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Asian Commerce Thriving in Gwinnett

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NUMBER OF KOREAN FIRMS

Gwinnett: 2,464

Fulton: 893

DeKalb: 869

Cobb: 730

Clayton: 309

GWINNETT'S ANNUAL PAYROLL

Asian Indian: \$270.5 million

Few metro Atlanta counties have devoted more time and effort to developing Asian markets than Gwinnett County.

For the past five years, government and business leaders have cast a wide net across Asia, with visits to South Korea, China, Japan and Taiwan.

Those efforts have paid off in a big way. Today, sales, receipts or value of shipments from Asian or Asian Indian companies account for about \$3.4 billion in the local economy. The county's total Asian annual payroll is \$471 million.

And while government and business leaders work to draw more overseas commerce, local Asian businessmen and women who have already established a foothold in the community work to grow even larger.

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Korean: \$87.8 million

Chinese: \$61.3 million

Vietnamese: \$40.2 million

Other Asian: \$40.2 million

“All the affluent, intelligent, engaged Asians are moving to this area,” said Nick Masino, senior vice president of Economic Development and Partnership Gwinnett at the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce. “They’re moving here for the same reason I moved here out of college, the same reason 30,000 people move to metro Atlanta every year. There are great schools, especially in north Fulton, Cobb County, Gwinnett County.”

SOME OF GWINNETT'S LARGEST KOREAN EMPLOYERS

Clark Equipment Co. – Industrial machinery & equipment -- 624 employees

One of the biggest reasons for the Gwinnett’s success in drawing international business from Asia, Masino said, has been working through Peter Underwood, a business development consultant working with the Georgia Department of Economic Development in Korea. Through Underwood’s direction in Korea, the state was able to draw investors such as Kia Motors, SKC and LG Chem.

Doosan Infracore -- Industrial machinery & equipment -- 110 employees

“What we’ve done on top of that is use the people who live here in Gwinnett County and metro Atlanta to connect with people back in South Korea,” Masino said. “We also go there, work with organizations like the Korean International Association, the Korean Small Business Administration to set up seminars for businesses interested in expanding into the United States.”

Mega Mart – Grocery store – 150 employees

Kia Motors – Auto parts distribution and training center – 65 employees

Gwinnett County is home to some 23,000 Koreans, by far the largest concentration in the state. They represent 3 percent of the county’s 850,000 population and are about 24 percent of the county’s Asian population.

Dasan Machineries – Defense manufacturer – 50 employees

Duluth and the surrounding area has the highest concentration of Korean residents and businesses.

Source: Gwinnett County Chamber of Commerce

There are 93,000 businesses registered in Gwinnett County, 14 percent are Asian.

In the past several years, the county has landed some major Korean businesses.

One of the biggest is large equipment manufacturer Doosan. The company, which acquired Bobcat three years ago, moved its credit headquarters to Suwanee, then added manufacturing.

Doosan also worked with county and business leaders to pave the way to add a natural gas engine assembly plant at their campus, adding millions in new capital investment.

Another heavy equipment manufacturer, Hyundai, moved its corporate headquarters from Chicago to Norcross in 2010. Company leaders said the move would provide them better access to Latin American markets through Hartsfield Jackson Airport. Overall, the move represents more than a \$10 million investment and about 100 jobs.

Dassan, a new company that develops auto parts and gun components, is investing \$30 million and hiring 150 workers in Duluth.

While Asian companies span the county, Koreans, for the most part have settled in and around Duluth. Nearly every shop window in the mini-malls along Pleasant Hill Road carry both English and Korean lettering.

Sometimes that has led to the misconception that Duluth has become dominated by Koreans, but that is not true, said Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District.

The Asian community plays a big role in the area economy, Allen said. However, while many of the signs along storefronts carry wording written in Korean, Japanese or Chinese, only 9 percent of the daily workforce is Asian.

“In fact, it’s difficult to track exactly how many Gwinnett businesses are Asian,” he said. “Many of the properties are leased to Asian entrepreneurs but remain registered to non-Asian owners.”

Clayton Lee, vice president of the Korean American Association of Greater Atlanta, said Gwinnett had long been a draw for Koreans because of its school system. But the opening of a Super H shopping center in Duluth in 2004 sparked the true influx.

“That shopping center ignited and attracted most Korean businesses,” he said. “That’s where it really started.”

The neighborhood environment is also very important to Koreans, Lee said. Gwinnett offers reasonable housing prices and many amenities, such as parks, that appeal to the community, he said.

The county is well-known to the people in Korea as well, he said. Through is many visits to woo businesses, Koreans have a sense they are welcome in Gwinnett, he added.

“The government is very supportive of the Korean community,” Lee said. “We don’t feel left out.”

Lee has worked hard to help local Koreans integrate into the larger community. He is part of a campaign led by the grassroots group Asian Americans Advancing Justice to register 10,000 voters to participate in this fall’s election.

Lee is also a charter member of the Duluth mayor's Korean Task Force, contacting residents to become more involved in the community. The effort had the added effect of spurring Korean businesses to reach outside their own native market, he said.

"A lot of Korean businesses have been successful because they targeted not just Koreans but others in the area," Lee said.

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