Investing in the region

Economic development successes help ensure a stable financial future for Washington County

By LEIGHTON HART

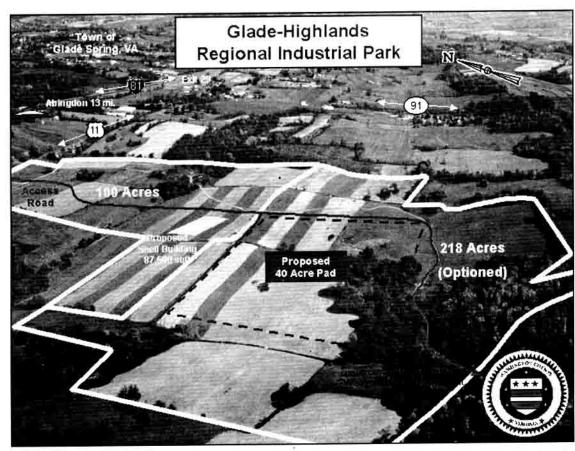
IF ANY ONE word could describe the economic development landscape in Washington County, Va., it would be: busy. A steady stream of positive developments in recent years is helping to ensure the long-term economic success of Southwest Virginia by bringing jobs and dollars to the region.

Much of the success economic developers have had recently can be attributed to the overall atmosphere of the county. Washington County encompasses 570 square miles and has a population of 49,400. The county and the Town of Abingdon are widely known for their strong tourism draw. The presence of Interstate 81 makes the county attractive to businesses by providing a link to the human capital of the Tri-Cities TN/VA metropolitan statistical area (MSA).

Headlining the economic development successes has been an innovative partnership between Washington County and Smyth County that will bring new technological and industrial businesses to the region.

In an agreement announced Aug. 28, 2000, Washington County and Smyth County will share equally in the expenses and revenue of the Glade Highlands Regional Industrial Park. The park sits on 302 acres north of the Town of Abingdon near the Town of Glade Springs, Va.

For Smyth County, the partnership provides an economic lifeline, according to Christianne Parker, assistant county administrator for Washington County. Smyth County has no more industrial land available for development, which hinders that county's efforts to expand its economy. Through the Smyth-Washington Regional Industrial Facilities Authority (SWIFA) – the organization created by the joint venture – Smyth County can benefit from developments occurring outside its corporate limits. As industries locate in the Glade



Washington County has teamed up with Smyth County to share expenses and revenues associated with the Glade Highlands Regional Industrial Park.

Highlands Regional Park, those companies can draw on Smyth County's available labor force.

For Washington County, the partnership provides a chance to stimulate a higher level of development in the Glade Highlands park than previously anticipated. By partnering, the two counties were able to leverage their financial resources and secure a unique grant for the park.

"We received a \$1.3 million industrial site development grant for the regional park," says Parker. "We were

not able to qualify for that \$1.3 million unless it was a joint venture between two counties."

Parker says the dollars will be used to prepare sites in the park for development.

"That will help us with grading additional sites within the park over and above the site for the shell building."

In addition, the park has been awarded Virginia Enterprise Zone status, allowing recruiters to offer a wider variety of incentives to companies willing to locate their operations in the park.

Parker says the partnership is an innovative move that she expects to see duplicated in other communities.

"In a lot of cases, local resources are just so limited that it makes sense to work together," she says. "Without Smyth County's partnership, we may not have expanded the Glade Highlands park. I think that revenue sharing agreement was very progressive, and that we established a role model for the region."

The Glade Highlands Regional Industrial Park isn't the only economic development story unfolding in the county.

"Washington County has purchased and is in the process of designing, through a master plan and preliminary engineering report, 180 acres of land around the former Westinghouse building. We call it the Westinghouse Industrial Park," says Parker.

That development was sparked by the 1999 announcement of 21st Century Containers, Ltd., of a \$6 million, three-year investment expected to create 120 jobs in the former Westinghouse facility. The 21st Century Containers location was one of five deals in the last five years to receive support from Virginia's Governor's Opportunity Fund - which Parker calls the "premier" deal closing fund

ing fund.
Simply measuring by the number of grants from that fund in recent years tells a lot about the good things that are happening in Southwest Vir-

ginia, says Parker.

"I think the fact that we've gotten that much money from the Governor's office indicates that the State has increased their awareness of the needs of economic development in Southwest Virginia," she explains.

Another major announcement which will brings dollars to Washington County is the construction of a power plant in the Bristol-Washington County Industrial Park by Wolf Hills Energy. The \$96 million Wolf Hills project constitutes the largest onetime investment in the county by a company, and although the plant won't create more than five jobs, the county will see tax revenue of \$1 million the first year. Once the plant becomes active, its tax classification will change and will create \$400,000 per year for Washington County.

The past five years have been good for economic development in Washington County, and Parker doesn't see reason why the future should be any different. She adds that she has the resources to market the



Officials break ground on the \$96 million Wolf Hills Energy power plant in the Bristol-Washington County Industrial Park.

county effectively. "We've got a wide variety of product or sites, with rail service, on the Interstate, off the Interstate, in a variety of sizes," she says. "Our site inventory has never been

greater as far as the quantity of avail-

able industrial sites and the availabil-

able industrial sites and the availability. We've also never been in a better position relative to the incentives that we can offer because now we are an enterprise zone, which allows us to offer state tax advantages."