



Cooperative Competition Key to

BY DAN MCCUE  
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# Economic Development

**W**e've all been there. A project needs to be done, or an elaborate event or celebration planned, and somehow having too many well-intentioned helpers results in something less than desired.



“Boiled down to their essentials, there are three kinds of groups that practice economic development in Midlands. These are the state, regional entities, and the counties and/or cities.”

So why, it might well be asked, doesn't this happen when it comes to the economic development of our region?

After all, there is no shortage of entities waiting to welcome a prospect company to the Midlands.

A short and by no means complete list would include the S.C. Department of Commerce, the Central South Carolina Alliance, The Greater Lexington and Columbia Chambers of Commerce, the economic offices of Richland and Lexington counties, and the City of Columbia.

And yet one never hears of a

fumble, of an opportunity lost because a prospect didn't know who to speak with or because they were getting market intel and solicitations from too many directions at once.

Why is that?

“Well, I mean, there are certain times when lines get blurred and when who's in charge of dealing with a particularly prospect is not as clear as it should be,” says Nelson Lindsay, director of the Richland County Economic Development office.

“But I'll tell you, the vast majority of the time, and in the case of the vast majority of projects, the companies

involved are well aware of who's taking the lead on the initiative and that the rest of us are there to provide a united front in trying to get them to come here,” he adds.

To be sure, one would be hard-pressed to find a company that would say it chose Raleigh, N.C. or Savannah, Ga. over an Orangeburg, Richland, Kershaw, or Sumter counties because too many cooks spoiled the broth. That kind of backbiting simply isn't done.

But Wayne Gregory, Jr., Columbia's economic development director since last September, believes there's more to the lack of this kind of criticism than good manners.

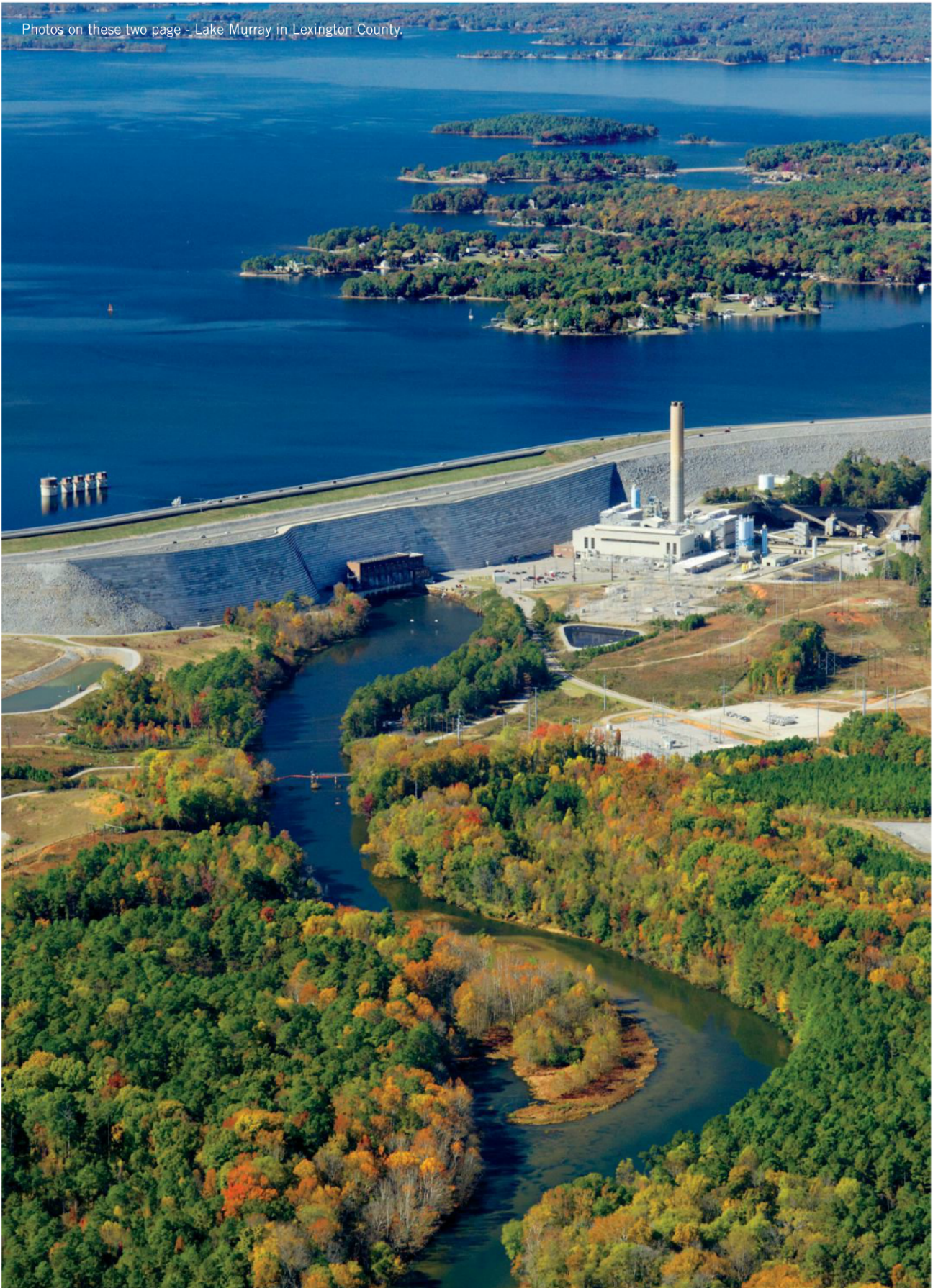
“I think, at the end of the day, it comes down to two words — communications and trust — and how they define the relationships we all have with one another,” Gregory says.

