

Once-Busy Georgia Industrial Town, Now A Dead Zone

by Rodney Manley, Associated Press

EAST DUBLIN, Ga. (AP) — Quitting time on Nathaniel Drive once meant traffic, bumper to bumper, from the bridge spanning the Oconee River into Dublin back to the textile plants that spun the fabric of a thriving local economy.

Now, Nathaniel is a lonely, almost lifeless 3.5-mile stretch of five-laned blacktop. Weeds and grass grow tall through cracks in the parking lot at the former Forstmann plant, once Laurens County's largest employer with 1,500 workers. A few weeks ago, wrecking crews began leveling the mill, which closed in 2007, looking to salvage whatever steel remains after the equipment followed jobs out the door.

Near the other end of the road, a workday finds a few dozen cars scattered at Mohawk Industries, the last remnant of the once robust textile industry. Just two years ago, Mohawk employed almost 800 people. Last month, the remaining 179 workers were told the carpet mill will close in April.

Kathy Green worked for more than three years at Mohawk, hanging spools of yarn to feed the carpet-making process. She was laid off in October 2009 and now works at a nearby country-cooking buffet restaurant, waiting tables two days a week.

"There's nothing," she said of the once-bustling Nathaniel Drive. "It's like a dead zone." Having weathered the loss of thousands of textile jobs since the mid-1990s, the Dublin area is dealing with a new wave of job losses.

Since the recession's official start in December 2007, Laurens County has lost more than 1,000 manufacturing jobs. During that time, the county's unemployment rate has shot from 5.2 percent to 12.6 percent in February, according to figures released Thursday by the Georgia Department of Labor. The state's jobless rate was 10.2 in February.

That local number could go even higher. CNH Global announced in January that it will close its tractor-assembly plant in Dublin by as early as the end of this month. The plant employs about 50 full-time employees.

The job situation could be worse if not for the several hundred jobs created by the area's growing health care community, anchored by the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center and Fairview Park Hospital, said Cal Wray, president of the Dublin-Laurens County Economic Development Authority. Dublin has more than 100 physicians, and a number of them have expanded or built new clinics and facilities, Wray said.

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Meanwhile, he said, officials are aggressively pursuing new industry, especially those that could support the new MAGE Solar plant, which is expected to begin producing solar panels by the end of May.

If textiles were the county's past, so-called green industries, such as the solar panel plant, could very well be its future. Last week, as crews were wrecking the old Forstmann building, workers at MAGE Solar were placing solar panels in a charging station for electric cars.

The plant is projected to create 350 jobs, and Kathy Green hopes to land one of them.

"I've got my resume in there," she said. "I think everybody was in line there. I don't care, I'm going to put mine in there if there's 10,000 of them."

Green's husband is disabled and is working to get benefits. Their two adult children have been helping out in the meantime, she said.

"I just turned 50," said Green, who earned \$11.50 an hour at Mohawk. "There's not that many jobs out there, especially at my age. It's hit Dublin hard. There really are no jobs that pay like they did."

End of textile age, then recession

In 2006, YKK AP America launched an \$80 million expansion of its plant in Dublin. The facility makes aluminum windows and other architectural products, so when the construction industry nose-dived, the 200 new jobs at the plant never materialized.

"They finished up about the time the economy down-turned," said Wray.

Still, with 355 workers, YKK is now the county's third-largest employer. The expansion has the plant ready to employ 600 to 700 workers if conditions improve, Wray said. Another industry, Eldorado Stone, was "idled" because of low demand for its architectural stone veneer, but it could "flip a switch" and be back to 60 employees, he said.

Many of the job losses have been at companies tied to the construction industry. Others fell to cheap imports. The shuttering of CNH, which makes small New Holland tractors, could be blamed on a dwindling demand.

"There's not much of a market for a hobby tractor right now," said Wray.

In Mohawk's case, the 50-year-old plant simply could not keep pace with the company's faster, more efficient mills.

"They were competing with new facilities with new equipment," said Wray. "Would it make sense to retrofit that plant or to do what they're doing and move it all to one

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location?"

The Forstmann plant was built in 1947 by textile giant J.P. Stevens and later bought by Victor Forstmann Inc. For decades, the mill, which among other things made the material for The Masters' famous green jacket, was the region's economic engine. When it closed four years ago, it employed fewer than 200 people.

