

STRONG ECONOMIES, RESILIENT COUNTIES

The Role of Counties in Economic Development



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PUL ALLIANCE, MISSISSIPPI

Attracting New Industries



Comprised of rural counties in northeastern Mississippi, the PUL Alliance is a collaboration of counties that work together to promote economic outcomes. The three counties — Pontotoc County, Union County, and Lee County — that comprise the PUL Alliance are also members of a larger collaboration called the Three Rivers Planning and Development District (Three Rivers), which promotes economic development and community planning throughout the region. Three Rivers is a private, non-profit organization established in 1971, consisting of eight member counties: Calhoun, Chickasaw, Itawamba, Lafayette, Lee, Monroe, Pontotoc and Union counties. The PUL Alliance counties were affected by a downturn in the furniture manufacturing industry between 1990 and 2000. The region experienced significant population growth; the three counties reached a population of 144 thousand in total by 2013, a 12 percent increase since 2000. Three Rivers assisted Pontotoc, Union, and Lee counties in successfully recruiting a new major economic impact industry to their region. Through a recruitment process in which the counties shared resources, risks and rewards, the three counties' success resulted in a major economic impact throughout the Three Rivers district.

Affected by the decline of the furniture manufacturing, in 2001 three counties in the Three Rivers district—Pontotoc, Union and Lee counties — formed the PUL Alliance, a strategic partnership to attract new major economic impact industries to the area. The counties' regional economic development alliance was the first of its kind in Mississippi, and the alliance members decided to share equally the expenses and revenues. After forming the alliance, the counties assessed the type of new major economic impact industries to the area that would offer sustainable job opportunities and livable wages for county residents. The PUL Alliance identified food processing and automotive manufacturing as industries with potential for positive economic impact in their counties. Given structural constraints in meeting the construction and operating needs of a food processing industry, the PUL eventually decided to recruit an automotive industry.

- 3 Mississippi counties
- Total Population, 2013: 143,991

The Wellspring Project

The PUL Alliance attracted a major automotive assembly plant to the area with the support of Three Rivers, the Community Development Foundation (CDF) — a non-profit organization that works on economic development in Lee County

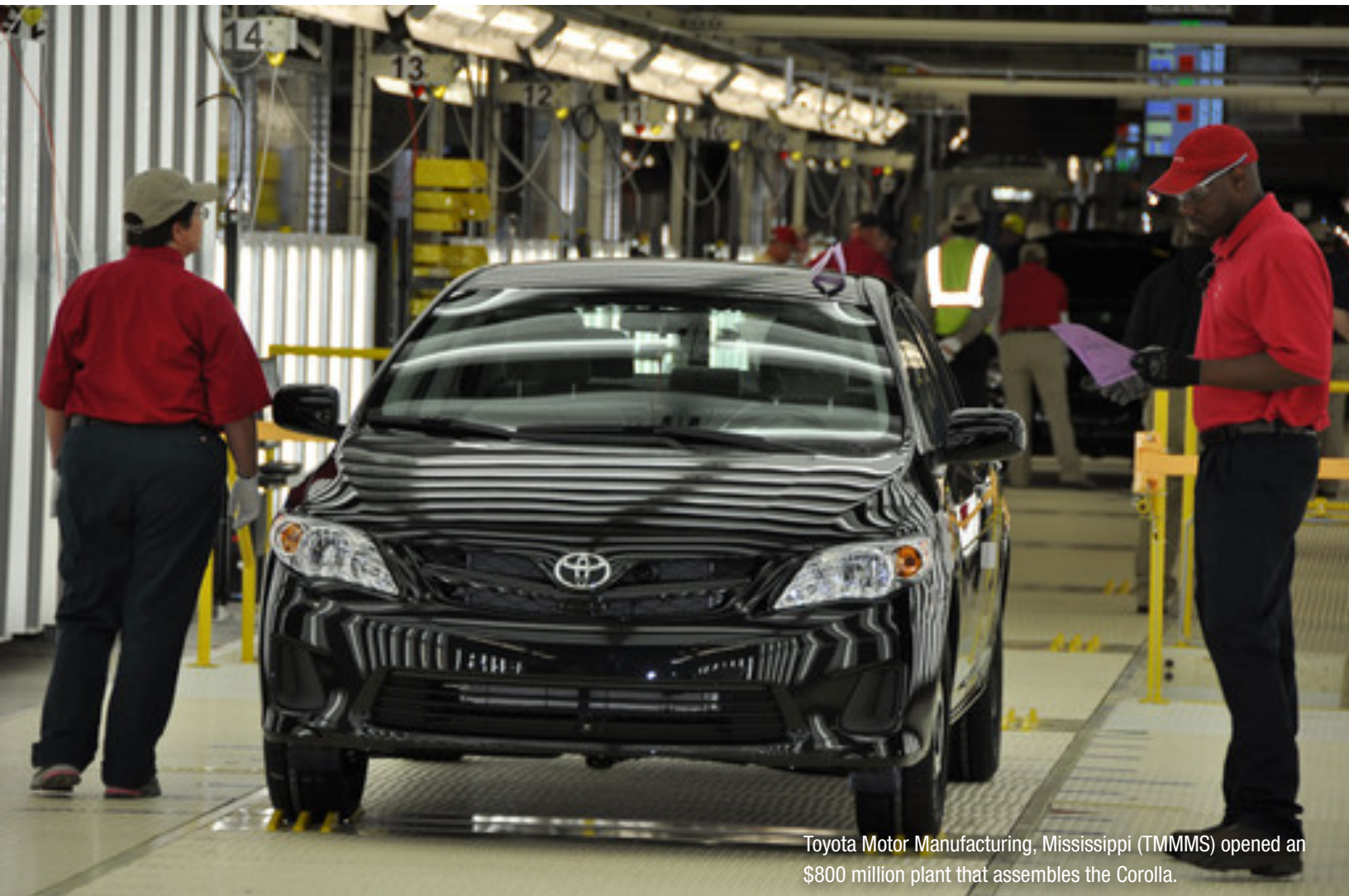
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— and other partners. Three Rivers undertook the fiscal and administrative functions of PUL while the CDF handled the marketing of the project. The first phase of the recruitment process involved identifying suitable industrial land. Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), helped identify a 1,200-acre site, involving 22 landowners and Toyota, the primary company targeted, conducted several visits to the site. Toyota representatives indicated that would require additional land as a buffer zone around the site. The Three Rivers' Executive Director engaged landowners, securing purchase options for 1,700-acres of land from 56 private landowners. Named the Wellspring Project, the site was certified in 2005 as a megasite by the TVA, confirming it as a large industrial property appropriate for development.



Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Mississippi (TMMMS) opened an \$800 million plant that assembles the Corolla.

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Attracting a top tier automotive company required more than land — the region needed sufficient transportation infrastructure to meet the shipping needs of the new manufacturing facility. Three Rivers and the PUL worked with federal legislators to secure the designation of Highway 78 as Interstate 22 in order to establish eligibility for interstate funding for future road upgrades. The PUL also showcased the area's rail service, which includes two national rail lines, and the nearby Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway port to prospective companies to demonstrate the Wellspring site's various shipping alternatives and easy connection to external markets.

For workforce training, PUL Alliance benefitted from the help of the Workforce Investment Network (WIN) Job Centers. While the district had a skilled workforce for furniture manufacturing, the automotive industry required a different skillset. The Workforce Investment Network (WIN) Job Centers serve a vital role in meeting such workforce demands. WIN Job Centers are a consortium of one-stop operators, currently including three community colleges and the Mississippi Department of Employment Security, that provide employers in the region with a skilled workforce. Offering courses on sheet metal, tool and dye technology, robotics and other industry related skills, the community colleges served as a vital partner in providing customized training to prepare the workforce for the new automotive industry. Furthermore, the WIN Job Centers offer On-the-Job training and customized training services that focus on increasing both short term and long term vocational opportunities. As of 2013, almost 3,000 students were enrolled in degree programs related to high demand occupations in the area and almost 7,000 students were enrolled in vocational programs to meet the skill demands of major area employers, including the automotive industry.

PUL Alliance achieved its goal of attracting a major company to the area in 2007 when Toyota announced that it would open its 8th North American Automobile Assembly plant at the Wellspring Project megasite. The \$800 million Toyota manufacturing plant, known as Toyota Motor Manufacturing Mississippi, Inc. (TMMMS), began assembling Corolla sedans in 2011. TMMMS employs 2,000 people and 500 people work for on-site suppliers. The plant brought more automotive supplier firms to the area, producing plastics, metals and auto parts. Seven near-site Tier-1 suppliers for the plant have opened since 2011, employing 1,500 people in the area. The Mississippi Development Authority estimates that full production at the Toyota plant will create 10,000 direct and indirect jobs.

By joining together, the three Miss. counties were able to pool resources and apply for grants and other funding sources that would not have been available to single-county applicants. The strategic partnerships included Three Rivers, the CDF, business leaders, school officials, landowners and community members. In their efforts, the PUL Alliance engaged elected officials, including the state Governor, U.S. Senators and Representatives, the Mississippi legislature and county Supervisors. Collaboration at each step of the recruitment process was critical to delivering the skilled workforce and appropriate infrastructure required for the automotive industry.