

by Jerri Goodman

This initiative is the first of its kind in the state -- and it's starting right here in Metter, GA.

This fall, local producers can market their Metter Made, Georgia Grown products through Metter Welcome Center. The details of the plan were highlighted on Tuesday afternoon, July 24, when Georgia Agriculture Commissioner Gary Black visited town, along with representatives from Georgia Southern University, Georgia Department of Economic Development and Georgia Grown.

"This project is about two years in the making," said City Manager Mandi Cody, who, along with Metter's Director of Tourism and Business Development, Heidi Jeffers, crafted the project to be unique to Metter."

"I am excited today because it is the first time we have had all our local and state partners in the same room at the same time to talk about strategy that has been developed uniquely for Metter," Cody said.

"What's wonderful about it," Cody continued, "is it is really just taking all the ingredients to the recipe that is already there and mixing them and presenting them in a new light, in a new way to capitalize on what is already great about Metter and Candler County and the great things that are already happening with our partners in the state and the local community and how we can take those things to the next level."

Cody said that when she first came to Metter two years ago, she held a series of 'Coffees with the Manager.' During those sessions, Cody said, "I kept hearing some pretty interesting insights about our community. I heard a

lot of sentiment of local pride. Everyone who came to talk to me said, 'We love Metter; we love Candler County and we want to see it survive. We're worried about it. We see some declines. We see some building vacancies. We're losing our kids; our grandkids don't have jobs to stay here for and we're concerned, but we love our community and we want it to survive and we want it to thrive.'

With the interstate mere minutes from downtown and a traffic count of 30,000 cars on I-16 daily, Cody said, "Downtown merchants kept saying to me, 'We've got to get these cars off the interstate and bring them downtown. That's what we need. If we could capture that traffic and bring them downtown, we know we could succeed. We know we could be profitable.'"

With those concerns in mind, while drafting the state-required Comprehensive Plan to guide Metter through the next decade, Cody said, "I was thinking through the comprehensive plans and I was thinking of the lessons learned through our coffees and the other areas.

"How do we build on Metter's assets in a way that can develop our local economy, see our potential realized but maintain our character and the essence of who we are as a community, because we don't want to lose that."

"We don't want to lose that in our growth and so often communities that develop do lose the essence of their character and the essence of their community, and that's sad. And our community had said to me very clearly that they did not want to see that happen."

"In economic development you identify your assets and you match them to an audience that values those assets

and then you figure out what may be missing in the mix and you provide it.

“The interstate gives us an awesome opportunity to create a destination point. The people of this community have a love for our welcome center and our visitors’ center unlike any I have ever seen. And the people on our interstate have a love to stop there and to visit there and to explore our community based on the presence of that visitors center.

“And I also learned how dependent our local economy is on agriculture.

“So what do we do with those assets? Well, we created a vision statement to work our economic strategy off, that marries all of those considerations. And this vision statement combines all those things I talked to you about. The love of our history, the care of our character as a community and our desire to see this community survive for future generations, is expressed in our vision statement:

“The City of Metter will preserve our historical past, embrace our agriculturally based economy and capitalize on our downtown and interstate location to become the destination stop for travelers at Interstate 16 and the foodie fans of the GA Grown, Metter Made, Farm to Table Movement from across the state and region.

“Additionally, we will aggressively seek to elevate our presence as an industrial location in close proximity to the fastest growing container port in the nation, offering rail, air and interstate access, first class broadband capabilities, infrastructure capacity and first-class business service.

“We will grow a small city with a high quality of life and abundant economic prosperity while cherishing the comforts of small town life and the businesses, farms, friends and families that call Metter home, the new residents we will welcome and the visitors we host daily.”

Why Georgia Grown?

The Georgia Grown program is a marketing and economic development program of the Georgia Department of Agriculture. The No. 1 goal is to aid the agricultural economies by bringing together producers, processors, suppliers, distributors, retailers, agritourism and consumers in one powerful, statewide community.

“Georgia Grown is a wonderful program of the Georgia Department of Agriculture,” Cody said. “Their No. 1 goal ... is to support the producers of Georgia Grown products and to take those producers to market and to support that thriving part of our economy.

“Based on a foodie destination, the idea of using our interstate at a historic downtown location with an agrarian based economy both across our state and our county, we can create a destination place for the Georgia Grown fans across the state and across the region. That is at the heart of our economic development strategy.

“Oddly enough, Metter is already a destination place in some respects. We are already a tourism draw, bringing in right at \$17 million in direct tourism spending and supporting 142 jobs. We have great impacts from tourism. 30,000 cars a day come through our city and we can capture that market and marry it with our agrarian base, our Metter Made Products, our Georgia Grown community

to spread the Georgia Grown movement and the Metter Made movement across this state and region.”

“But without our partners we cannot be successful,” Cody continued. “This is a multi-pronged strategy .. but the wonderful thing about that is this strategy is designed to meet the needs of every sector of our economy, every demographic of our population, every one of our visitors. This is the tie that can lift all ships for the people of Metter and Candler County. “

To develop the strategy, Cody said, “We’ve partnered with the Georgia Department of Economic Development and we have put together in our process a model recruitment team.”

Bringing new business to Metter

“We will have a combination of local and state stakeholders and representatives from the city of Metter and Candler County to work with Lori (Hennessey of GA DEcD) and her team to identify businesses that match our strategy of capitalizing on the foodie destination, Georgia Grown concept,” Cody said.

“We’re identifying businesses across the state and region that are already strong, already have a following and are financially capable and willing to expand their businesses.