"J.P. Stevens is really what started Laurens County," said Len Tanner, a longtime East Dublin city councilman. "They had what they classified as 'good jobs.' "

Tanner worked at the J.P. Stevens mill from 1972 to 1974 after graduating high school. He left to open a small gas station in East Dublin that has grown into a full-service automotive shop and wrecker service.

At the turn of the new century, the seepage of textile jobs from the area was becoming an exodus. Biljo, a pants manufacturer also on Nathaniel Drive, shut down in 2001, laying off its remaining 120 workers. By 2005, when Forstmann cut its workforce to just more than 100, the region within a 45-mile radius of Dublin had lost 7,500 textile jobs within a seven-year span.

The downturn coincided with local and state officials completing a \$4 million expansion of Nathaniel Drive to accommodate commuters, an irony not lost on Tanner.

"It was causing a major traffic jam. When they got (the project) completed, everybody started leaving," he said.

Three weeks ago, a sign in front of Tanner's business advertised two job openings. A Mohawk employee had already applied, he said.

Tanner said he's seen customers hurt by the recession. The job losses here could have been even higher, he said, if not for "a good chamber (of commerce) and good civic leaders."

"Laurens County is blessed to be able to hold off what we've been able to hold off," he said.

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Company could make Dublin "green and growing" again

Wray, the county's lead economic developer, is optimistic of a turnaround. The economic development authority is "busier than we've ever been." Officials have hosted 10 official visits by new industry prospects since January, he said.

"We're excited. We're busy. The projects we're working are about \$1.3 billion worth of investment -- and that is with a 'B.' ... The activity, the looks we're getting, they're really quality projects. They're quality jobs with well-run companies.

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"We're close on several of them," Wray said. "It's a matter of the companies pulling the trigger."

Targeted industries include aerospace, clean-tech, light manufacturing, wood aggregate and distribution companies.

"We look very specifically at whether a business is propped up by government subsidies," Wray said. "A business propped up by government subsidies might not be the best business to go after. You never know when they might go away."

Interest has been generated with wind, solar and wood pellet-burning energy companies, and the Dublin area's potential for alternative energy prospects might have some jokingly considering a change in motto.

"Our slogan is 'green and growing,' " said Wray. "People have started to use 'green and sustainable.' "

One of the area's top selling points is location. Interstate 16 knifes through the heart of the county, which sits midway between Atlanta and Savannah, a two-hour drive to both. That access to the world's busiest airport -- Hartsfield-Jackson in Atlanta -- and the country's fastest-growing port was a major plus in landing the Germany-based MAGE Solar's new North American headquarters.

"They could bring product into the port," Wray said, "and they could make a direct flight from Atlanta to Stuttgart, near their headquarters."

The county, he said, offers a "low cost of doing business with a high-quality of life." It is a drawing area for nine to 12 counties.

"Before the recession, it was probably nine counties, but people are willing to drive further for employment," Wray said. "We're drawing from a much larger labor pool."

Laurens County, which according to the 2010 Census has about 48,000 residents, has a workforce of about 22,000. Factor in the surrounding counties, Wray said, and the number of available workers is closer to 80,000.

"The people who come here to work already come here to shop," he said. "They already come here to go to the doctor."

The development authority owns about 600 acres, with utilities, to offer prospects, and it also has partners with available land, Wray said.

MAGE Solar has moved into the former Rockwell Automation plant, which announced in 2009 that it would close, leaving 145 people out of work. The solar panel maker actually shared the facility on Dublin's Industrial Boulevard with Rockwell for three months last year. The company already has launched and expanded its "Solar Academy" operation and has hired 40 employees, mostly management, sales and engineering personnel.

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Production lines are being installed, and, after test runs, the plant could begin manufacturing solar energy panels by the end of May, said MAGE Solar spokeswoman Susanne Fischer-Quinn. The company plans to hire 350 employees within five years, she said. It also has bought additional land at the site for possible expansion.

As MAGE Solar is gearing up, across the river, Mohawk Carpet is winding down. The plant is expected to close by the end of April, leaving longtime employees such as Willie Horne in the unaccustomed position of job seeker.

"I've been there all my life," said the 51-year-old Horne, who started working at the carpet mill when he was just 20.

"This is happening all around. If you follow the news, it's not just affecting Mohawk, it's all over the world. ... Mohawk's as good a place as any to work. It's just because of the economy."

Horne said he's not sure what he'll do next.

"I tell everybody you just got to stay prayed up," he said. "God knows what the next door is that's going to open up. But I've got a lot of friends who are already out of work who haven't been able to find a job."

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