



The Mighty Mississippi

FOOD, MUSIC AND BEAUTIFUL SCENERY ARE JUST PART OF THE PICTURE. THE COMMUNITIES OF THE DELTA MAKE THE REGION A GREAT PLACE TO GET DOWN TO BUSINESS. — SARAH NETTER

► Across Alabama, hundreds of potential employees are showing up at Alabama Industrial Development and Training centers. They are learning to be pipe fitters, welders, machinists and technicians. They are learning how to create résumés and ace job interviews.

Workforce training programs like AIDT have been a boon to the local economies in the Mississippi River Delta that are attracting new businesses across manufacturing, shipping, technology and retail.

"The Delta is very pro-business in the sense that it wants new economic development," says economist Ted Abernathy, managing partner at Economic Leadership, a consulting firm that has worked extensively in the South. "It wants to make sure that businesses are successful, because it wants opportunity for its citizens."

In the past, the Delta region has dealt with its fair share of poverty, natural disasters and a significant decrease in population. But renewed faith in the region in the form of investments from the public and private sectors are helping breathe new life into communities. For example, in Mississippi this year, Continental Tire the Americas announced it will build a tire plant near Clinton, creating 2,500 jobs. Moon River Foods' new fish processing plant in Baird will create 100 new jobs, and retailer Five Below in 2013 opened a distribution center in Olive Branch, also creating 100 new jobs.

Since its founding in 2000, the federal-state partnership known as the Delta Regional Authority has invested more than \$138 million in the region, from public infrastructure upgrades that are needed to attract large corporations to job training to improvements in the quality of health care. All in the name of making the region a better place to live and work and likewise, making it easier for those outside the region to visit.

Tourism is key to the Delta's economic infrastructure, and recent hospitality strides have created jobs and drawn in even more tourists. In Memphis alone, 13 hotel companies are looking at building in the city and another four have already made commitments.

The biggest investment by far has been in the region's people. Last year in New Orleans, the DRA invested \$100,000 in a new mobile hospital-industry training unit, which can train up to 20 students at a time for catering, food service and customer service jobs.

"One of [the Delta's] strengths is the fabrics of the communities being so strong," Abernathy says. Drawing on that strength, the DRA has

SAM HANNA/FACILITATE PHOTOGRAPHICS (IDEAVILLAGE); VISTALOUSIANA.COM (LADY VIN CELLAR); FRAN PARENT/ACE HOTELS; ID/DELA STATE/TENNESSEEFOR HASLAM

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Manufacturing industrial compressors in Louisiana; Port of New Orleans; 2016 Idea Village event; Memphis' Start Co.; Alabama Industrial Development and Training center; The new Ace Hotel in New Orleans.

invested \$11.4 million specifically in small businesses and entrepreneurship development.

There also has been an effort to bring young talent back home. New Orleans native Tim Williamson grew up in the turbulent 1970s and '80s. He moved away, rose through the ranks of Bear Stearns in Boston and launched a series of video and Internet marketing ventures. In 1997, he returned to his hometown and began meeting regularly with a group of competitors at the Loa Bar, where they discussed the lack of opportunities in the city.

"The community had seemingly given up," he says. "We needed a new generation of leaders that would be entrepreneurial... that would challenge the status quo." Those discussions became the blueprint for Idea Village, an ecosystem to support new businesses.

He explains that Idea Village was founded to "build a group of business leaders, of government, universities, professionals, entrepreneurs—a collaborative network that would be committed to identifying entrepreneurial talent, would be committed to supporting that talent and more importantly retaining that talent in the city that ultimately would create jobs and revenue and wealth."

Sixteen years later, that vision is coming true. *Forbes* named the city the No. 1 "brain magnet" in the country and the Idea Village-produced Entrepreneur Week attracted 13,216 people over eight days this spring. Alumni of Idea Village's accelerator programs have created more than 2,800 jobs and generated more than \$70 million in annual revenue.

New Orleans' booming entrepreneurial culture is reverberating across the Delta region. Incubators and business accelerators have sprung up to entice residents and out-of-towners who are looking for a place to start their businesses. The Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center in Little Rock has helped its clients create more than 9,800 new jobs and secure more than \$478 million in financing. And Start Co., a business-accelerator organization in Memphis, has helped its start-ups secure \$14 million in investments. The DRA has invested in incubators in places such as Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and Henderson, Kentucky.

"There's a return back to those cities that have a deep sense of place," Williamson says. "The entrepreneurs in the Delta region, they're building great businesses, they're creating jobs, they're creating wealth, but they're also participating in building cities they care about." ▶

My Tennessee

BILL HASLAM

GOVERNOR

LOCAL ROOTS: My wife, Crissy, grew up in Memphis and her family still lives there. I spend a lot of time in Memphis and throughout West Tennessee.

FAVORITE EATS: It's tough to beat Memphis' world-famous barbecue. Rendezvous, Central BBQ, Cozy Corner, A&R, Interstate, Corky's... take your pick. If you make it up to Reelfoot Lake, go to Boyett's for catfish, country ham and hushpuppies.

PERFECT DAY: Crissy and I would spend the day with family, taking our grandchildren to places she loved growing up like the Memphis Zoo, the Pink Palace and Overton Square. We'd picnic at Shelby Farms, Memphis' 4,500-acre urban park. We'd head to Mud Island and the new Bass Pro Shops at the Pyramid—one of the largest retail stores in the world. We'd be at the Peabody Hotel by 5 p.m. to see the famous Peabody ducks make their evening march. Depending on the time of year, we may try to catch a Redbirds or Grizzlies game.

