

# At DeKalb Chamber of Commerce's 75th anniversary, President Leonardo McClarty looks at its past and its future

by Kathy Mitchell  
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Although the DeKalb County Chamber of Commerce has undergone many changes during the 75 years of its existence, its core mission has remained the same, according to chamber President **Leonardo McClarty**. "DeKalb County 75 years ago was rural so business was largely agribusiness. As that has changed we have continued to see our role as a partner, resource and support system for business whatever that business is. "While businesses in the community may see each other as competitors on a day-to-day basis, through the chamber they can work for the things that benefit the entire business community," McClarty said. He said that while the chamber may take the role of advocate or opponent on a particular issue, as a nonpolitical, nonprofit organization it more often helps stakeholders understand one another's point of view and see the big picture. "Business doesn't stand alone," he said. "It works in concert with government, education and other entities. Often the chamber is the place where they find common ground. "Business in recent years has gotten a black eye. Sometimes people think of business as a collection of greedy and self-interested people—and occasionally someone behaves in a way that reinforces that image—but those people represent only a small minority," McClarty said. "Without support from business nonprofits and community programs could not exist." McClarty noted that in

its journey of the past 75 years, the county—and consequently the chamber—experienced some important turning points. "A major event in the county's transition from a collection of rural communities came right after World War II, around 1947 or '48, when the General Motors plant came to Doraville. That was huge," said McClarty, who has headed the chamber for nine years. "The chamber played a major role in supporting that effort." During that same time frame, the federal government started the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and established its headquarters in DeKalb's Druid Hills neighborhood, McClarty said, adding that in the same part of the county, Emory University underwent a great growth spurt in the 1940s and '50s. He said the Veterans Administration complex, including the VA Hospital also changed the economic picture in DeKalb. "Another major milestone was the completion in the 1960s of the hospital that's now called DeKalb Medical," he said, noting that health care is now a big industry in DeKalb. McClarty said while it's good to have major employers in the area, a mix of large and small companies is ideal. "Most of our growth right now is coming from small businesses and we want to be sure we're an important resource for them. Nurturing small businesses is more important than trying to land the big fish, right now," he added. He said the county has important assets that help it compete as a place to

do business. "We're very well positioned in terms of transportation, for example. Interstates 85, 285 and 20, all cut right through DeKalb. MARTA is here and we're just minutes from Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, one of the largest international airports in the world. We're also home to DeKalb Peachtree Airport, the state's second largest airport," he continued. Another asset, he said, is quality institutions of higher learning, including not only Emory, but Agnes Scott College, Oglethorpe University, Georgia Perimeter College, Piedmont Technical College and others. "All these resources make us strong competitors for business. We need to keep working to make sure we're creating the expertise needed in today's job market." He noted that in the current economic climate, competition may be in the next county, but it may also come from a distant state or from another country. A strong chamber can be a strong voice for business, McClarty said, "but we need solid businesses behind us to lend strength and credibility to our message."



McClarty

## City of Decatur hires first public information officer

After an screening process of more than 250 applicants, the city of Decatur announced Sept. 17 the hiring of **Casie Yoder** as its first public information officer. "Communication is at the heart of Decatur's commitment to transparency," said City Manager **Peggy Mer-**

**riss**. "Casie Yoder's years of communications experience in our nation's capital and local communities across the country will make her an invaluable asset to the city as we work to enhance and expand Decatur's communication tools and efforts." Based in Washington, D.C., since 2008, Yoder has

**DeKalb County  
Department of Watershed Management  
Public Advisory  
Interstate 85 & Oakcliff Industrial Court Sanitary Sewer Rehabilitation**

**September 5, 2013**  
Advisory Issue Date

**October 5, 2013**  
Advisory Close Date

This advisory is issued to inform the public of a receipt of an application for a variance submitted pursuant to a State Environmental Law. The Public is invited to comment during a 30 day period on the proposed activity. Since the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) has no authority to zone property or determine land use, only those comments addressing environmental issues related to air, water and land protection will be considered in the application review process. Written comments should be submitted to: Program Manager, Non Point Source Program, Erosion and Sedimentation Control, 4220 International Parkway, Suite 101, Atlanta, Georgia 30354.

Type of Permit Application: Variance to encroach within the 25-foot Sate Waters Buffer.  
Applicable Law: Georgia Erosion and Sedimentation Act O.C.G.A. 12-7-1 ET seq.  
Applicable Rules: Erosion and Sedimentation Control Chapter 391-3-7.  
Basis under which variance shall be considered {391-3-7.05(2) (A-K)}: D

**Project Description & Reason for Initiating:**

The proposed project involves buffer encroachments necessary to rehabilitate an existing gravity sewer line. Three sections within the buffer will involve direct line replacement and will impact 676 linear feet of buffer along an unnamed tributary to North Fork Creek. The project is located near Oakcliff Industrial Court and south to Interstate 85 in DeKalb County.

