

BUSINESS ▶ TO ◀ BUSINESS

www.louisiana1st.com can enhance how Louisiana's small



Photo-illustration
by Travis Gauthier

By
KATHLEEN THAMES

What is economic development, anyway? Just bottom line it. Doesn't economic development boil down to connections between people?

"Economic development," replied Gregg Gothreaux, "is *always* personal."

Gothreaux probably knows as much about economic development as anyone in Louisiana. He's been director of the Lafayette Economic Development Authority for eight years. LEDA's mission is to foster economic growth in Lafayette Parish.

It's not a coincidence that LEDA chose to build its new office in University Common, 400-acres of prime property in the center of Lafayette that are owned by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

At the time LEDA moved there, Gothreaux couldn't know that, in a couple of years, his next-door-neighbors in Abdalla Hall would create the Louisiana Commerce and Exchange System, an ingenious tool for economic development. (www.louisiana1st.com)

LACES IS A GIANT DATABASE THAT'S ACCESSIBLE through the Internet. It's a quick, free way for Louisiana companies to get in touch with each other to do business. The only "cost" to a company is the two minutes an employee will spend at a computer keyboard to register the company.

State Sen. Mike Michot has described LACES as "probably the single most important economic development tool that we will unveil and give to the public



DOUG DUGAS

Authement. "LACES is a major step in helping Louisiana companies to grow and prosper. And, I'm confident that several other projects being planned by the Center, once completed, will have equal or increased impact on economic development in Louisiana."

THE SUCCESS OF LACES

now lies, in large part, in the hands of Louisiana Economic Development, which has licensed it from UL Lafayette.

Economic development officials agree that the department's organizational structure is well-suited for spreading the word about LACES to companies throughout Louisiana.

About a year ago, Louisiana Economic Development was reorganized to implement "industry clusters," led by nine directors

who concentrate on strengthening particular industries:

- advanced materials;
- agriculture/forestry/food;
- durable goods/manufacturing;
- energy/oil and gas;
- entertainment;
- information technology;
- life science/biotechnology/biomedical;

Above: Gregg Gothreaux, left, director of the Lafayette Economic Development Authority, and Dr. Ramesh Kolluru, head of UL Lafayette's Apparel Computer Integrated Manufacturing Center, are next-door neighbors in University Research Park. Right: Phil Arleigh Lank of Lafayette is the state Department of Economic Development's Acadiana regional representative. The department was reorganized about a year ago by "industry cluster" and geographic region.

commercialization and sources of well-educated graduates as potential employees."

In the mid-1990s, UL Lafayette's Apparel Computer Integrated Manufacturing Center was facing extinction. International trade agreements had prompted many of its clients – U.S. textile and clothing manufacturers – to go overseas or to Mexico to cash in on cheap labor.

"The Center's direction has been altered slightly to dovetail more aggressively with the university's mission

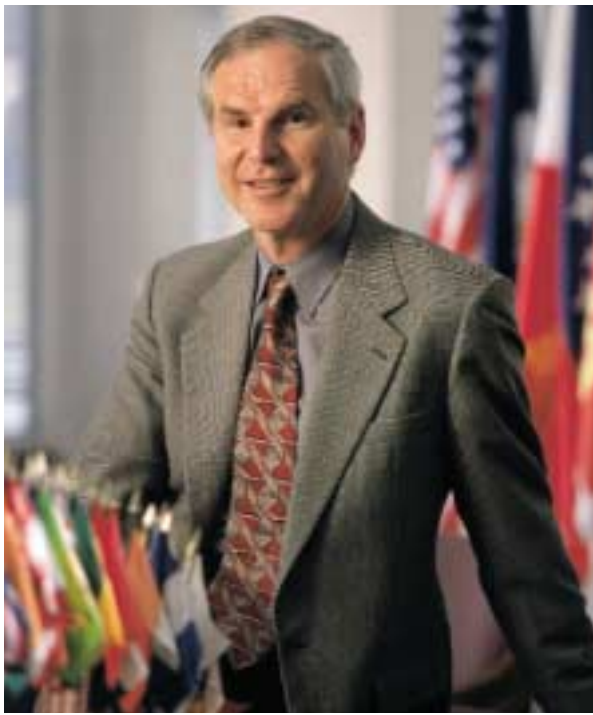
for economic development," said Kolluru. (A-CIM will soon be renamed the Center for Business and Information Technologies.)

It was an ideal place to invest the university's "intellectual capital."

"Just this year, Dr. Kolluru has been responsible for eight copyright submittals, five of which have already been approved. He has numerous ongoing projects at the Center," said UL Lafayette President Dr. Ray



DOUG DUGAS



DOUG DUGAS

- logistics/transportation; and
- petrochemical technology.

The Louisiana Department of Economic Development also is organized by geographic regions: Northwest, Northeast, Central, Southwest, Acadiana, Bayou, Capital, and Southeast.

Phil Arleigh Lank of Lafayette is the Acadiana regional representative.

Left: Philippe Gustin is director of Le Centre International de Lafayette which fosters increased international commerce and tourism in the Lafayette area. He was one of the earliest proponents of a database that would encourage Louisiana's businesses to trade with each other. Below: UL Lafayette student Natalie Perkins, standing, was on hand when Wen DePriest of Lab Techniques, Inc., registered with LACES on the day the software program was unveiled on campus.



DOUG DUGAS

How www.Louisiana1st.com Works

UL Lafayette is making an offer that companies shouldn't refuse.

It's a free, easy-to-use database that can put Louisiana businesses in touch with other Louisiana businesses, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, via the Internet.

Only one other state in the nation, Alaska, has any comparable service.

Registering with LACES gives a company access to a database of more than 88,000 businesses and the ability to update its own online profile. It also enables a company to obtain information about other companies who have expressed interest in its goods or services.

Here's how it works, using fictitious companies:

ABC Co. in Lafayette, La., sells widgets. It's now buying cardboard shipping boxes from a company in California. But it might be cheaper and faster to obtain them in Louisiana.

So, ABC Co. logs on to www.louisiana1st.com and registers, which takes about two minutes. Then it asks LACES to list every company in the database that manufactures boxes.

The names of four companies appear on the computer screen. ABC clicks on the first one, Boxes, Inc., and finds out that it's in a city that's only 30 miles away, has been in business for 20 years and specializes in cardboard shipping boxes for widgets.

There's a clickable e-mail address for Boxes, Inc., so ABC sends an e-mail asking for a Boxes, Inc., repre-

sentative to phone.

ABC can check out the other three companies on the list, too, to see if any might also be a possible source for cardboard shipping boxes.

Or, if ABC has the name of a company that makes boxes, it can search the database specifically for that name to get some background and contact information.

Since ABC has registered with LACES, it can check the database for information about its own company, to make sure its own profile is correct and current. It can also make changes, while the information is displayed on the computer screen.

ABC can also ask LACES about any companies that have expressed interest in purchasing widgets from a Louisiana company. The database will provide names and information about any businesses that have made such inquiries.

"The most important aspect of the system is to have current and correct information," said Dr. Ramesh Kolluru, director of UL Lafayette's Apparel Computer Integrated Manufacturing Center, which developed LACES. "We are asking each business to take just a couple of minutes to register with LACES and to check from time to time to make sure that information about its own company is correct." ■



DOUG DUGAS

Some of UL Lafayette's brightest students in the fields of computer science, business and computer engineering have contributed to LACES. They are shown with Dr. Ramesh Kolluru, director of A-CIM, and Vijay Kanumilli, manager of information technology applications at A-CIM.



- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Vishnuvardhan Manchala | 9. Troy Meyer |
| 2. Satyavani Neppalli | 10. Amarender Garlapati |
| 3. Dheerendranath Mundluru | 11. Shahfazel Mohammed |
| 4. Laurent Jadoul | 12. Natalie Perkins |
| 5. Ranjit Dontineni | 13. Seshagiri Varanasi |
| 6. Ramesh Kolluru | 14. Ryan LeCompte |
| 7. Srinivasulu Pacharu | 15. Lalitha Chandran |
| 8. Satykrishna Gandham | 16. Vijay Kanumilli |
| | 17. Kang Lee |

"We're the support crew for the clusters," he explained in a recent interview. The regional representatives are out in the field, talking with business leaders and making vital connections.

"It's all about networking, who you know and how to get things done," Lank said.

Don Hutchinson, Louisiana's secretary of economic development, said he plans to use the built-in structure to promote LACES.

"I will make it a mandate of my department that cluster directors talk about this wherever they go and really push this," he said, when LACES was unveiled on UL Lafayette's campus in late March. "It will be the regional representatives' charge as well to make sure we push this. We're going to talk to Chambers of Commerce, business

organizations, et cetera. We just have to get the word out."

LACES has some other vital partners who have assisted with its creation and will promote it. One of them is UL Lafayette's Manufacturing Extension Partnership of Louisiana, which provides more than 5,600 small and medium-size manufacturers in the state with assistance to make them become more productive and more competitive. It co-funded the development of LACES, as part of a partnership agreement between A-CIM & MEPoL.

"That was without strings. We felt that this program is *that* important to Louisiana businesses and specifically to manufacturers," said Van Landry, director of MEPoL.

LACES, he said, "is a tool which Louisiana businesses can use to help each other grow." ■