



*SINCE THE ORIGINAL 2009 CASE STUDY, THE SMALL TOWN OF DOUGLAS, GA CONTINUES TO IMPROVE RESIDENTS' QUALITY OF LIFE AND INCREASE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DESPITE BEING 120 MILES FROM THE CLOSEST URBAN CENTER AND FACING THE INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TASK OF RETAINING SKILLED WORKERS.*

Since the original case study, Douglas has continued to diversify its economy by supporting small business. The Douglas-Coffee County Chamber and Economic Development Authority (CEDA) continues to offer mentorship programs, economic incentives, a retail incubator, and other resources for small businesses. While agriculture and manufacturing are still important sectors of the economy, Douglas is now home to a variety of businesses and industries.<sup>1</sup>

## Economic Activity

Following the Great Recession and the loss of 1,600 manufacturing plant jobs, Douglas gradually rebuilt its job base and the unemployment rate steadily decreased (with

the exception of a spike at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic). The unemployment rate in Douglas was 3.6% as of March 2022.<sup>2</sup> Now, due to innovative business support strategies, Douglas-Coffee County experiences a net inflow of workers commuting to the county for jobs, with approximately 8,015 workers commuting in and 6,828 workers commuting out daily. The median household income in Douglas is lower than the state median of \$48,300 however, at \$38,600 in 2022.

Douglas's primary industries are manufacturing, agribusiness, and retail trade. Some of the top employers include the Walmart distribution center, Pilgrim's Pride, Coats & Clark, and Elixir Extrusions. Elixir Extrusions, an aluminum components plant started in Douglas in 1986,

<sup>1</sup> Douglas, GA. (2008). Homegrown Tools. <https://homegrowntools.unc.edu/index.php/studies/douglas/>

<sup>2</sup> FRED Economic Data. (2022b, April 27). FRED Economic Data. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GADOUG0URN>

pledged in 2017 to invest \$8 million and create 100 new jobs with a new 70,000 square foot facility.<sup>3 4</sup> The ribbon cutting for this facility took place in July 2019. The Walmart distribution center has also undergone several expansions in recent years.<sup>5</sup> These large manufacturing facilities have provided a strong job base which Douglas can rely on as it continues to diversify its economy and recruit new businesses.



## Business Development and Support

### DIVERSIFICATION OF INDUSTRIES

Douglas has been working to diversify its industries and provide more opportunities for people with varying skill sets. The town's reliance on manufacturing—an industry that still employs 824 more people than the next largest—has lessened in recent years as the economy has become more diverse. As a response, The Douglas-Coffee County

Chamber and Economic Development Authority (CEDA) has shifted to offering more holistic incentive packages to businesses. These incentives combine access to infrastructure upgrades, job training, and ad valorem tax abatement. John Henry, President and CEO of the CEDA, says that a selective approach to incentives has helped Douglas attract sustainable businesses. The CEDA runs a fiscal analysis to gauge a potential employer's impact on the community by looking at wages, net new jobs, and capital investment. The CEDA then uses this information to determine if offering incentives to a new business will be a wise investment for the County.

### MANUFACTURING FACILITIES

While industries in Douglas are diversifying, the CEDA still aims to attract and support manufacturers. With their LEaP (Leadership, Excellence and Progress) Campaign the CEDA raised over \$1.8 million in private funds from local investors to purchase land for a new industrial park in Douglas. The 180-acre plot of land has been named a Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD) Site by Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDED), the state's marketing and sales arm. "The GRAD designation for Satilla Park means that it can truly compete on a global stage for new industry and the accompanying jobs," said Pat Wilson, Commissioner of the GDED. In another example of inward, community sourced development and philanthropy, Francis Lott purchased an abandoned downtown Belk Hudson building in 1998 and renovated it as a mixed-use business facility. Renamed The ATRIUM, Lott gifted the building to the Douglas-Coffee County Economic Development Authority

3 Hudson, P. (2017, May 4). Aluminum extrusion manufacturer Elixir Extrusions to invest \$8 million, create 100 jobs in Georgia. Atlanta Business Chronicle

4 <https://www.bizjournals.com/atlanta/news/2017/05/04/aluminum-extrusion-manufacturer-elixir-extrusions.html>

5 Interview with John Henry. April 15, 2022

in 2014, then designed and built out 4,000 sq. ft. state-of-the-art offices for the Chamber of Commerce, as well as a 260-seat Event Center in the basement.

## SMALL BUSINESS RESOURCES

This on-the-ground work is supported by a robust online presence. The Douglas-Coffee CEDA website has an easy to navigate pool of resources for small businesses, incentive offerings for potential employers, and regional economic and demographic data. Resources range from the “How to Start a Business Guide,” to detailed explanation of how a firm can utilize the Georgia Quick Start program to retrain an unemployed individual at the local community college, Wiregrass Georgia Technical College, free of cost.



