

St. Mary's Leveraging Future, Past For Economic Growth



Chris Kaselemis and Tech Port Director Tom Luginbill

By Guy Leonard
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St. Mary's is a county of tradition and technology, innovation and conservation, of looking to the future while clinging jealously and lovingly to the past.

The county's strong economic growth relies heavily on both key aspects.

Chris Kaselemis, director of the county's Department of Economic Development, is using his office to leverage the best the county has to offer to ensure its continued prosperity.

"We're creating an identity for St. Mary's County," Kaselemis told *The County Times*. "Knowing who we are and what we represent is important."

Aviation, particularly

naval aviation, and the concurrent advances there have been the county's economic life blood to increasing degrees since World War II and the advent of the Patuxent River Naval Air Station.

But downturns in defense dollars due to federal sequestration cuts several years ago shocked the system, and local leaders realized the need to diversify the economy.

But they quickly realized relying on the region's technological strengths was the best way to achieve success; the county now sports the St. Mary's Take Flight theme as its brand and actively promotes itself as the Washington, D.C. area's Aviation Headquarters, ideal for aviation and aircraft repair and modification.

The focus of this new nexus of aviation work is the county's regional airport, which has experienced exponential growth in just a few years, with vast new hangar space and technology-based businesses continuing to build there.

It's all part of a plan to create an Airport Innovation District, a combination of not only businesses and tech-oriented companies but homes and amenities that make it a close-knit, even walkable, community.

The core idea is to have innovation-oriented companies, and even defense contractors, working so closely together that the best minds will share ideas and spark even more innovation, leading to business and job growth.

All of this, which is still in the planning stages, would only add to all the innovation currently at the airport environs.

Already there is the University System of Maryland's Unmanned Air Systems (UAS) test site and the TechPort business incubator, which got its start from \$2 million from the Navy as a way to help technology companies get their start here.

The new facilities mean taking, in many cases, former military technology and turning it to lucrative, civilian applications.

While much of the county's prosperity remains with testing and evaluating the Navy's aircraft and unmanned systems, St. Mary's is taking strides to step out on its own, said economic development Deputy Director Kellie Hinkle.

"It's not just a suburb of D.C.," Hinkle said. "You can work here and live here; we're more than a bedroom community."

There are about 200 technology companies in St. Mary's, Kaselemis said,

and the staff are actively meeting with them to find out how the county can best suit their needs and grow their workforces.

"We're doing work here that stands on its own," Kaselemis said of the technological successes here. "We're being more aggressive than we have in the past; what we have is good but we're not going to rest on it."

"We're taking a leadership role."

The county isn't looking solely to technology to ensure its future, though. It continues to promote agriculture and agritourism to spread prosperity and keep much of the county's rural character strong and vibrant.

The county has fostered the growth of wineries and now distilleries of liquors but if gained a significant win last year when it won grant money from the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission to begin construction of a Regional Agricultural Center (RAC) in Charlotte Hall which will finally provide the region with a processing center for local meat producers.

In conjunction with a newly USDA approved slaughter facility run by an Amish family, local meat producers will be able to save time and money in getting their product to market.

The meat processed at the RAC will also be sold there, as well as goods such as jams, jellies, preserves and other value-added items made from farm produce.

The county also plans to move the farmers market located at the Charlotte Hall Library Branch to another site on Thompson Corner Road.

Scott Sanders, proprietor at the Tobacco Barn Distillery in Hollywood, said the county's focus on promoting agriculture and agritourism was just as important to continued growth here as high technology.

"Agritourism, it helps attract a quality work force here, they like that in a community," Sanders said. "It's a quality of life issue."

Keeping farms operating means keeping them profitable, and branching out into industries such as beer, wine and liquor made that possible, Sanders said.

Having activities like the Fly-In Farmers Market each month at the county airport, helped provide a venue for local farmers to become known to a wider market.

Pilots can fly in and peruse local farm products at the airport terminal and get in flight experience at the same time.

"It's like having a motorcycle, when you own one you want to ride it," Sanders said. "It [the market] combines high tech with agriculture and the heritage industries."

He credited Kaselemis with finding innovative ways to promote diversification of the economy.

"He's been very strategic in his thinking," said Sanders.

Ken Reed, managing member of S. Hunt Aero LLC, which has overseen and managed much of the facility expansion at the airport, said

the work to lengthen the runway at the airport by an extra 1,000 feet will mean more and bigger aircraft.

With no rail lines, major port or interstate, the airport was key to boosting the county's economy.

"That makes it important for commerce and tourism," Reed said. "I think Airport Road will become the most important road in St. Mary's County one day."

The airport also boasts two flight schools along with the aviation and technology companies choosing it as a home, making it a training hub for pilots and aviation mechanics.

Both of those specialties are in short supply, Reed said.

"I've never seen general aviation thrive as much as I have at this airport," Reed said. "We're the fastest growing airport in the state."

