



Agribusiness

Agribusiness refers to the business operation of farming, manufacturing, processing, packaging, and distributing of agriculture using advanced technology.

Agribusiness Henderson County - Tri-Hishtil

Tri-Hishtil is a global partnership between American, Italian, and Israeli companies that specializes in using advanced technology to grow disease-resistant plants. Tri-Hishtil uses plant-grafting, the science of connecting the vascular tissue of one plant to another. This international partnership includes Israeli-based company Hishtil, US-based TriEst, and Italian-based SIS/Centro SEIA. Each company specializes in either soil management and fumigation or plant-grafting. Agribusiness Henderson County, a public and privately funded non-profit organization, helped secure a site for the company in Mills River, North Carolina on Highway 191. This venture is projected to create 125 jobs. Mark Williams, Executive Director of Agribusiness Henderson County, provided insights into the project. For more information, go to www.trihishtil.com.

Produced Summer 2017

NCACC / Dominique Walker: What are the short- and long-term goals for Tri-Hishtil?

Mark Williams: Tri-Hishtil is in business to provide growing solutions for farmers in the U.S., especially watermelon and tomato growers. They grow grafted plants, which have a stronger rootstock, are resistant to soil-borne diseases, and generally produce higher yields than conventionally grown plants. The product meets a need for U.S. farmers that has not been readily available. Short term, the goal is to build a good foundation with a manageable, Phase I greenhouse and facilities, build a well-trained team of employees, and establish a market by educating farmers on the many benefits of grafted plants. As each part of the operation takes off, plans are in place for significant expansion on the site where they have selected to operate.



DW: What role did the county play in establishing the partnerships between TriEst Ag Group, SIS/Centro Seia, Hishtil-Israel, and Agribusiness Henderson County, and how does the county contribute to the ongoing operations of Tri-Hishtil?

MW: Henderson County serves as the primary public partner of Agribusiness Henderson County (AgHC), which is a non-profit, public-private partnership. AgHC has one full-time employee in its Executive Director, Mark Williams, who answers to a 17 member board of farmers, agribusiness owners, and other key professionals and community leaders. The County relies on AgHC to serve as the economic developer for all ag-related business. In the case of Tri-Hishtil, it required a 2 ½ year effort to establish a partnership of companies, identify suitable property, close on the purchase, assemble a management team, and arrange for necessary infrastructure. AgHC was given a lead by a local greenhouse operation that Hishtil, based in Israel, was exploring a possible U.S. operation, similar to their 40 year business in Israel and 7 other countries. AgHC immediately made contact and began recruitment efforts for this high-tech, advanced agricultural operation.

Henderson County had an ideal growing climate, but for a deal to come together it required identifying the right domestic partner. Relying on a network of relationships, built over many years working in agriculture, AgHC convinced the NC-based TriEst Ag Group to take part in the new venture. They had a 50 year history in the soil fumigation, drip irrigation, and fertigation business, which made them a good fit along with their existing customer base of farmers throughout the Southeast and across the U.S. TriEst had a close relationship with the Italian company, SIS/Centro Seia, which coincidentally was already partners on an operation in Italy with Hishtil. An experienced general manager was required to oversee the new partnership of Tri-Hishtil in the Mills River Community of Henderson County, NC. A Dutch immigrant, Bert Lemkes, who had been living in the area for several years and had lifetime experience in greenhouse production, was the perfect fit. With the help of Henderson County and the Golden LEAF Foundation, sewer lines were extended for the new operation and the City of Hendersonville fit the bill for extending public water.



DW: What economic development impact does Tri-Hishtil have in your county?

MW: The initial investment in the County was \$7.5 million and approximately 50 jobs. This is for Phase I, which included 2.5 acres of greenhouse space and a limited-size facility for seeding, grafting, healing rooms, storage, and shipping. Tri-Hishtil purchased 42 acres of land with the intent to eventually have approximately 30 acres under greenhouse, which will require about 300 employees. The goal is to reach this level in the next four to five years.

DW: How can other communities and counties with similar needs replicate this initiative? Who should they involve in the process and what first steps would you recommend?

MW: Economic development opportunities are largely dependent upon available resources. Each county and its leadership must first identify what they have to offer such as climate, geographic location, available infrastructure, existing base of operations, commodities, workforce, training, and all the other typical things associated with economic development. The next key component is to put a structure in place to promote what the county has to offer and a public-private partnership model has proven to work well. Perhaps the most important part of all is to hire the dedicated services of a well-qualified person or team to lead in coordinating efforts to recruit new business and assist in expansion of existing ones. Getting the right person, with the right experience and network of relationships is of utmost importance. This requires appropriate allocation of funds and you get what you pay for. A combination of desired qualifications includes: industry specific experience; local connection and broad network of relationships; strong business knowledge; understanding of local and state government; and respect from the community being served. Couple these with a passion for the people and industry being served and drive to bring about results and also be willing to provide attractive compensation.



DW: How can county commissioners and other elected officials contribute to raising awareness about investing in projects like Tri-Hishtil?

MW: Utilize traditional and social media outlets and be very public with announcements as opportunities materialize. Educating the general public is crucial. Economic development is not cheap, so it is imperative to have taxpayer support and to let the taxpayers know what the real returns are on the public funding. It's all about ROI (Return on Investment). When citizens clearly see the amount of private dollars invested, the jobs created, increase in tax base, and "the multiplier effect" of economic development projects, then they can buy into the investment it takes to be successful. Counties have to toot their own horns and provide strong financial support to keep efforts going and bring about desirable growth.