



New projects put spotlight on Staunton

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Staunton has long relied on its quaint charm and historic attractions to draw tourists. Now, the city — the birthplace of Woodrow Wilson — is getting more attention for its business-friendly amenities.

These include the Stonewall Jackson Hotel and Conference Center, a downtown historic property that was refurbished two years ago; the Villages at Staunton, a \$100 million development project that will turn the former grounds of Western State Hospital into a mixed-use urban village; and a recently expanded enterprise zone.

Also helping the city to stand out in a crowd has been the 2001 opening of the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse, a re-creation of Shakespeare's original indoor theater.

The combination of projects has sparked the interest of business prospects, says Bill Hamilton, Staunton's economic development director. "We are beginning to get the kinds of businesses which we have been targeting, which are small manufacturers and companies that offer high-paying professional jobs. And a lot of it is because we are now a kind of mini-metropolitan area. People are surprised at the diversity of amenities that we have here."

For example, Staunton successfully competed with Texas to get Universal Impact, a manufacturer of aluminum impact extrusions that will build a \$2.5 million plant downtown and hire 50 people. Also, the Law Offices of Rajiv S. Khanna, an Arlington-based practice specializing in federal immigration cases, is opening a satellite office in Staunton.

In addition, several companies are investing in existing facilities. Atlantic Research Group, which manages clinical trials, opened its headquarters in Staunton in 2005. After first-year revenues exceeded projections by 30 percent, owners Paul Bishop and Lyle Camblos, both Charlottesville natives, decided to double its office space to 5,000 square feet and add another 15 employees.

In October, Carded Graphics LLC, a folding-carton converter, announced that it will spend \$6.5 million to increase its manufacturing capacity in Staunton. That follows a move by Specialty Blades, which manufactures precision-cutting and piercing components for surgical and industrial use, to invest \$6 million to expand its facility.

Because Staunton expanded its enterprise zone, three of the companies — Specialty Blades, Carded Graphics and Universal Impact — were able to receive grants from the Governor’s Opportunity Fund as well as local incentive monies.

Hamilton noted that the Stonewall Jackson Hotel and Conference Center has helped increase sales at downtown shops and restaurants. Patsy Wilson, owner of Pen and Paper, says that traffic at her stationery store is up significantly. “They’re all staying at the hotel,” she says.

Organizations holding conferences at the hotel have included the Virginia Community Colleges Association and the Virginia Chiropractors Association. “Our weekends are full, too, with tourists and people getting away from the cities, and we do a lot of weddings,” says Carol Simon, general manager of the hotel. “There’s plenty for our guests to do for a night or two.”

The Villages at Staunton is also helping to draw potential businesses and employees to the area, Hamilton notes. The project will include residential condos, single-family residences, business parks and retail shops and restaurants. The development is unusual, he says, because it “essentially extends Staunton’s downtown,” allowing professionals to live close to their jobs.