

REALIZING ROBERTSON

Comprehensive Growth and Development Plan

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In July 2012, Robertson County embarked on a journey with two desired endpoints. The county wants to accelerate its economic development and create high-wage jobs and at the same time preserve its rural culture and important agricultural landscapes. At first glance the two might seem somewhat contradictory, but that is the very essence of what makes our community spe-

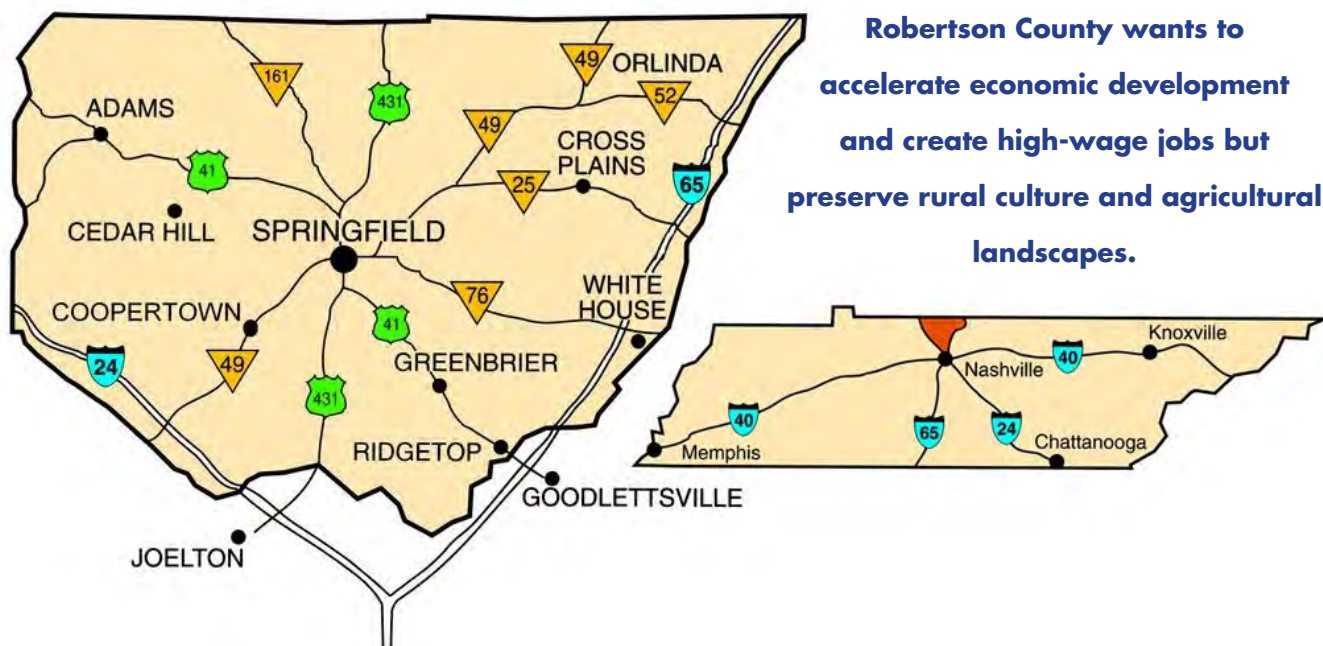
cial and why our journey will serve as a road map for many other communities in the years to come.

Robertson County sits just north of Nashville, bordered by Interstates 24 and 65. Long known as the home of the “World’s Finest Dark-Fired Tobacco,” agriculture is still a critically important part of our economy, bringing in more than \$115 million annually from sales of primary agricultural products and services. Our 1,400 farms cover 230,000 acres, create over 1,700 jobs, and place us fifth in the state of Tennessee in market value of products sold.

Home to 11 different incorporated municipalities ranging from densely populated urban areas to rural hamlets and bedroom communities, Robertson County provides a quality of life that attracts families looking for affordable homes and a small-town culture within a 30-minute drive of the world-class city of Nashville.

But there is much more to Robertson County than farmland and quaint country lifestyle. The county seat of Springfield anchors a diversified manufacturing presence, with Elec-

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Photos courtesy Margot Fosnes

Springfield will soon put in service a new 1.5 million-gallon water tower south of the city to manage growing demand along the Highway 431 corridor.



A dark-fired tobacco “smoking barn” in eastern Robertson County.

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trolux Major Appliances as the largest employer. Producing gas ranges by the millions with an employee base of over 3,000, the Springfield facility recently completed an expansion that made it the company’s Research and Development Center and Purchasing Headquarters for cooking products in North America, as well as the Global Development Center for electronics worldwide.

