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Gwinnett expands business tax incentives

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Efforts to bring new businesses to Gwinnett County got easier Tuesday with changes to the county's 2006 economic development ordinance.

The County Commission amended the law to align its goals with those of the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce-led Partnership Gwinnett initiative and to make it easier for companies to qualify for incentives — particularly those seeking to locate in areas needing redevelopment.

The 2006 law required companies to provide a \$500,000 net economic benefit to the county over 20 years. The new law lowers that to \$100,000 for companies relocating to one of the county's three community improvement districts or any future tax allocation districts.

Companies seeking to locate elsewhere in the county will be required to meet two of three standards contained in the new law — provide at least 25 new jobs, pay an average salary at least 1.25 times the county average for that industry, or provide a net economic benefit of at least \$250,000.

Incentives offered by the county include tax abatements, reduced development fees and accelerated zoning review.

"We now have armed ourselves with an actual tool," said Nick Masino, vice president of economic development for the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce.

The chamber does most of the economic development legwork in the county. The county's economic development office primarily evaluates leads brought by the state and the chamber to determine whether they qualify for incentives.

The original law was developed before the chamber launched its Partnership Gwinnett effort to attract 65,000 high-paying jobs in the next five years. Planners found some companies that would have been good fits for the community ended up being disqualified.

For instance, Masino said the county wasn't able to help a company that wanted to bring more than 200 jobs paying nearly \$70,000 each to the Jimmy Carter Boulevard area because it was not planning a

major construction project. That kept the company from qualifying under the net economic benefit standard.

In the two years the law has been on the books, only two firms have qualified: Hewlett-Packard and FATS/Caswell, both of which received tax incentives, said Alfie Meek, the county's economic development director.

Meek said the reduction in standards does not mean the county is looking for lesser businesses. Instead, it gives his office and the chamber greater flexibility in bringing worthwhile businesses into the county.

"These are still good projects," Meek said. "They still generate more revenue than costs."

The new law wasn't prompted by discussions with any companies that wouldn't qualify under the 2006 version of the law, he said. The law remains in effect until April 1.

"We've learned a lot in two years," he said. "We wanted to make the law better."

The new ordinance also gives Meek the authority to sign confidentiality agreements with companies considering relocating in the county, but requires they be made subject to the Georgia Open Records Act.

Meek said he doubted the new ordinance would change county policy toward releasing requested information about economic development projects. That's because state law already compels almost every document his office generates or receives be made available for public inspection, Meek said.

What it does, Meek said, is give him the authority to sign confidentiality agreements often required by companies to simply begin discussions.

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