



(Athens Economic Development Corporation)

Web Site: www.athenstexasedc.com

Email: director@athensedc.com

Phone Number: 903.675.4617

AEDC's plans going forward

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 17, 2019

AEDC's plans going forward



ATHENS, TX: Over the last several weeks, we've looked at each of the four pillars, or goals, of Athens Economic Development Corporation's comprehensive strategic plan.

These four goals are sites and tools, marketing and attraction, business retention and expansion, and talent development.

TIP Strategies' comprehensive strategic plan was a five-year plan that wrapped up in 2017. At that time, AEDC engaged Opportunity Strategies to work with the board and staff to provide an updated three-year strategic plan to carry the organization's goals through 2020.

Let's take another look at each of the four goals, along with AEDC's plan going forward.

Goal 1, sites and tools, to increase the capacity to accommodate new investment and employment in Athens.

When the comprehensive strategic plan was initiated, AEDC had minimal land to offer, including the industrial park. One of the tasks under Goal 1, was to pursue targeted assembly of sites and buildings suitable for industrial and commercial development.

Today, the Athens Industrial Park has been expanded to 98-acres along with a new roadway extension with water and sewer.

Future plans for the industrial park are to extend Enterprise Street to FM 1616, in addition to adding a new roadway that will connect Enterprise and Old Tyler Highway. Along with the new roadway, utilities will also need to be extended, creating additional shovel-ready sites in Athens' industrial park.

AEDC also purchased 296-acres for the potential airport expansion project, which was identified as an opportunity for long-range development.

Most recently, AEDC purchased a 53-acre site on FM 1616 to further expand the industrial park, giving AEDC its largest tract of land to offer potential prospects and site selectors, as many of them are looking for larger sites.

In the current plan, AEDC is tasked with the management and development of current assets, in addition to pursuing the acquisition, development and management of new assets.

Furthermore, under Goal 1, AEDC continues to add and refine local regulations and economic development incentives.

The current plan suggests AEDC examine and refine its incentive guidelines to ensure it is both competitive and supportive of higher paying jobs and to work with the City of Athens to encourage business-friendly regulations.

AEDC offers qualifying new and existing businesses with financial assistance toward leasehold improvements, construction, real estate purchase, training, personal property or equipment and infrastructure needs. Other public tools used to stimulate new investment include tax abatements, Freeport tax exemption, Foreign Trade Zone, Enterprise Zone, Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone and Chapter 380 and 381 agreements.

The second goal of AEDC is marketing and attraction, to increase awareness of economic development in Athens. Athens' target market industries are healthcare, metal fabrication, logistics and distribution, and manufacturing to

include medical devices and supplies.

AEDC continues to recruit and encourage new industrial development in Athens by building awareness of Athens among decision-makers in target sectors and corporate site selectors, along with participating in regional, statewide and national economic development marketing initiatives.

AEDC leverages its marketing dollars by participating in recruitment mission trips that result in face-to-face meetings with decision makers in target industries. In addition to hosting several site visits with prospective companies, these recruitment trips have resulted in project wins for Athens, successfully attracting manufacturing companies, bringing primary jobs and investment to the community.

With the current plan under Goal 2, AEDC is tasked with developing and implementing an internal marketing plan, to continue marketing efforts to highlight positive stories about area businesses, along with promoting a positive image of AEDC and Athens online and through social media.

AEDC continues to highlight positive stories about local businesses to the media, in addition to creating testimonial videos, which can be found on AEDC's website and social media channels. These success stories also tout AEDC's awards and recognition for economic excellence, workforce excellence and its business retention and expansion efforts.

Under Goal 2, AEDC supports efforts to improve the appearance and quality of development along the city's main gateways and arterial roads.

This is accomplished through AEDC's Business Assistance Grant program, which is designed to encourage exterior improvements to distressed properties located along high traffic roadways leading into Athens.

Since the program's inception in 2014, AEDC has awarded more than \$130,000 in matching grant funds to eligible businesses located along Athens' main thoroughfares. To date, eligible businesses have invested \$910,745 in capital investments.

With the current plan, AEDC continues to support efforts to enhance the image of Athens and its corridors by promoting the redevelopment of strategic sites and buildings through the Business Assistance Grant and façade improvement program, in addition to exploring policies to improve properties.

Goal 3 is business retention and expansion, to create an environment that promotes the prosperity and growth of existing businesses.

The knowledge gained through business visits and facility tours helps AEDC identify areas in which to offer assistance. Some of the ways is workforce training, acting as a liaison and advocate for Athens industries by addressing issues with appropriate entities, assisting with resources and programs, building and maintaining communications with local and state constituents.

One of AEDC's most notable accomplishments, in the area of business retention, was getting the Freeport tax exemption passed. This project was initiated in 2016 when Argon Medical Devices approached AEDC about obtaining Freeport tax exemption, as they were exploring avenues to help mitigate tax liability for the Athens location. With the support of the taxing entities (Athens ISD, City of Athens and Henderson County), this incentive has helped not only one company but many others that carry Freeport inventory, relieving 95 percent of the tax rate on qualifying inventory.

Moreover, AEDC continues to provide networking opportunities through quarterly human resource luncheons and an industry appreciation event.

AEDC also works with Trinity Valley Community College Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and other relevant organizations in the region to ensure that existing small business and entrepreneur services are promoted to local businesses.

The last and final goal is talent development, to make Athens a destination for technical training.

Under the current plan, AEDC supports regional and local workforce development efforts, including continued partnerships with Workforce Solutions East Texas, TVCC and area school districts.

AEDC assists companies looking to expand or relocate by identifying available training grants through local and state resources, such as the skills development fund, among others.

The updated plan identifies the need to create a workforce and education partnership team to explore opportunities for a regional technical training center.

After surveying local employers to identify their workforce needs, AEDC, TVCC, seven area school districts, and Workforce Solutions East Texas came to the table to discuss the demands of the local workforce.

As part of the next step in this process, in late 2017, AEDC purchased a 10,000-plus building in Athens to use as the potential training center. This facility could be utilized as a training center for local employers to send their employees and new hires for certifications and necessary skills training, in addition to providing a facility area high

schools, namely those that are unable to offer the full career technical education program, could use for CTE classes. Another potential use discussed was the need for a computer lab that could be used for testing services, including food handler service training.

The EDC has been instrumental in bringing new jobs and investments to the Athens community since the collection of a half-cent sales tax was voted in by the citizens to fund economic growth nearly 30 years ago.

Just over the last five years, AEDC's efforts have resulted in 10 project wins generating an economic impact of over \$834 million to the local economy, over a 10-year period. Those ten project wins created 533 new jobs, retained 876 jobs and will add more than \$34 million to the tax rolls in real and person property.

image_top:

