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Dorchester County economic development director stepping down after six years



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Jon Baggett, Dorchester County economic development director, is leaving his post Oct. 3 after six years. Provided

Six years ago, Jon Baggett unpacked his bags as Dorchester County's new economic development director as the deep recession unfolded.

Unemployment peaked at 10.8 percent in the county. It dropped to half that during his tenure, but it's starting to creep back up a little.

Baggett's job has been to help expand existing industries and recruit new businesses. But after Oct. 3, he'll be in Columbia. Baggett is returning to his former employer, the state Commerce Department, to work as a project manager, helping to recruit and expand existing industries across the state.

"It's a good opportunity to focus on projects," he said. "That's what I enjoy doing the most. I enjoy helping industries grow or locating a new facility."

Baggett, a 38-year-old Walterboro native, has family ties in the Midlands as well. That's where his wife, Ann, is from.

He also said the recent strife enveloping the Charleston Regional Development Alliance had nothing to do with his decision. Dorchester County is a member of the three-county, industry-recruitment agency that has been trying to keep disgruntled counties, a major source of its funding, from defecting. The counties want more involvement and communication or they threaten to leave the alliance and start their own.

"This was a personal and professional decision," Baggett said.

He said he enjoyed his time in the Lowcountry, helping existing industries weather the recession, putting them in touch with work-force training and seeing job creation rise again.

"We have seen a lot more activity with companies investing again," Baggett said.

On Monday, for instance, he drove to Harleyville to participate in the ribbon-cutting ceremony for Missouri-based SpecChem, a chemical maker for the concrete industry that is putting 50 people to work in a 65,000-square-foot plant that closed years ago.

Also, two of the county's four boatbuilders - Sportsman and Scout - recently announced expansions, with the promise of 450 new jobs.

During his tenure, Baggett helped launch a business retention and expansion program, an industrial council and saw the need for plant workers to be trained in CPR.

He hopes to be back in the Lowcountry, helping to land new industries and expand others in his new role at Commerce.

"There is a lot of opportunity here," he said.

The task now at hand for Dorchester County is to find a new economic development director.

"We hate to see him leave, but if he is going to go anywhere, the Department of Commerce is a good place for us," County Council Chairman Bill Hearn said. "He certainly knows our product and our inventory. He spent a lot of time and energy overseeing and fighting to get the infrastructure in place and getting three (industrial) parks up and running. He's left us in a good place."

Dorchester County pays Baggett \$89,587 a year.

Hearn said the county probably will rely on the alliance and Commerce for help until it can hire a replacement.

"I guess it's a good thing we are still in good graces with both of them," Hearn said with a chuckle. Commerce is overseeing talks between the three local counties and the alliance to work out differences that surfaced over the summer. A meeting two weeks ago of about 30 people from all parties ended with an agreement to keep talking in a smaller group of fewer than 10 people. Another meeting has not been scheduled, Hearn said.

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