

Livingston's Economy on Fast Track

Development plans run gamut from industrial park to international trade

It's one of the fastest growing parishes in the state. New businesses, as well as new citizens, continue to flock to Livingston Parish, which has realized phenomenal economic growth in recent years.

Many businesses, both large and small, are locating here. There are motels, restaurants, offices, grocery stores. Others are more diverse, such as a scientific observatory and a kennel club forging an international deal to sell dogs to China. Skip Smart, executive director of the Livingston Economic Development Council, said that in the past 10 years, the LEDC has attracted close to \$12 million in private investments—resulting in the creation of more than 900 jobs.

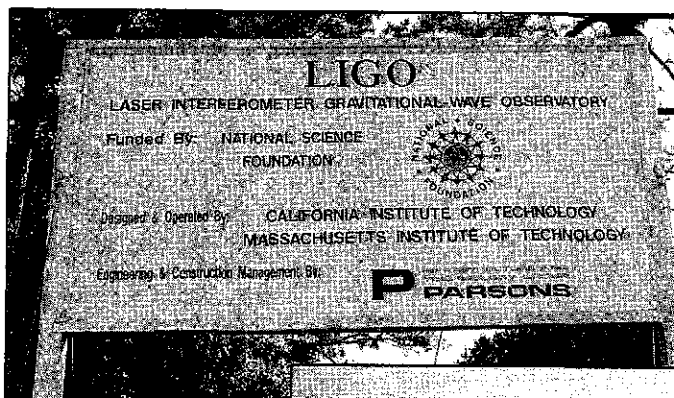
The LEDC also secured almost \$3 million in grants and loans for both the private and public sectors of the economy.

Smart cited a couple of reasons for the parish's fairly steady growth. First, he said, is Livingston's central location and accessibility by interstate to Baton Rouge, New Orleans and Hammond.

"From a transportation perspective, there is the Illinois Central Railroad that traverses Livingston Parish," he said. "There are the airports nearby, the major ports, and in addition, the shallow draft barge facility at Port Manchac. We have access to rail, water, air and ground travel, and that is good for moving goods, products and services, as well as people."

Second, Smart said, the quality of life has spurred growth. "The price of land is less expensive than that of Baton Rouge. The Livingston Parish School Board runs a very well-respected and accomplished school system. At this point, there is less crime and less of the urban woes of traffic congestion and the like," he said. "And people are still just a short trip away from Baton Rouge and all it has to offer."

Smart said one of LEDC's most recent accomplishments is investing more than \$900,000 to purchase and begin development of a 200-acre industrial park in Walker. Phase one of that project is complete, and the park has two tenants—Sunland Fabricators, a specialty pipe manufacturer, and Waste Management Inc., which houses its district office and



Gerry Stapher (below, left) and Skip Smart, executive director of the Livingston Economic Development Council, discuss work on the Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory project.

fleet maintenance facility at the site.

More than 500 jobs have been created at the industrial park, Smart said, and LEDC is currently working with two additional companies that have expressed interest in locating there.

"We (the LEDC) also recently partnered with DEMCO, the electric cooperative, to establish the Dixie Business Development Center in Denham Springs. The center is a small business incubator formed to help new and expanding businesses," he said.

Two years ago, Smart said, he remembered speaking of a company coming into the parish and spending more than \$3 million on a 110,000-square-foot facility in Holden to manufacture firefighting equipment. That company is Ferrara Fire Apparatus, and Smart said it has grown into the fourth largest manufacturer of firefighting equipment in the country, besides employing more than 200 people.

Livingston Parish, at first glance, might not seem like a place where international trade is taking place, but Smart said there are more businesses in the parish than one would expect that buy and sell globally.

One of those is Ekato Manufacturing and Services Inc., which has been in the northern portion of Denham Springs for the past five years. It is the company's only manufacturing facility located outside the parent corporation in Schopfheim, Germany.

General Manager Jerry Armstrong said the company had been in Baton Rouge for the first five years of its existence, and then the search began for a more economical place to relocate, where increased space could be obtained.

"We are basically out of traffic here in



the woods. It's quiet. From a transportation standpoint, this is a very strategic place to be. A lot of our customers are located in the southern Louisiana area and in Texas," Armstrong said.

The company manufactures heavy-duty industrial agitators used to mix liquids such as those used in industry and in the mixing of paints and pigments.

Ekato has 25 employees.

"We do about 60 percent of the fabrication for all of the Americas. We export quite a bit to Latin, South American and Asian markets," Armstrong said.

"The cost is somewhat lower here. We feel like we are in a position here to be competitive in the future. We have always received good support from the parish. It seems like a very dynamic and growing parish."

The parish's international trade also now extends to dogs. In March, the Continental Kennel Club Inc. embarked on the international dog export business.

Officials of the kennel club signed a contract with a representative from China, who will be the kennel club's official contact in that country. The kennel club's

president, George Fontenot, said the enterprise opens up a whole new area of international trade. The venture began as a means of reintroducing the Chow Chow and other dogs of Chinese origin back into their native land.

On a teaching jaunt to China, Tom Treadway, who is the broker for the export business, said he noticed the lack of dogs in the country and wanted to do something about it.

Thus, the parish now has a dog exporting business.

Science and technology also are finding their way to the parish on a grand scale.

By the year 2000, Livingston Parish will be the home of the Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory, or LIGO for short.