“We work very well with high quality people like Susan McPherson and Scott Callison at the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce, Mike Briggs at the Central SC Alliance, and we work very closely with Nelson Lindsay and his staff, with whom we speak several times a day, in fact.”

“So I think the kind of thing you're



Photos on these two page - Lake Murray in Lexington County.





asking about is prevented by the fact we are all actually quite good friends, by our keeping in daily contact and often more than that, and by our trusting one another,” he says.

Boiled down to their essentials, there are three kinds of groups that practice economic development in Midlands. These are the state, regional entities, and the counties and/or cities.

If one were to try to visualize their collaboration, they would start with one of those charts that looks like a cloverleaf composed of three circles with a sliver in the middle showing where they all intersect.

That’s all right as far as it goes, but a far more accurate way to visualize the partnership would be to see that clover rendered in three dimensions, as it might appear if drawn by the chart-making tool in Microsoft Excel.

Animate the chart, and at any given time one “leaf” might be higher than the rest depending on how to prospect came to engage the whole and on the company’s specific needs.

When all is working well, the clover’s respective pieces would trade position and, in keeping with our proposed 3D model, would slowly move up and down at different points in the engagement, like the pistons in a engine.

“I often talk about economic development being a team sport,” says Commerce Secretary Bobby Hitt. “It takes all of us, at the state and local level, and with the alliances and our private-sector partners.”

“By working collaboratively with all of our partners in economic development, we help set the table for continued success,” Hitt adds.

The Secretary’s counterparts on the local level certainly agree, universally describing the Department of Commerce as the prime marketer and primary lead generator for the state. Followed by the Central SC Alliance.

“But that doesn’t mean leads only come to us from them,” Nelson Lindsay says. “Many come directly to us, and others come to us through other allies, such as lawyers or

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Left to right: Wayne Gregory, Bobby Hitt and Nelson Lindsay

bankers or construction companies.”

However the lead materializes, the next step is coordinating efforts.

“If a company contacts the state directly, knows what it wants, and expresses interest in Richland County specifically, they’ll contact us directly,” Lindsay says. “If, on the other hand, the company just has a set of criteria that it’s interested in, but doesn’t know where it might fulfill them, the state will reach out to all of the regional alliances and say, ‘What have you got that fits what they are looking for?’”

