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ERIC PEREIRA/Staff

Shown, from left, are NGTC Vice President of Community and College Relations Amy Hulsey, Cheryl Kowalsky and NGTC Director of Information Technology Savonda Turner.

Forward Habersham kicks off future

BY ERIC PEREIRA

The Wednesday morning sunshine filled North Georgia Technical College Industrial Technology Center's event center, filled with over 100 of Habersham County's community leaders. People from all corners of Habersham County turned out to hear an update and learn more about Forward Habersham at its campaign kickoff breakfast.

Attendees heard about the Forward Habersham Campaign Initiative led by Habersham Partnership for Growth (HPG), a private-public partnership comprised of local businesses, government and educational leaders driving toward the strategic economic development of Habersham County.

"In its short lifespan, the Habersham Partnership for Growth has succeeded in creating a strong foundation of collaboration and support," said Forward Habersham co-chair and HPG Chair Brian Horton. "But today, Habersham faces intense competition for workforce talent and the need to be infrastructure ready



ERIC PEREIRA/Staff

Shown is Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary W. Black speaking at the Forward Habersham Campaign kickoff breakfast.

for both commercial and residential growth. The challenges we now face directly impact business decisions regarding expansion and where to lo-

cate."

Horton said Forward Habersham

FORWARD HABERSHAM ON 2A

is the plan to face those challenges head on and create the future they believe Habersham County wants.

GREAT LEAP FORWARD

Horton introduced HPG Executive Director Tim Lee, who has helped raise Habersham's statewide profile and build strong working relationships among stakeholders in the private and public sector, according to Horton.

"Forward Habersham is our great leap forward," Lee said, "a step that will ensure that we have the right kind of growth for the businesses and people that live and work in Habersham, today and in the future. Forward Habersham will focus on achieving three distinct goals."

Those three goals are comprehensive economic development, talent development, and infrastructure and community development.

"To that end, we will build on a collaborative culture we have estab-

lished, with our cities and our county leadership as we market our offerings, especially sites like the airport industrial park and our proximity to the inland port," Lee said. "All three of these goals to comprehensive economic development, workforce development and infrastructure development are all deeply interdependent. To expand your business, you must attract a sustainable workforce. To attract that workforce, you must have infrastructure that leads to a vibrant community with diverse retail amenities, attractions, services and housing. If done right, all of these things will work together in concert. It promotes growth. And with Forward Habersham, it is growth the way we want it. Preserving our quality of life while offering the opportunities for all of us to thrive."

Lee then spoke on an independent economic impact analysis in which HPG commissioned Georgia

Tech. Their findings projected what the Forward Habersham initiative is expected to deliver.

"Over the next five years of the initiative, our projected job growth is estimated to be and to rise to a total of 800 jobs," Lee said. "Those jobs are estimated to generate \$27.5 million in annual labor income. Of that labor income, \$15.4 million is expected to be spent by consumers in Habersham each year, with approximately a third of it projected to be spent on housing. And all of this new activity is expected to generate an expected \$7.8 million in additional bank deposits and roughly a quarter million in additional sales tax revenue each year. A large portion is going right back into our school system, creating a positive cycle that will prepare our next generation to thrive right here in Habersham."

Lee then emphasized how important the community's involvement is in achieving these goals.

"As you know, the partnership is you," he said. "All of you and all of us. Working together to make our community what we want it to be. I'm grateful for your confidence and need in our leadership, and with your support going forward, I am excited about bringing this vision to life."

CHOOSE YOUR LEGACY

Up next to speak was Forward Habersham co-chair John Borrow, who owns seven McDonald's in the Northeast Georgia area. He spoke about why he decided he wanted to be an investor in the future of Habersham County.

Borrow said when he was contacted to be an investor in Forward Haber-

sham, he learned of the benefits it would bring for his restaurants. But, more importantly, he saw the impact this would make on the county he lived in, Borrow said.

"Mortality isn't something that will never happen, right? So I think about my legacy and what will my impact be," Borrow said. "And I think about my impact on my family and spiritual legacy, but I also think about what will my legacy be in my community. I live in Cornelia. What will it be in Cornelia, what will it be for Habersham County. And I think a lot of you have a similar mindset and I know that when we all work together, we can have so much greater [of an] impact than just me or just you. If we all do it together; all try to lift this giant weight together, I think it would be unbelievable the difference we can make when we're together."

'THE WINDSHIELD PRINCIPLE'

Borrow then introduced guest speaker Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary W. Black to offer some words of wisdom on this initiative. He decided to use an analogy of his "the windshield principle" for Habersham moving forward.

"And think about ... what is the purpose of a windshield - you know it protects us in moving forward," he said. "But there are three other things that are very close that are also made of glass and those are rear-view mirrors. ..."

Taking into account the amount of square inches that makes each piece of glass, Black said the largest piece is where we spend the most amount of time looking - forward. But you should be aware of the past, he said.

you will be looking at something that has already happened to give you a quick glimpse of history, every time you glance. Now, there are historical things to be aware of. There are historical things of your community that you must be vested in. I would challenge you to do so. Because it is about moving forward, but I suppose there is not a person, not a citizen in this room that doesn't want to respect the past. Respect where we came from, how did we get here? It is about forward, but it is about some respect to the heritage and how do we take what we have learned and how do we build on that? Latch onto that for a moment and maybe that will pay some dividends for you."

He went on to explain the importance of utilizing the rear-view mirrors when "changing lanes" under the subject of agriculture, Habersham County's largest industry.

STRETCH GOAL

“Looking forward, if you change lanes, it’s just good to have a strategic thought about what you want your quality of life to be and ... what are the paths you want to respect with respect to rural heritage, agriculture production, and how does that fit into your economic development strategy?”

‘GAME CHANGER’

Forward Habersham co-chair Wade Rhodes then welcomed guest speakers Amy Carter, deputy commissioner of Rural Georgia Initiatives for the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDED); and Senior Advisor of Economic Development for the GDED Charles Gatlin.

“This is a game changer

for this community and I so wish that we could see other rural communities around the state make this happen also,” Carter said of the Forward Habersham Campaign.

Gatlin then said that when it comes to economic development, “Don’t wait.”

“The reason is because this is a process,” he said. “Now, today, we have an event where everybody comes together, looks at who are skeptical out there wondering, ‘Are we on the right track? Are we doing the right thing?’ You are absolutely on the right track,” he said. “And will things change over the next four to five years? Of course they will. This is a process, don’t worry about it.”

Horton then returned to the podium to inform the audience of their stretch goal of the campaign and where Forward Habersham currently stands.

Horton announced that with the help of investors, Forward Habersham has raised \$1,040,000 toward their stretch goal of \$2 million, or 52 percent.

“Thank you again to all of our early investors,” Horton said. “Because of you, we are able to officially kick off our campaign with significant momentum, but one we are just getting started. To reach our goal, we need everyone to join us so we can achieve that goal in the next three months.”

The goal will be to raise \$960,000 more for the Forward Habersham 5-year initiative.

“The partnership is your business partner, your resource to achieve your goals, the initiative is projected to deliver a strong return on your investment, but one that will ultimately be the tide that lifts all boats in our community,” he said. “And as an investor, you are also a board member, you’re a part of our leadership community, a strong coalition that will play a role in guiding Habersham’s future.”

“Forward Habersham is our great leap forward, a step that will ensure that we have the right kind of growth for the businesses and people that live and work in Habersham, today and in the future.”

- HPG Executive Director Tim Lee
