

For Immediate Release

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JOCO LEADERS HEAR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKFORCE STRATEGY

Johnston County, N.C. – January 31, 2023. Leaders from across Johnston County business, government, education and community development circles gathered in Smithfield yesterday morning for the unveiling of a comprehensive strategy for the county’s workforce development. The full report – <https://www.growwithjoco.com/workforce-plan> – is the result of four months of surveys, focus groups, face-to-face interviews, data gathering and best-practices research organized under the auspices of the Johnston County Workforce Alliance, a program of the County’s Office of Economic Development.

“We’re all now in post-post-Covid and beginning to see what changes came out of the pandemic might become permanent,” said Ted Abernathy, founder of Economic Leadership LLC, a Raleigh consulting firm hired to forge the strategy. Abernathy discussed demographic, economic and workforce trends that are impacting – and will continue to impact – employers in the County. Some of the trends, such as a declining labor force participation rate, mirror those of the nation, while others – record-setting population growth, for example – are outliers. Demographers project the number of Johnston County residents will grow by more than 40 percent by 2042, roughly twice the rate of North Carolina, itself fast-growing, as a whole. “You’re the exact opposite of what’s going on nationally,” Abernathy told the gathering.

Domestic migration, as well as international immigration, are behind the County’s growth. “One reason people move is to lower their cost of living,” he said, noting that the pandemic had sparked a wave of movement from large expensive metro areas to smaller, more affordable

communities. COVID also pushed people out of the workforce – perhaps permanently. Federal Reserve Board Chairman Jerome Powell recently stated that some two million U.S. workers had retired earlier than anticipated, Abernathy said. Data also point out that people have been leaving small firms to work for larger companies. “We start from that context,” Abernathy said.

Johnston County’s labor force participation rate – that share of the working-age population either employed or searching for a job – was below the figures for both the state and the U.S., suggesting older workers were dropping out of the labor market in higher numbers here. “How do you get people on the sidelines back into the game,” asked Abernathy, whose career in economic development included roles at Durham County, Research Triangle Regional Partnership and the Southern Growth Policies Board. Programs designed to provide re-skilling to individuals in their 40s and 50s might draw some back to the workplace, he said.

Abernathy’s data analysis also uncovered a high number of self-employed individuals. “They work for themselves,” he said. Among his recommendations is that Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs include entrepreneurial training. His research confirmed the rich diversification of the County’s industrial base: job growth is hitting across biopharma, production tech, heavy machinery and logistics – all “tradable” economic clusters that pull in outside wealth. But “non-tradable clusters,” more localized activity like healthcare, education and construction, are also seeing growth. “Both types of jobs are important,” Abernathy said.

Stakeholder interviews, surveys and focus groups held across the County last fall identified deficits in the “soft” skills of the workforce -- reliability, communications and interpersonal skills, for example. Just over half those participating indicated concerns about “work ethic.” On the positive side, employers were impressed with the digital skills of Johnston County workers. Most of Abernathy’s recommendations focus on strategies and programs at the K-12 and community college level. “Only about a quarter of all jobs in America need a four-year degree,” he said. Outreach to parents is as critical as that being directed toward youth. Recommendations also include additional capacity for work-based learning, such as



apprenticeships, and career coaching, which provides a more externalized perspective than the guidance counseling schools have long offered. “Resources matter – whatever you have should match your expectations,” Abernathy said. “Scale whatever works for you.”

The recommendations support the County’s commitment to reducing the high number of Johnstonians who commute to neighboring counties for employment. About half the County’s workers leave daily for jobs, a data-point that leaders here hope to reduce to 30 percent by 2030. “People prefer to work closer to where they live,” says Chris Johnson, director of the Office of Economic Development. A “30 by 30” promotional campaign has directed commuters to digital resources to connect with Johnston County employment opportunities. “This exhaustive work by Ted and his team, and the coming together of a broad array of Johnston County community, educational and business leaders, all fits neatly into that vision,” Johnson says, “and the establishment of the Johnston County Workforce Alliance, which led this valuable initiative, moved the ball significantly up the field for us.”

Key to the Alliance’s success have been its partnerships with Johnston Community College, Johnston County Public Schools, Capital Area Workforce Development, the Clayton Chamber of Commerce, the Triangle East Chamber of Commerce, the Benson Chamber of Commerce, Johnston County Visitors Bureau, NC Works, NC Department of Commerce, Johnston County Industries/NextGen and the Johnston County Partnership for Children.

The Johnston County Economic Development Office (JCEDO) facilitates value-added interaction between government, education, and the private sector in encouraging and promoting job creation and economic investment in Johnston County. A unit of county government, JCEDO collaborates with local, regional, and statewide partners and allies in providing confidential location assistance to businesses and technical support to the county’s 11 municipalities. Its menu of services includes customized digital mapping, labor and wage analysis, site readiness assistance and incentive packaging. For additional information, visit www.GrowWithJoCo.com>