**Project Location:**

This project is located in land lot 314 and 318 of the 18<sup>th</sup> district of DeKalb County, beginning at terminus of Oak Cliff Industrial Court and running south to Interstate 85 and continuing south to the confluence of the North Fork of Peachtree Creek for a total distance of approximately one mile. The Public can review site plans at 1580 Roadhaven Drive Stone Mountain, Georgia 30083. Phone 770-621-7272.



The panel for the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce's business forum was composed of, from left, Bob Voyles, Craig Lesser, Gregory Baranco and Becky Blalock. Yvette Cook, standing at right, was the moderator.

## Executives comment on local business climate at chamber forum

by Kathy Mitchell  
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As part of its 75th anniversary celebration, the DeKalb County Chamber of Commerce hosted a business forum at which four leaders in the business community discussed their thoughts on the business climate in Georgia and specifically in DeKalb County.

The panel, moderated by United Way of Greater Atlanta Chief Marketing Officer **Yvette Cook**, was composed of **Gregory Baranco**, president and CEO of Baranco Automotive Group; **Becky Blalock**, managing partner at Advisory Capital; **Craig Lesser**, consultant and former Georgia commissioner of economic development; and **Bob Voyles**, founder of Seven Oaks Co., a commercial real estate firm.

Panelists generally agreed that the economy would be helped by increased availability of investment capital. Baranco told of his efforts to build his Mercedes dealership in 2008, when the economy was in a deep slump. "The banks just weren't interested," he recalled, "but I found some investors and they did very well. Now all those banks that turned me down are calling wanting to lend me money. And as for the people who invested with me before—they're asking 'what's our next project?'"

Voyles said a slumping economy can sometimes present opportunities

for small businesses. "When the banks are offering very low interest rates, people are looking for investments that will provide a greater return. If they see a business that has great potential, they may be willing to put their money there instead of with more traditional investments," he said.

Lesser commented that success doesn't necessarily depend on the state of the economy. "Often it depends on what business you're in, where you are and how smart you are," he said.

Blaylock, whose book *DARE—Straight Talk on Confidence, Courage and Career for Women in Charge* is scheduled to appear in bookstores in October, said Georgia doesn't offer a lot of incentives for businesses to move into the state. "Texas is really beating us in that area," she said.

Voyles quipped, "I just came from Texas; I can see why they need incentives."

Pointing out that Georgia has relatively few Fortune 500 companies when compared with other states its size, Cook asked panelists what they thought the state could do to change that picture. Several responded that attracting Fortune 500 companies is not the key to boosting Georgia's economy.

Lesser said the state would do better by growing sectors that are already excelling in Georgia. "I'm disappointed that we don't do more of that," he said. "We have lots

of people who have great ideas. We haven't done a good job of supporting them."

He said the business community should be open to new ideas. "Who would have predicted Google?" he asked.

Blaylock agreed that the business community needs to support innovative newcomers. "Some have great ideas, but have no idea how to implement them. They need mentors with business savvy. We all need to get involved in mentoring," she said.

Baranco said those who are new to the business world may need help understanding how to get things done and how much work it takes to get a new idea into the marketplace. "We want to help those who are just getting started, but we want to see that they are totally committed," he said.

Panelists agreed that Georgia has both assets and liabilities as a place to do business. "Education is ranked near the bottom in the nation,"

Blaylock commented, "That doesn't bode well." She added that traffic is an issue in the metropolitan Atlanta area and voters' rejection of the TSPLOST (Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) initiative to pay for transportation improvements suggests to outsiders that Georgians aren't interested in solving the problem.

Lesser said politicians at the local level "have some work to do." He said the inability of politicians to

work together is harming the county and the state.

Panelists also noted that the area has strong assets and should, Voyles said, "do a better job of telling our story."

He said the education picture is not all negative as the area has excellent colleges and universities. "Georgia Tech is a tremendous resource," he said.

Baranco acknowledged that were problems a few years ago in some state colleges, "but that's been fixed," he said. "We now have a network of state schools anyone should be proud to attend."

People care about quality of life and that's a real asset here, Lesser said. "Decatur has one of the greatest downtown areas you'll find anywhere," he said. "Young adults especially love living in an area with lots of wonderful specialty shops, interesting restaurants and pedestrian and bicycle friendly areas."

Asked what types of employees they look for in their businesses, panelists agreed that they want those who go beyond their job descriptions. "We want to select the best, then invest in them. It should be a win-win for everyone in our organization," Baranco said.

Voyles said he looks for flexible people who are "prepared to wear multiple hats. They should be able to perform three or four functions, depending on where they're needed."



The Voice of Business in DeKalb County  
**DeKalb Chamber of Commerce**

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