

Commissioners join business leaders on trade mission

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Leonardtown, MD – In an effort to learn firsthand how a predominantly military community has successfully diversified its economy, Commissioners Randy Guy and Tom Jarboe were among a delegation of 14 government and business leaders on a trade mission to Huntsville, Alabama.

The delegation also included County Administrator Dr. Rebecca Bridgett, County Economic Development director Chris Kaselemis, Richard Braam, chair of the St. Mary's County Economic Development Commission, private sector executives, a State economic development representative, Department of Defense representatives from NAWC-AD, a private developer, St. Mary's County Chamber of Commerce, and a defense advocacy agency representative.

The group traveled to Huntsville October 21 – 23 at the invitation of Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle and the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce. While there they visited a number of sites and companies, including Redstone Arsenal a garrison for tenants including the United States Army's Material Command, Aviation and Missile Command, the Department of Defense's Missile Defense Agency and NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center. Redstone employs over 35,000 employees, working in over 19 million square feet of office space on 38,125 acres of land.

The group also visited NASA's Payload Operations Center and Hudson Alpha Research as well as receiving briefings on cyberHuntsville, Providence Development and GAN Corporation.

"Huntsville's economy has some similarities to St. Mary's in that both have a large military installation anchoring their economy," said Chris Kaselemis, St. Mary's County Economic Development Director. However, the Huntsville economy is also powered by private sector dollars, with a nearly 50/50 split between government jobs and private sector jobs."

Huntsville's target industries include defense, aerospace, life sciences, information technology, and advanced manufacturing.

The group learned how Huntsville successfully attracts companies with incentives and fast-track permitting. "I would offer that this would be a great opportunity for this Board of Commissioners to work with our delegation to try and come up with some solutions and see if we can ease that process because that's a big deal," said Commissioner Tom Jarboe (1st District).

Jarboe also believes tax abatements would be another incentive to luring new companies to St. Mary's.

The group also had the opportunity to meet with Alabama State Senator Bill Holtzclaw. "It was very enlightening to hear what he had to say," said Commissioner President Randy Guy. "He was big on pushing government services down to the lowest level. He said 'I don't want the county coming to me for anything' except for what relates to the entire state of Alabama and not the county."

Other takeaways from the trip included opportunities to collaborate with the state to incentivize development, partner with private sector firms in local efforts to improve the economy, tying an infrastructure plan to the BRAC report card, and develop ways to attract new businesses both regionally and nationwide.

"It was a power-packed tour - both informative and experiential. I look forward to the opportunities for implementation in St. Mary's County," said Dr. Rebecca Bridgett, County Administrator.

Members of the delegation will meet on November 5 to discuss things they experienced on the trip and the steps needed to make them a reality.

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