Robertson County is also home to automotive suppliers Johnson Electric, IAC, Kyowa America, Schrader Electronics, and Martinrea Fabco and other manufacturers including Unarco, Bath Fitter, Werthan Packaging, and Olhausen Billiards. Our location between two major inter-

states has made the county a preferred destination for logistics and distribution centers, the largest being Macy’s Logistics, occupying a million square feet along the I-65 corridor and serving as the fulfillment center for *Macys.com* and *Bloomington.com* for much of the U.S.

NorthCrest Medical Center in Springfield has also become a major economic driver, employing nearly 700 directly and hundreds more indirectly through physician practices and other medically related services. NorthCrest has positioned itself as a regional medical center for the northern middle Tennessee and southern Kentucky market.

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McCauley Aerial Photography

Exit 19 along the I-24 corridor is the proposed site of a new industrial and technology park.

ranks seventh in the state, our county of nearly 70,000 would seem fortunate and well positioned, but a closer look at statistics and patterns reveals some alarming facts. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, more than 70% of employed Robertson County citizens leave the county each day to go to work, one of the highest out-commute rates in the state. County and municipal budgets are stretched thin to provide the infrastructure to a population that has grown more than 20% over the past decade, and significant new road improvements and transit alternatives have not kept

pace with the demands of commuters. Lack of a consistent, reasoned plan for the projected future population growth of 40% in the next decade threatens the open spaces and rich farmland that define the character of Robertson County.

Our journey to addressing these issues has two paths that are unquestionably linked. The first is development of a comprehensive growth and development plan, a project approved by the Robertson County Commission in August. The impetus for creating this plan came from

a series of workshops held in 2007 with county citizens who shared their concerns and opinions about future growth and development. The majority who attended these workshops expressed the same general feeling about what they want for our county—to maintain our rural open spaces and farmland while encouraging future growth around existing town centers and infrastructure.

With technical support and guidance from Cumberland Region Tomor-

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row, a USDA Rural Development Grant, and the partnership of three of our municipalities, Littlejohn Engineering Associates has begun work on a plan that will guide future growth in such a way as to preserve our agricultural heritage, sustain the open spaces, and allow county and city governments to be good stewards of the county's financial resources while providing necessary services and infrastructure to support a growing population. The plan is expected to be completed by the fall of 2013, followed by a revision of land use and zoning ordinances and regulations to support the implementation of the plan.

The second path is focused on economic growth and insuring a vibrant employment picture for Robertson County residents. In March of 2012, economic development leadership kicked off a campaign to raise private funds to implement a comprehensive strategy to create quality jobs, retain and expand our existing business base, improve education and workforce training, address transportation and infrastructure projects, and grow our local economy. The strategy was developed based on a series of visioning sessions facilitated by Byrne Allen Corporation of Atlanta involving over 125 community and business leaders. The product of those visioning sessions was vetted through nearly 100 confidential interviews with key stakeholders who prioritized initiatives and suggested measurable goals, appropriate funding levels, and an implementation timetable.

Goals include competing for 100 corporate recruitment prospects through 2015, providing retention and expansion guidance for existing industries, creating a business-education partnership to enhance workforce quality, and adding 400 jobs generating \$38 million in direct economic impact.

With 52 investors committed to providing more than \$1.2 million in funding, Realizing Robertson's Future (RRF), a four-year economic, business, and workforce development plan for Robertson County, launched in July. Measurable goals include qualifying and competing for at least 100 corporate recruitment prospects through 2015, partnering with every existing Robertson County industry to provide retention and expansion guidance, create a vibrant business-education partnership to enhance the quality of our workforce, and create 400 new jobs generating an estimated \$38 million in direct economic impact.

Target industries for corporate recruitment include agribusiness and research, polysilicon users seeking to locate close to the Hemlock Semiconductor facility in nearby Clarksville, logistics/distribution,

healthcare/medical support and development, and automotive suppliers. With a proactive approach focused on sectors that will take advantage of our competitive assets and complement our vision for the future, it is hoped that Robertson County can transform its future and provide opportunities for all of our citizens within our community.

A key component of Realizing Robertson's Future is support for the Robertson County Comprehensive Growth and Development Plan and advocacy for the efficient development of infrastructure to ensure effective transportation, information, and water delivery systems critical to maintaining and enhancing our county's quality of life and supportive of the growth of Robertson County businesses. Economic development leadership recognizes the importance of participation and support for the growth plan project, and RRF investors have budgeted a matching grant of \$50,000 for the implementation of the recommendations developed in the growth plan.

Robertson County is poised to experience the most prosperous and successful decade in its long and storied history. With the commitment and involvement of both its public and private sector leadership, there is a plan in place to participate in the growth and development coming to the middle Tennessee region and to protect and preserve the qualities that make it a place we all want to call home. We hope that our journey will provide an example for other growing, rural communities across the state of Tennessee. ■