The CEDA contributes to the entrepreneurship network in Douglas. In engaging local business leaders like Donny Bradshaw (CFO of Elixir Extrusions), they create social capital that entrepreneurs can tap into for advice. New

entrepreneurs can take advantage of The Shoppes at Tip Top – a privately run, downtown retail incubator. This small-scale shopping mall resembles a quaint village of houses and is designed for startup businesses. New businesses can rent retail space at a low cost and use it to launch their business. If the business is successful, they can relocate to Main Street when there is space available with help from the City of Douglas’ Main Street Program. This system allows entrepreneurs to try out their business ideas without sinking a large amount of money into overhead costs.<sup>6</sup> Members of the community are encouraged to visit the Shoppes at Tip Top during First Friday celebrations that take place each month in downtown Douglas.<sup>7</sup>

## Workforce Development

As many industries in Douglas are looking to expand, the town now faces the challenge of ensuring there are enough qualified employees. Douglas invests in a well-trained workforce through its training and education programs in state colleges, technical colleges, and high schools. The Coffee County Career Academy (CCCA) is an innovative, non-traditional high school serving Coffee County with the goal of making sure all graduates are college or career ready. Students at CCCA participate in career-based academics and learn at their own pace. They can set their own learning objectives and focus on reaching personalized goals. The school plans to add more pathways as it grows, but the two available now are nursing assistant and mechatronics (a

<sup>6</sup> Interview with John Henry. April 15, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas-Coffee Chamber of Commerce, GA - Community Video Tour. (n.d.). Douglas Coffee County Chamber and Economic Development Authority. Retrieved April 2, 2022, from [https://www.elocallink.tv/m/v/Redesign4/?pid=w7QyBA54&fp=gadgfcoc19\\_econ\\_rev1\\_iwd#c|gadgfcoc19\\_shop\\_iwd](https://www.elocallink.tv/m/v/Redesign4/?pid=w7QyBA54&fp=gadgfcoc19_econ_rev1_iwd#c|gadgfcoc19_shop_iwd)

multidisciplinary field that refers to mechanics, electronics, and computing, as well as other skill sets needed in the manufacturing industry).<sup>8 9</sup>

Other educational institutions in Douglas include the Wiregrass Georgia Technical College WTGC and the South Georgia State College. WGTC offers associate degrees, diplomas, and technical certification programs. CEDA recently partnered with WTGC to upgrade the manufacturing training facility. The upgraded facility will enable training and education to meet the needs of local industry partners. The South Georgia State College is a four-year university and is part of the University System of Georgia offering more than 20 majors and transfer opportunities.

Wiregrass Georgia Technical College serves several communities in Southern Georgia, including Douglas. One program offered through WGTC is Georgia Quick Start, a workforce training program that provides specialized training for qualifying new, expanding, and existing businesses free of charge. Georgia Quick Start is funded by Georgia Department of Economic Development and the program trains individuals for many different fields including culinary, technology, and manufacturing.

Douglas invests in its future leaders through an annual leadership program, Leadership Coffee. Participants work on a seven-month long project that exposes them to government, education, economic development, and other quality of life issues, and gives them the skills to become leaders in their workplace and community.<sup>10</sup> According to

John Henry, the leadership program prepares participants for positions on chamber boards, planning commission boards, and elected positions.<sup>11</sup>

## Outcomes

- Elixir Extrusions, a manufacturer of custom aluminum extrusions and fabricated parts, has expanded its operations in Douglas-Coffee County. This expansion has created over 100 new jobs and represents an investment of more than \$8 million in the facility.
- As of 2020 there are over 7,800 businesses in the Douglas-Coffee economic zone, in comparison in 2010 there were around 6,800 businesses. This is a 14% increase in businesses from 2010-2020.
- 3.6% unemployment rate
- Creation of Satilla Park, and ATRIUM, which offer top tier office space for potential employers

8 Michigan Technological University. (2021, October 4). What is Mechatronics? <https://www.mtu.edu/mechatronics/what-is/#:~:text=Mechatronics%20is%20a%20multidisciplinary%20field,specialists%20create%20simpler%2C%20smarter%20systems>

9 About The School. (n.d.). Careeracademy.Ga. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://careeracademy.ga.ccc.schoolinsites.com/aboutschool>

10 Douglas Coffee County GA Chamber of Commerce. (2020). Douglas-Coffee County | Business is Brewing in Douglas-Coffee County, Georgia. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.coffeegachamber.com/programs-events-leadership-coffee>

11 Interview with John Henry. April 15, 2022

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