And scientists from around the world will come to do research at the facility.

The project is designed to give scientists a new window for viewing the universe, and in the process it could help answer fundamental questions about the origin, development and be-

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Business Booming in Denham Springs

Denham Springs, probably the best known area of Livingston Parish, is also keeping pace with the growth of the parish.

Jim DeLaune, who is serving his seventh year as the town's mayor, said he believes the city is the second fastest growing area in Louisiana behind the Mandeville region.

"Denham Springs has grown 17 1/2 percent over the last two or three years," DeLaune said.

The mayor then launched into an expansive list of businesses either already in the area or coming to the city. "A new Piccadilly just opened. We have a fairly new Best Western. A Days Inn motel is under construction. A Holiday Inn Express will begin construction soon. A Ryan's Steakhouse will begin construction soon. Two new banks—Iberville Bank and Guaranty Bank—will begin construction soon."

"We have two new doctors' offices

going in. We also have a new dentist office and a new attorney building. A Taco Bell recently opened.

"Albertsons has purchased property in Denham Springs to build a store. There will be three other stores in that shopping center. When the land was purchased, the plans for the new Albertsons showed it to be the largest in Louisiana."

When asked why businesses are so interested in moving to Denham Springs, DeLaune had an equally long list.

"Well, we like to think we're a friendly bunch of people over here," he said.

"It seems that people are moving to the suburban areas," he added. "We are not in Baton Rouge, yet we are still near enough to have all the advantages of the bigger city in a short drive. We are near LSU and Southeastern.

"We don't have a high crime rate. "And our schools rank in the top 10



Denham Springs Mayor Jim DeLaune (left) and Greater Denham Springs Chamber of Commerce President Fred Banks show off the train park station near the antiques village.

school districts in the state as far as student achievement."

Along with all the other construction under way, there will soon be two new schools in Denham Springs. The elementary school is expected to be ready for occupancy in the fall and will house about 400 students. The junior high school is set to open for the 1998-99 academic year and will house about 700 students.

As for fun and recreation, the mayor said there are an abundance of places. "We have excellent park facilities here. North Park and South Park are our two larger parks, and we also have several smaller parks in the area."

There is also a popular antiques village that attracts crowds. "We think we have some of the best prices around. It's a nice area. Twice a year we close the street in the antique village and have festivals," he said.

And there is a train park station near the antiques village.

In addition, Denham Springs has been designated a Main Street city,

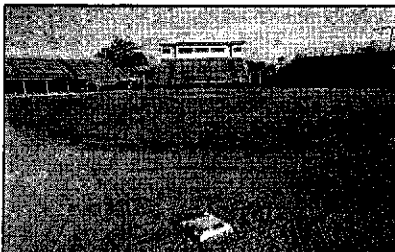
which means it is eligible for funds to help rejuvenate its downtown.

The mayor also pointed out the water sports that are popular in the parish, with the Amite and Comite rivers particularly favorite destinations.

As for municipal services, DeLaune said there are some traffic problems that need to be addressed, but overall the services and finances of the city are growing along with the parish.

"Our city has not borrowed any money in the last seven years. On a whole, our finances are in real good shape."

For the future, the mayor again hauled out a lengthy list. There will be a new water tower, improvements to several state highways, a new state road from Range Avenue to City Hall on River Road, the overlaying of several streets and the changing of gas, water and sewer lines in conjunction with those overlays, \$4 million to be spent on the sewer treatment plant, and \$1 million to be spent on improving sewer lines and pump stations.



The A.B. Netterville baseball field is one of the amenities available at North Park.

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havior of the universe.

Smart said the National Science Foundation selected the parish as one of two sites for LIGO. The other one will be in Hanford, Wash.

The California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology will build and operate the LIGO, while the state of Louisiana is providing more than \$1 million to acquire the land and to construct an access road.

Mark Coles, head of the Livingston observatory, said the site 4 miles north of Livingston on Highway 63 was chosen for many reasons.

"The site had to be flat and seismically quiet," he said. "This is a pretty quiet place. It is a rural, quiet, level site. We are also near Baton Rouge and New Or-



leans, and we are close to LSU and research facilities."

Coles said the value of the observatory is more than \$100 million, and he added that the construction and other jobs associated with installing the equipment will benefit the parish.

Smart said about 300 construction jobs will be involved in the building phase of the project, and 35 professionals will be employed once the site is operational.

Coles said the observatory also hopes to have an impact on the community

through the education system and its resources for the public.

In addition, the National Science Foundation mandates that there should be an education outreach component involved with the new observatory, he said. "We are very enthusiastic about trying to establish an educational outreach as part of the conduct of this research. We will have opportunities for schoolchildren to come and visit and to learn."

Turning to fun and entertainment, a ground-breaking ceremony was held recently for the new Tickfaw State Park that

officials hope will be completed in a couple of years.

The park will be located on 1,169 acres along three miles of the Tickfaw River near the town of Springfield.

This will be the first state park devoted to natural resource education, with the unique ecology of the Tickfaw River providing a rich environment for natural resource education and recreation, according to information provided by Smart.

There will be canoe trips, hiking, backpacking, photography, a boat launch, nature trails, camping, birding, and an opportunity for hands-on learning experiences.

The park is projected to have an approximately \$2 million economic impact once it is opened, and it is estimated that there will be about 150,000 visitors per year, Smart said.