

A Shining Star in the Delta

Community Leaders
Focused on Jobs, Tourism
and Economic Development

By GRETA SHARP

There may be a dark COVID-19 cloud hanging over the rest of the world, but not Clarksdale. This town focused its energy and enthusiasm on jobs, tourism and economic development with great results.

“While this unusual time has presented a variety of challenges to our fellow citizens in Clarksdale, in our region, and throughout our nation and state, I am so pleased to say that Clarksdale has witnessed job growth in 2020,” says Jon Levingston, executive director of the Economic

Development Authority of Coahoma County. He hopes to soon announce Clarksdale’s sixth economic development project in three years.

City Commissioner Ken Murphey says Clarksdale is responsible for thirty percent of the jobs added in the Delta. “We can go back or we can move forward, and we’re moving forward and excited about it,” he says. “We know what we have been and what we can be. This is a ‘we’ thing, the whole community coming together. We’re just trying to improve the quality of life for





Murphey



Levingston

state. In March, PeopleShores hired seventy people to assist the state in processing unemployment claims, says Levingston. It is hiring fifty additional employees to service a major client's new contract.

Steel manufacturer Image Industries moved from Chicago to Clarksdale last year as well, creating seventy jobs, says Murphey. "We are so grateful to the owners and management team of Image Industries for the faith in our community and their commitment to growing their business here in Clarksdale," stated Levingston.

Homegrown steel company Saf-T-Cart is expanding its plant, adding space and capacity to produce new product, creating twenty jobs in the process.

This is a gigabit city. "We have high-speed fiber optic cable that runs

everyone here and everyone that comes here."

PeopleShores opened an office in Clarksdale last year with plans to scale up to two hundred employees. In February, it

announced a collaboration with Automation Anywhere, the global leader in artificial intelligence software development, to create the first RPA training and development center in the



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BY KIM LUNGE

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- Apr. 11: Mr. Tater's Memorial Birthday Bash - Bad Apple Blues Club
- Apr. 15 - 18: 17th Juke Joint Festival & Related Events - Featuring Kingfish, Rev. Peyton's Big Damn Band, Super Chikan & 100 more blues acts - Headliner Apr. 17
- Apr. 18: Cat Head Mini Blues Fest
- May 8: 15th Clarksdale Caravan Music Fest at Cat Head / Bluesberry / Bad Apple Blues Club
- May 29: 3rd Red's Old-Timers Blues Fest at MLK Park Stage
- May 29 - 31: Goat Fest VII



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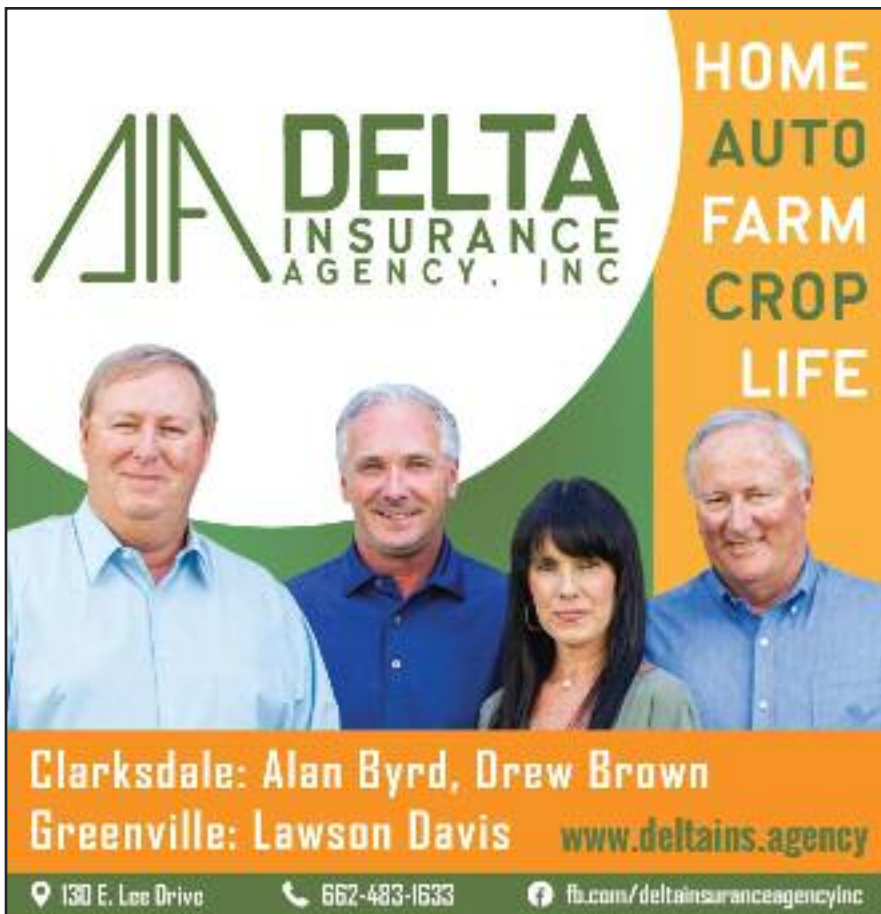
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underground throughout our business district,” says Livingston. “We have aggressively pursued opportunities to talk about Clarksdale and our desire to be a tech hub.”



