

# GROWING SANTA ROSA'S WORLDWIDE INDUSTRY

From a well-kept, Spanish-style building tucked in the back of the Santa Rosa Industrial Park in East Milton, recruiters have worked to help companies all over the world fill some of their top positions — from Nike and Johnson & Johnson to Coca-Cola and Hershey's.

The recruiting and consulting company, Ropella, employs about 30 people — some onsite in Milton and others who do most of their work on the road.

Across the street in a 16,000-square-foot warehouse, another 18 employees at Airlift Technologies International manufacture materials to airdrop supplies like fuel, food and medicine, servicing the United States military, NASA and organizations in 56 countries.

Beer and beverages from major brands like Corona, Heineken, SweetWater and Abita are distributed to hundreds of retailers along



the Gulf Coast from Goldring Gulf Distributing Co.'s \$18 million, 191,000-square-foot warehouse just down the road.

The county-owned Santa Rosa Industrial Park houses about two dozen diverse companies like these, with just one available building and about 30 acres left to be developed at the complex, according to Santa Rosa County Economic Development Director Shannon Ogletree.

With the park nearing capacity, the county's Economic Development Office is looking to the future of industrial development and how to keep the momentum in a competitive market. And with about 135 acres available at the nearby Santa Rosa Industrial Park East at Jeff Ates Road, 90 acres at the Northwest Florida Industrial Park at Interstate 10 and another 267 acres at the Whiting Aviation Park, there's still plenty of room to grow.

Attracting companies to Santa Rosa County — or any location — takes a lot of time and persistence, Ogletree said.

"We've sent out flyers, we've done postcards...so it's keeping that interest," Ogletree said. "Because there's basically 3,400 counties and parishes in the United States alone. Every one is trying to do the same thing we're doing. So how do we differentiate ourselves among those others?"

The interest in the county is continuing to pick up, said Ogletree, who visited last month with several companies from Pennsylvania, Georgia and Louisiana looking into the possibility of locating their businesses in one of the industrial parks.

Those new industries mean more jobs and more revenue for Santa Rosa County.

"People working at good-paying jobs have a higher disposable income, which then they can go out and spend in the community — buy new houses, new cars, shopping..." Ogletree said. "(Companies) are paying local salaries; they're buying local goods."

To keep the growth coming, Santa Rosa County offers various incentives to industries that relocate within its borders, from tax exemptions and credits to loan programs and workforce training. Companies can also receive discounts on county industrial property based on job creation, average wages, performance and capital investment.

Those incentives helped Ropella Chairman and CEO Patrick Ropella make the decision about eight years ago to relocate his company to the Santa Rosa Industrial Park, building Ropella's 14,000-square foot facility.



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Patrick Ropella is Chairman & CEO of the Ropella Group an international Executive Search, Leadership Transformation, and Corporate Consulting firm. He authored the book and web-based training program, *The Right Hire – Mastering the Art of SMART Talent Management*, and has seen his content featured in many trade magazines, business publications, and industry journals. Patrick regularly speaks at webinars, career fairs, and conferences.

"The county offered discounts on the land, helped us get state and federal incentives in the form of tax rebates and grants for job creation," Ropella said. "So the combination of all that is what motivated us to bring our building into the industrial park."

Jobs at Ropella pay double or even triple the county's average wage of about \$32,000, Ropella said, in a business that could easily be located in a major city like New York or Atlanta.

"We bring many, many millions of dollars in revenue into the community from outside the area," he said. "We are well-recognized around the world as a leading search firm, so we are branding and marketing Milton and the Pensacola area."

Airlift Technologies International came to Santa Rosa County in 1988 before relocating to Crestview for about five years and returning to the industrial park in 2000, said Director of Operations Bryon Woram. He attributed the decision to the positive relationships with County Commissioners and the Economic Development Office.

Since coming to the park, Woram said the growth has been tremendous, and he's especially glad to see large companies bring new jobs to the area.

"We've seen it quadruple the last 15 years," he said. "I think they're all good businesses, and we're seeing a lot of these distribution places come in here that have people, and that's important."

TPR Systems Inc. relocated to the park about a year ago from Pensacola, manufacturing custom parts for everything from commercial airlines to military engines. Employing 10 people in an 18,000

square-foot plant, TPR distributes parts all over the world, said Plant Manager Chuck Pyritz.

"The building just fit us really well," Pyritz said. "We have overhead cranes in here, so we can handle large stuff, and we can take our products with our crane system from one end of the shop to the other."

Along with providing jobs well above the county average, Pyritz said the high-tech facility brings unique business to the area, including five axis and high-speed mill machining, 3-D modeling and the most advanced water jets in the world for cutting materials.

"There's so much capability that we have that other places don't have," Pyritz said.

The county has requested about \$1.8 million from the state to add infrastructure in hopes of spurring development at the vacant Santa Rosa Industrial Park East, along with a virtual spec building program and marketing efforts.

The infrastructure would include some roadways in the park, water and sewer and a stormwater retention pond, Ogletree said, which makes the site more attractive to companies looking to locate there.

"Say if you buy five acres and you put this building up here and we don't have stormwater retention, then you have to put your pond on your site," Ogletree said. "But if we build it, that means you've got more of a footprint now to build a larger building and use the space more how you'd like it."

The spec program would allow companies to get a virtual tour before constructing a building, said Santa Rosa County Business

Development Manager Tina Stewart, saving time and money.

"This gives them the idea of what a building would look like without them having to spend the money to have somebody design it, an architect or somebody to design their space for them," Stewart said.

Another tool used to promote the county's available land is Gulf Power's Florida First Sites program, which makes industrial parks and sites more attractive to businesses by eliminating risk factors. The Santa Rosa Industrial Park East is a certified park, and the Northwest Florida Industrial Park at I-10 is a certified site, Stewart said, which is based on acreage.

The program provides detailed information about utilities, access, environmental concerns and potential development costs, which allows the county to respond more efficiently to potential companies in a competitive economic market.

"Sometimes somebody's asking on Wednesday and they need it by Friday, so having this helps us pull it all together into a nice package to present to them," Stewart said.