“We will go to them and invite them to come to Metter and have that second or third location on Interstate 16. We are already going out and visiting with them and I expect we are going to have some great announcements soon,” Cody said.

Business Friendly

“To encourage those businesses and to convince them the City of Metter is serious about being business friendly and about this strategy and about welcoming them into our community, Metter City Council has adopted an incentive plan,” Cody said. “This incentive plan essentially eliminates all the start-up costs, fees and permitting requirements for any new business that locates anywhere in our city limits that fits this strategy that we are sharing with you today.

“Sometimes those fees are cost prohibitive and would keep a company from coming our way. Sometimes they are not, but the message those incentive plans sends to these businesses is very loud and very strong that the city of Metter is committed to their success and we want them here.”

Enhancing the Welcome Center

A second part of our strategy is to develop our welcome center,” Cody said. “Right now, the Welcome Center is being used as a gathering place. People like to picnic, they like to have lunch there, they like to visit with the staff and that’s wonderful. We’re glad to have them there, but we want to make it more of a part of our strategy.

“We want to open the doors of our visitors center into a retail center that features Georgia Grown and Metter Made products and introduces all of those products to all of those travelers that are visiting each and every day.

“In 2017 alone half of those cars, over half, 18,000 people visited our retail center. If we can capture just some of those 18,000 people to come in and learn about a new Georgia Grown product, learn about a new Metter Made

product, become a fan and a follower of that product, take that product and make their next trip to the hometown of that product, we think that is an incredible opportunity.”

Expanding opportunity for local business

“We want to open the opportunity for all the businesses in our community to join in that success, so in addition to having a retail center, we will develop a map, a retail trail if you will.

“We will offer every business in Metter and Candler County the opportunity to feature for sale a Georgia Grown, or a Metter Made product that is not in the Center but would be in their antiques store, in their clothing store, in their restaurant. We’ll offer that on a retail trail.”

An incubator location

“Here’s another component of our strategy,” Cody said.

“We want our local entrepreneurs in the Georgia Grown Movement, in the Metter Made Movement, to have all the support that they need to take their product to market, whatever that product may be. And that is expensive. And that is daunting.

“There is a lot that can be scary about that process. But we have Ben McKay and our partnership with Georgia Southern University to help us overcome that daunting scariness and to provide the resources to our start-ups that will make them successful from the very beginning.

“The City of Metter would like to donate building space for Georgia Southern University and others to come in and open an incubator that will provide those business support

services to start-ups that focus on Georgia Grown, Metter Made products.

“We particularly want to focus on the manufacturing aspect, the value-added aspect, so that our growers, our producers can get their product to market.”

“Our first step,” McKay said, “is to do a feasibility study. A feasibility study will look at a couple of different aspects, starting with what an incubator market looks like in the U.S. and how it comes together.

“The second aspect will be what the location(s) that we select have to offer for the community itself and kind of what are the advantages and disadvantages to it.

“We’ll do some discussions with the community and see how deep the excitement level is and then we’ll use some of our previous research that we’ve done in the community to kind of guide that process.

“We’re excited to have this opportunity to be part of such a fantastic community with so many great people at the table right now.”

Next steps

“We will be reactivating our development authority and main street program in the coming months,” Cody said.

“Our goal is for all of us to partner together and in the fall open Georgia’s first Georgia Grown Retail Center at Metter Welcome Center on I-16.”

Hennessey commented, “Metter has embraced their authenticity and are really looking at how they can bring people into this community and they’re really saying, ‘We’ll put our money where our mouth is and we’ll come up with realistic and very good incentives for businesses to come here.’”

Commissioner Black applauded the team for their efforts and commended State Senator Jack Hill for his support of Georgia Grown.

“I want to thank Sen. Hill for his confidence in us,” Black said. He then reported that the Georgia Grown movement is growing internationally, but, “What you are doing here at home, I’m proud of it,” he said. “The A Team is here. Y’all are sitting in a sweet, sweet spot”

Mayor Ed Boyd added, “We believe that a renaissance is starting here and we can turn this into a destination. We have several examples close to us of some success stories. A lot of people these days are not on a strict time table and they can take a few minutes and explore, so we are very excited about this.

“In all the years we have been involved in trying to make Metter a better place, this is the first time, I think, that we have had an actual plan we can execute.”

State and local partners

Partners in the new Georgia Grown, Metter Made, Farm to Table concept attending last week’s meeting were Agriculture Commissioner Gary and Lydia Black; Ryan Waldrep, assistant director of Entrepreneur & Small Business, GA DEcD; Lori Hennessey, project manager, Tourism Division, GA DEcD; Lynn Ashcroft, DCA, Region 9; Tom L. Neville, Southeastern-Coastal District manager, GA Dep’t of Agriculture; Matthew Kulinski, GA Dep’t of Agriculture, Marketing Division; Ben McKay, assistant director, Center for Business Analytics and Economic Research, GA Southern; Mayor Ed Boyd, City of Metter; City Councilwoman Amy Harrelson, Pineland Telephone;

City Manager Mandi Cody; County Commissioner Donny Wells; Candler County Industrial Development Authority Executive Director Molly Olson; CCIA Chairman Brian Tootle; Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Victoria Gaitten; Chamber Chairman-Elect Jason Grimes; City Clerk Angie Conner; Metter Director of Tourism and Business Development Heidi Jeffers; Southern Soy Candles' Bob and Teresa Lytle; Candler County Extension Agent Ben Reeves; Candler County School Superintendent Dr. Bubba Longgear; Metter Advertiser Publisher Carvy Snell; and Metter Fire Chief Jason Douglas.