Hardy

It's not all high-tech. Clarksdale welcomed new businesses like Big River Bagels and the Blue Cotton Bake Shop. Chuck Rutledge and Ann Williams renovated the old Travelers Hotel. “They’ve redone it into a twenty-room boutique hotel, kept the old along with the new, so you’ve got the best of both,” Murphey says.

Levon’s Bar & Grill reopened and Hooker Grocer & Eatery renovated its patio for outdoor dining. There are new sidewalks on DeSoto and Madison, with Sunflower sidewalks planned. Thanks to Mayor Chuck Espy, says Murphey, the city’s main intersections are attractive for tourists and locals.

Coahoma Community College added focus areas in health care marketing and radio/film/tv. “We’ve added new programs that will serve the students as well as the area,” says Chief Communications Officer Marriel Hardy. “We want to fortify the students to be as successful as they can be once they leave our gates.”

There are also new career tech programs in HVAC and diesel engine repair. “These benefit people within the state and the Delta,” says Hardy. “People want to get into the workforce quickly, have a job they can be proud of and support their family. These will serve the institution well and serve the community and everyone in the Delta region and state. Skilled workers make a meaningful contribution to the area.”

COVID-19 promoted growth at The Woman’s Clinic, which introduced telehealth appointments in the pandemic’s early days. Administrator Ann Nowell says it was well received by patients, especially as staff reached out in advance to explain the process. “A lot of changes we had to make because of COVID weren’t all negative,” she explained. “Some, like this, were positive and will continue where appropriate.”

It also hired another nurse practitioner. “We are expanding with new service lines and getting new patients because of this and our obstetrics population continues to



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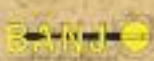
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Nowell



Peay

grow,” says Nowell.

Red River Federal Credit Union’s Clarksdale branch is adding amenities. “We are in the process of putting up an ATM in town to service our members,” says Branch Manager Charlene Moore. “That is one big thing our members really want so we are in the process of getting that done. It’s available to all, but with no surcharge for members.” It also rolled out contactless debit cards in November and offers online banking and mobile deposits.

COVID-19 changed the events business. It’s been a quiet year at Events at the Bank and the next reservation isn’t until January, says Venue Manager Hannah Peay. This required flexibility, including an update to the rental contract to comply with CDC and government guidelines. “So far everyone has been very understanding and they’re willing to work with us,” says Peay. “In Clarksdale, big weddings are a part of the culture around here, and I don’t see that changing a lot.”

Events at the Bank added a ‘green room’ at the rear of the facility as a dressing and rest area for musicians. There is also a focus on smaller events. “I hope things get back to normal, but we want to be flexible in case we can’t get back to normal events,” Peay says.

Murphey’s theory on Clarksdale’s growth has to do with personnel. “It just seems like the right people have fallen into place” he says. “The mayor and board work well together.” He reported City Clerk Cathy Clark says she’s never seen a board that accomplishes tasks so quickly.

“I am particularly grateful to Mayor Chuck Espy for his outstanding, common-sense leadership through this crisis,” says Livingston. “Our city board of commissioners and president Johnny Newson and our county board of supervisors have been an example and a lesson on how local government comes together to meet the needs of our citizens with firm, decisive and pragmatic strategies.”

