



Reporter's notebook: Birmingham Business Alliance still searching for its next leader

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By Michael Tomberlin -- The Birmingham News



The **Birmingham Business Alliance** hoped to have a new chief executive in place by now, but the first candidate that was offered the job politely turned it down, according to widespread chatter at a convention for state economic developers

last week.

Officials on the high-powered BBA search committee aren't confirming the buzz at the Economic Development Association of Alabama winter conference in Montgomery. Instead, search committee members are saying they will find the best person to fill the job of leading Birmingham's most powerful business group.

Johnny Johns, chief executive of Protective Life Corp. and chairman of the BBA's search committee, said only that the search continues without commenting on whether the No. 1 candidate actually turned the job down.

"We continue to go through a very thorough search," Johns said. "We're seeing some very strong candidates."

The search committee had said it hoped to have a new BBA leader in place by the end of January or early February.

"We may have been a little too ambitious as to our timeline," Johns said. "It may take a bit longer than we had anticipated. But we are very committed to ending up with a very strong person in the job and very hopeful we will get to that end point in the not-too-distant future."

New or used?

The new auto assembly plant or other mega project will always be the filet mignon of economic development, but there is no question the bread and butter of job growth is in helping existing industry expand.

The **Economic Development Partnership of Alabama** and the **Alabama Development Office** pulled the numbers for the state's largest economic development projects in each of the last 11 years. The numbers came down on the side of the bread and butter.

The biggest projects each year between 2000 and 2010 created 16,648 jobs. Of those, five were new companies with 7,600 jobs, and six were expansions of existing companies with 9,048 jobs.

Because new operations typically require more capital than expansions, the newcomer companies splashed out more cash. The figures found the 11 largest projects, based on capital investment, brought in \$7.9 billion over the period. Of them, only four were newcomers, but they accounted for more than \$5.5 billion in investment. The seven expansions brought in less than \$2.4 billion.

Some recruiters say even that indicates the need to focus on existing industry, since companies are being tighter with their dollars and may be more likely to expand existing plants in questionable economic times than establishing new plants.

Economic developers are making it clear with their latest efforts that they are more committed than ever to protect and grow what they already have -- but don't think for a minute any of them would pass up a filet mignon if it is served up on a platter.

Rural route

Democrat **Ron Sparks** may have lost in his campaign to be Alabama's governor but he believes he can help lead rural Alabama out of its economic doldrums.

The man Gov. **Robert Bentley** defeated in last year's gubernatorial election has been appointed by Bentley to head the Alabama Office of Rural Development, which was created through an executive order last month.

Sparks spoke to economic developers from across the state at the winter conference in Montgomery last week and said he already has identified a number of key areas where he will focus on for the state's rural areas. These include:

- Broadband access.
- Agriculture.
- Alternative energy.

- Health care access.
- Education.

Sparks said when you consider that 31 of the 33 counties in the state with double-digit unemployment are rural counties, the challenges of his new job will be great and require pulling all state and federal aid available.

"Not only am I going to be reaching across Alabama, I'm going to be reaching across the country" for ideas and programs that will help rural Alabama, Sparks said.

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