In many cases, the City of Columbia is engaged early, because when all is said and done, it will be the provider of water and sewer services for projects in the city center, or in Richland or Lexington counties.

One of the keys to understanding the multipronged economic development efforts of the Midlands is recognizing that each geographic area has different attributes to offer, different things they’re looking for in terms of the prospects that will be the best fit for their communities, and, as mentioned above, different services they can provide a prospect.

“From our standpoint, of course, we’d love for every prospect to locate right here in downtown Columbia,” Wayne Gregory says. “But at the end of the day, if I can’t provide what

a company needs within the city limits, I’d much rather have it choose Richland or Lexington County, rather than Raleigh.

“One of the reasons I think our collaboration works well is that we all recognize our unique strengths and needs,” he continues. “Columbia for instance, it’s better suited for office jobs and research and so on, that large scale distribution or manufacturing facilities.

“As a result, our primary focus has been on growing knowledge-based jobs, an effort on which we work very closely with the USC Business Incubator,” Gregory says. “Now, while that’s a huge focus for us, I’m still going to do everything I can to help Nelson Lindsay, in Richland County, and Chuck Whipple, [economic development director] in Lexington County, because the kinds of jobs they’re striving to create are also of huge benefit to our citizens.”

“For example,” he says, warming to the subject, “if somebody contacts me and they are looking for a specific building size, I will search our database and if we don’t have anything within the city limits that fits, I contact Nelson immediately ... and even if we do, I want him to at least know about what’s going on and to be aware of it.”

“Once again, it’s a matter of

communications and trust,” Gregory says. “One of our strengths here is we know that if we’re working on a project, we can share that information with our economic development partners knowing they are not going to go behind our back and say, ‘Wait a second, you don’t need to look over there, we have exactly what you need over here.’”

Gregory considers what he’s just said, then continues.

“You have to have the right people in place. It’s like doing a puzzle,” he says. “Imagine you have three different puzzles and you put all the pieces in one box, shook it, then dumped them out and tried to make what lay before you work. Well, it would be much more difficult.

“But if you have one puzzle, in one box and the pieces all fit ... we’ll, you can see what I’m saying,” he says. “We’re all of like mind, share a common goal, and that enables us to collaborate and work well together.”

“It certainly makes it far easier to function and do my job,” he adds.

Which is not to suggest that there isn’t a bit of friendly competition that goes on behind the scene.

“Absolutely, there is,” says Nelson Lindsay, unable to suppress a mild chuckle.

“I would say this is a friendly but a very competitive business, and the



reason it is friendly is because at the end of the day, everyone knows that so long as the prospect lands in South Carolina, that's a good thing for all of us," he says.

"I mean, South Carolina is such a small state. So even if a company locates in one of our neighboring counties, it will still have a positive impact on our citizens," Lindsay says.

But the question still remains: if you're a company that's dipped its toe in the pool and considering taking the plunge in the Midlands, how do you know who the right person to talk to is at any given point in the process?

"A lot of it depends on where the lead is generated," Lindsay says. "But from there, it is up to us to figure out how to coordinate our efforts so that dealing with our economic development community is not confusing to the prospect. I mean, that confusion is the worst thing that could happen, right?"

"Fortunately, we are usually able to decide amongst ourselves who the most appropriate person is to be the point of

contact for the company," he says.

Lindsay said while the number of economic development entities in the region may seem like an overabundance, he firmly believes there is strength in numbers.

"That's why you see multiple counties coming together to form regional alliances," he says. "In one respect, it helps with the marketing because it's easier to market a region than individual counties. It's also more cost effective.

"But the biggest reason why the state or some other entity just doesn't do it for everybody is each county and each community is different," Lindsay says. "What's interesting in Columbia or Charleston or Greenville, may not be what's interesting to those in our more rural communities.

"Everybody has their own, distinct needs and that's ultimately why there are different levels to this [economic development]. What's right for Richland might not be the right fit for Allendale County and visa versa," he says.

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