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City grant writer Millicent Dixon is responsible for bringing in more than \$400,000 from the CARES Act, says Murphey. “In my seven and a half years, she might be the best hire our board has made,” he says. “She’s smart and she’s found us a lot of money. She’s a rock star to city hall.”

Murphey says another right person on the job is Executive Director of Coahoma County Tourism Bubba O’Keefe, who recently launched a new marketing campaign. “Ready to Road Trip?” is the city’s multi-media marketing campaign targeting regional tourists. Clarksdale saw tourism numbers drop during the pandemic, but that changed in October.

“We saw an increase in regional travelers making day trips or weekend trips and didn’t want to get too far from home,” he explained. “People have been boarded up for a long time and we see they are ready to get out, and some, they are busting to get out. But we want to do it safely.” Clarksdale’s health protocols include hand sanitizer stations, social distancing markers and masks.

Murphey supports a plan to keep visitors in the Delta an extra day, which turns into \$160 spent in that community. “It helps with your economy so much,” he explained. “We want to share it. We want Cleveland to share with us; we want Indianola to share with us. Let’s feed off each other and all be successful. We have a great product to sell in the Delta.”

Clarksdale hosted four events in October, including Cruzn the Crossroads Car & Truck Show and the Hambone Festival, all outside events with social distancing.

The grounds of the Delta Blues Museum hosted the car show. “The weather was nice,” says Museum Director

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Shelley Ritter. “They had a parade slinking through town with the cars, some music on stage. People came in for that.”

The streets of downtown were alive with activity. “There were so many people walking on the downtown streets,” says Murphey. “It was so good to see Clarksdale alive again. It’s fun to go downtown and have the smells of the restaurants and the music.”

O’Keefe has taken this opportunity to develop new assets: “Clarksdale is the name people know, but we’re making a big effort to help identify places in the county: the convenience store with the great burger or the mom and pop place with the blue plate special.”

Levingston used the downtime to focus on projects to strengthen the economic development authority. This includes a new website and marketing plan scheduled to debut in December. New computers, cloud-based storage and new software to better manage chamber business help increase efficiency.

The Woman’s Clinic introduced new aesthetics services so patients don’t have to travel to Oxford, Memphis or Jackson for hormone replacement pellet therapy and Botox and fillers. “Our main focus is and always will be OB-GYN care,” explained Nowell. “That is our foundation. As things change, we have to change with them and want to be able to offer one-stop shopping for our patients. We had a lot of patients ask for these services.”

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Nowell is developing the practice's first website. Still, it relies on the basics. "The most valuable way of marketing our practice is word of mouth from happy patients," she says.

The Delta Blues Museum is a big tourist draw, usually hosting a parade of international visitors. "Normally it's kind of like the U.N. in here," says Ritter. The museum is making use of the extra time and a Mississippi Arts Commission Rapid Response grant to create virtual tours featuring local musicians with ties to featured musicians. Mississippi filmmaker Coop Cooper created the tours with Clarksdale musicians Lee Williams, Terry "Big T" Williams and James "Super Chikan" Johnson.

A grant from the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area will help create an exhibit and website feature on Lillian McMurtry and the development of Jackson-based Trumpet Records.

In 2021, Ritter plans to make permanent exhibit improvements thanks to funding from the state legislature, the first time the museum has received legislative appropriation. "Sen. (Robert) Jackson and Rep. (Orlando) Paden worked really hard for us to get that," says Ritter.

Locals are benefitting from growth as

well. "We're glad to see the addition of structures and important spaces on campus," says Hardy. The planned new student services building includes advisers, technology labs and the on-campus radio station, WCQC 91.3. Work begins soon on the 10,000-square-foot Student Activities and Family Enhancement Center, an athletic/recreational space with academic support services for student-athletes.



Ritter

Red River Federal Credit Union focuses on members. "We're able to have low loan rates, great rates on investments," says Moore. It offers holiday loans, loans for household supplies and traditional financial products. Before COVID-19, the credit union made presentations to schools and businesses on services and financial literacy.

During the pandemic, the credit union continued to serve its members with appointments and the drive-thru. It also specializes in personal service. "We know each other by name," Moore says. "When our members come in, sometimes I think they don't want to leave. We can sit with them, educate them with new services and help them set up accounts online. They enjoy being in control of their account." **DBJ**