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2013 Counties Of Excellence

Rewarding projects that revitalize an old industrial area, use technology to save money, enhance fire protection, help young people, improve healthcare and provide transit options

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Providing good services while being re-sponsible stewards of the public's money is always challenging, especially in a tough economy. The eighth annual Georgia Counties of Excellence awards program, sponsored by the Association County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG) in partnership with Georgia Trend, honors six projects that more than meet the challenge. Winners were determined by an independent panel of judges.

Ross King, ACCG executive director, values the transferability of the projects – the fact they can be duplicated in other counties with similar results and that they encourage regional cooperation.

But there's also a matter of recognition and pride. "These projects are important for the community," King says. "There is tremendous talent, people working under a lot of pressures – payroll cuts, furloughs. It's good to show [the public] their dollars at work."

Fulton County

Revitalizing An Industrial Area

One of the largest industrial parks east of the Mississippi, Fulton Industrial Boulevard is becoming, once again, a thriving commercial base for Fulton County as well as the region.

But a few short years ago, the area was far from thriving. After its heyday in the 1980s, the area had gone down aesthetically, says Fulton County Commission Chairman John Eaves. Businesses were leaving the area, which had become associated with drugs and prostitution.

In 2006, the Fulton Industrial Boulevard Redevelopment Initiative, a multi-agency project to support the revitalization of Fulton Industrial into a sustainable competitive business and industrial corridor, began to change that. "Since then we have been making positive steps forward," says Michelle Macauley, Fulton County's assistant director of planning and community services. "We have seen businesses coming back and businesses expanding." The corridor has its own police precinct and recently celebrated the opening of a new fire hall. The project earned Fulton a Georgia County Excellence Award in the Community Planning/Visioning category.

A major effort toward reducing crime in the area has been closing down motels along the corridor that were known to house prostitution and drug activity. But the initiative revealed some of the run-down establishments housed something more – a number of families also called them home. "No one expected that when we closed down the hotels," says Macauley. "They thought, 'We'll get rid of the prostitutes because there will be no place for them to go,' but holy cow, there were school buses pulling up."

Thanks to the involvement of Fulton County's Housing and Human Services Department, the families displaced by the hotels' closing were able to find more appropriate housing, says Macauley. "Everyone who touches this roadway has really worked together well," she says.

"I am so proud of Fulton County's commitment, along with its collaborative partners," says William "Bill" Edwards, the county's District 7 commissioner, "to put their time and expertise in to make the area as good as it should be."

Future plans for the industrial corridor include increased landscaping, which will improve the visual impact of the area from I-20. What is not planned is the introduction of residential development, which has harmed other industrial parks trying to survive a slow economy, says Macauley.

Typically when residential development moves in, industry starts to move out, she says. "We made a stand on that. We are not promoting any residential uses because industrial uses are loud and there are trucks, and people start complaining if they have to live next to them," she says. "We have really made a commitment to our industrial businesses that this is going to be an area that is business friendly and supports commercial uses that support industry."

While improvement to the industrial corridor continues, Eaves believes the refocus on the area – including the enhancement of code enforcement efforts and support for the creation of a community improvement district – have all been vital to resurrecting the area.

"Fulton Industrial Boulevard is a diamond in the rough that is on the brink of getting the attention and recognition that it deserves in terms of being an economic driver for this region," Eaves says. – MAD

Ben Hill County

Project Paperless

In the summer of 2011, Ben Hill County commissioners and staff began Project Paperless, a concerted effort to save money, time and labor by using modern technology to eliminate the sea of paper used by the county and its citizens in the daily business of governance.