobless rate: 12.3%; state rate is 10.7% (Oct. 2010).
- ▶ Median household income: \$34,136; state median is \$44,695 (2008).
- ▶ Persons below poverty: 21.1%; state rate is 15.7% (2008).
- ▶ Largest manufacturer: New York Wire (fiberglass screen maker that's closing in a few weeks).
- ▶ Major roads: Interstate 95 and U.S. Highways 17, 17-A, 15.
- ▶ Nearest ports: Charleston, Savannah.

— U.S. Census Bureau, Colleton County Economic Alliance

out of work, a move the local newspaper heralded as the sad truth about the state of old-school plants that sprung up across the South decades ago and provided a career job right out of high school.

Arnoti suggests Colleton's future lies with distribution centers and light industry that can take advantage of the interstate system and the nearby ports of Charleston and Savannah as companies ferry products inland to avoid higher labor and land costs in the metro markets.

"As the economy changes, you either adapt or you fall behind," he said.



## Ground work

When Arnoti came on board in 2004, he immediately met with 150 movers and shakers in the county to gain their views, enlisted the superintendent of education to improve school facilities and formed a new alliance to put the county's derailed economic train back on track.

"We had a handful of strengths but an armful of weaknesses," he said. "You can't change geography and weather, but everything else you can do something about."

Arnoti moved the economic development office from the stark setting at Lowcountry Regional Airport on the outskirts of town to the upper floor of the beautifully landscaped South Carolina Bank & Trust building enveloped in moss-draped trees in downtown Walterboro, a short hop off of Interstate 95.

He tackled an unsightly salvage yard along the freeway and

mounds of garbage strewn across an undeveloped industrial site. "You don't recruit anything if you don't have a positive image," he said.

The image makeover started to grow legs. Derelict buildings started coming down, and the county invested \$3.2 million in a face-lift of its historic courthouse.

Though I-95 sliced through the county for nearly 30 miles, not one of its five interchanges offered a decent site for industry. That oversight cost them the Google plant that eventually chose Berkeley County.

With financial aid from county coffers, Arnoti set about transforming a 260-acre tract at the juncture of the major East Coast travel corridor and McLeod Road into a first-class commerce park, including construction of a 100,000-square-foot speculative building.

He helped land improvements at

the airport, which once drew more drag racers than airplanes. It now has an extended runway, a new taxiway, new hangars and lower taxes on corporate jets that often fly in with guests on their way to Lowcountry plantation homes. The airport can accommodate industries as well.

Arnoti and his board came out in favor of Colleton County school system's controversial \$90 million plan to improve its dilapidated schools, including a new \$70 million high school designed with economic development in mind.

But Arnoti's proudest achievement under his watch in the county is construction of a \$3 million Quick Jobs Training Center beside the school district's career center. The 23,000-square-foot facility opens in March and should provide a vital link to job recruitment because the county does not have a technical training center. Residents must now travel more than an hour to North Charleston, Beaufort or Orangeburg to attend technical college.

The school will provide training for those interested in the county's job recruitment markets of light manufacturing, distribution, aviation and health care.

"It's unbelievable," Arnoti said. "It's a socio-economic problem that can only be addressed by education and improving the economy."

In addition, more than a third of the county's workforce, about 6,000 people, commute to jobs in more promising areas outside the county every day.

"People have the right attitude to go to work," Arnoti said. "We just want to make it a little easier (by

keeping them in the county.)

## Looking ahead

Arnoti doesn't view the county's proximity to metropolitan Charleston and Savannah as disadvantages to the county's job-growing efforts.

On the contrary, he calls them assets because their two deep-water ports and the interstate system can easily bring materials to light manufacturing and distribution centers that might not want to be in a metro setting.

"Colleton can be a pressure relief valve for them," he said. "The cost of property and labor is less here."

Joining the county in the push for new jobs is papermaking heavy-weight MeadWestvaco.

The large forest landowner, which holds 300 wooded acres along the interstate adjacent to the new commerce park, views the two sites as ideally situated from a transportation standpoint.

"By having the ability to incorporate our property in the overall economic development area, we will be able to accommodate larger buildings," said Ken Seeger, president of MeadWestvaco's Summerville-based Community Development and Land Management division. "It gives them an opportunity to appeal to a much broader market."

The MeadWestvaco property can handle buildings from 900,000 square feet to 1.4 million square feet. The largest building the county commerce park can support is 750,000 square feet.

Looking back, Arnoti rated the county's economic development efforts an F when he arrived. He now gives the county a C+ and believes the grade could rise a full letter in about a year or so because the new technical training center will start providing a certified workforce that targeted industries are seeking.

"From where we started to where we are, we are headed in the right direction," he said.

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