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Alpharetta a hotbed for high-tech companies

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By Patrick Fox
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

When Bob Trotter toured Alpharetta as a possible site for his company's IT operation, he was struck by the miles of underground fiber-optic cable and a world-class broadband network.

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But what really blew him away was what was above ground.

"If it was just technology, we'd have located to Chicago or Dallas," said Trotter, North American president of ThyssenKrupp Corp.

Despite a dot-com drubbing and the worst recession in a generation, Alpharetta continues to lure high-tech companies during a time Georgia's unemployment rate remains in double digits. One reason is Alpharetta's commitment to developing its technology infrastructure like its nexus of fiber optic data lines.

But what distinguishes Alpharetta from other tech-wired cities, Trotter said, is its proximity to all the elements that contribute to an inviting lifestyle — good schools, good roads, access to university systems, quality housing, the Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre.

ThyssenKrupp, a German-based industrial conglomerate, invested a year researching 138 cities for its North American IT Shared Services operation. Its selection of Alpharetta in January will bring \$30 million and 110 employees to the local economy.

"The board of directors — when I flew them in from Germany — they were extremely impressed," Trotter said. "They actually said 'Maybe this should be our world headquarters.' They were that impressed."

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Seven of metro Atlanta's top 25 technology employers call Alpharetta home. Close to 900 technology or tech-enabled companies are here, according to Technology Association of Georgia, a trade group that tracks the industry.

This year alone, tech companies have committed more than \$125 million to expand or relocate businesses to the city, bringing nearly 300 jobs with them.

That's good news to a city that leans heavily on its \$2.5 billion commercial tax base to help fund its quality of life. Business property accounts for 55 percent of the city's total tax digest, by far the highest proportion among north Fulton cities.

Even so, Alpharetta was not immune to the recession. The city lost more than 900 businesses from 2007 to 2008, and things only began turning around last year.

To sustain the rebound, city officials recently approved economic incentives to attract big employers. The package includes up to \$25,000 worth of waivers in inspection and permit fees for companies meeting certain criteria of employment and size.

The action came after Alpharetta found itself losing out to cities like Dallas for major economic development projects. It was a gesture to let companies know Alpharetta was still in the game, said James Drinkard, assistant city manager and the city's former economic development director.

Alpharetta got its edge 20 years ago when private groups invested in fiber optic cable, all of it secured in concrete. One project at North Point Mall, Drinkard said, had eight separate trunk lines feeding into it.

"You've got all these lines criss-crossing," he said, "and the redundancy levels are insane." If there's one thing tech companies like, it's redundancy, Drinkard said.

Another major factor that led to tech growth was the development and widening of Ga. 400 into an eight-lane super highway with limited access.

AT&T certainly thought highly of the highway when it moved to Alpharetta 20 years ago.

"[Alpharetta] offered ample space to develop an office campus, a good employee talent pool, and close proximity to major highways, retail and other conveniences," said Joe Chandler, executive director of AT&T Strategic Communications.

With the residential and commercial growth that followed, Chandler said employees have enjoyed more conveniences in the way of restaurants and shopping.

Those conveniences attracted Tom and Bob Klein, co-founders of Digital Scientists, a digital marketing firm in Atlanta. The brothers opened a second office in downtown Alpharetta two years ago when their business grew too big for their Atlanta location.

They chose Alpharetta to offer employees a commuting option between Atlanta and the northern suburbs. It also allowed them to settle in the same neighborhood as their best potential clients.

"We felt comfortable there was a market up here for our services," Bob said. "Sometimes people just walk in and ask directions. It's definitely more folksy here."

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Tracy Christian, senior vice president for human resources at McKesson Technology Solutions, one of metro Atlanta's largest tech employers, thought enough of Alpharetta to relocate there from Lake Alatoona three years ago.

"I love being close to the office, and Alpharetta offers a lot of great places to go and see," she said.

McKesson hired more than 600 new employees last year in metro Atlanta, including more than 60 straight out of college. About 40 percent of those came from Georgia schools.

Local business leaders are proud of the city's status in the technology field, but they aren't sitting pat.

The Alpharetta Development Authority, a quasi-government body composed of residents, is shelling out half of the \$100,000 cost for a new economic development study for the city. That plan, which has been more than a year in the works, is due next month, said Michael Cross, development authority chairman.

Alpharetta understands it must tell its own story because there are obstacles beyond its control and beyond its borders for which it must account.

"Make no mistake, when the world hears we have this ongoing battle with Alabama and Florida over water rights, when the world hears about problems in the Atlanta Public Schools, it has an impact," Drinkard said.

Alpharetta's top employers

Attracted by bucolic settings, Alpharetta has been attracting both corporate headquarters and technology and health care firms. These are the city's top employers.

Company Operation Employment

1. AT&T Inc. regional headquarters 5,000
2. Verizon Wireless regional headquarters 3,000
3. ADP Inc./ National Account Services regional headquarters 2,100
4. McKesson Provider Technologies headquarters 1,800
5. LexisNexis RIAG headquarters 1,100

Source: Georgia Power and the North Fulton Chamber of Commerce.

Business activity in Alpharetta

One sign of a city's commercial health is the number of business licenses it issues. Here is a look at business licenses issued in Alpharetta over the past 10 years.

Year Licenses Fees

issued

2004 2,088 \$624,508

2002 3,314 \$653,296

2003 3,551 \$648,579

2004 3,443 \$678,887

2005 3,595 \$754,394

2006 3,820 \$800,687

2007 4,878 \$855,692

2008 3,977 \$904,375

2009 3,836 \$872,391

2010 4,183 \$936,927

Source: Alpharetta Department of Community Development

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