

Three cities unite

Clayton towns announce joint venture



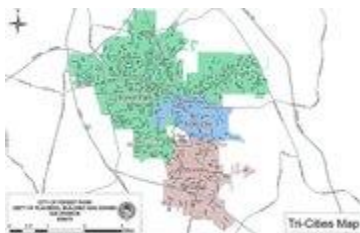
Lake City Mayor Willie Oswalt, left, talks with Rob Gordon from the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government following the announcement that the city is partnering with Morrow and Forest Park on a "TriCity" economic development venture Wednesday. (Staff Photo: Curt Yeomans)

[#MORROW](#) — Three Clayton County cities may be on the verge of launching one of the biggest, and most ambitious, economic development plans in recent memory.

[#Officials](#) from Lake City, Morrow and Forest Park announced their TriCity economic development endeavor Wednesday. If successful, the trio of municipalities will have created a massive opportunity zone designed to promote business growth and development.

[#It's](#) a rare instance where an opportunity zone has been created that crosses municipal boundaries, said an official with the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

[#"It's](#) a great opportunity for you guys to come together and work on something," said Rob Gordon, who coordinates economic development resources for the institute.



Special Photo

This map shows the proximity of Forest Park, Lake City and Morrow to each other. The cities are working together on a TriCity economic development opportunity zone. (Special photo).

#Officials from the city have been meeting and planning the TriCity opportunity zone for more than a year, and the respective city councils must still formally vote to join in the venture. However, the effort is an idea that not only has leaders from the participating cities excited. County officials were hyped up about it too after the presentation.

#“We can’t bury our heads in the sand,” said county commission Chairman Jeff Turner. “We must recognize our challenges and we must come together and we must push forward. This initiative does just that. It jumpstarts the county’s growth and enlarges opportunity.”

#Lake City City Manager Joel Lanken and Morrow City Manager Jeff Eady have been major architects in the effort, and they explained the reasoning for the partnership during Wednesday’s presentation. They said the idea was to see what the three cities could do together to promote economic development in their part of the county.

#“We thought we could do things together that we couldn’t necessarily do individually, and so with that unity, we built this concept for the TriCity project,” said Lanken.



Curt Yeomans

Rob Gordon, center, explains opportunity zones to officials from Clayton County and the cities of Forest Park, Lake City and Morrow Wednesday. Gordon coordinates economic development resources for the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government, which is working with the cities on their TriCity project. (Staff Photo: Curt Yeomans)

#Eady added the partnership broke new ground. The current shape of the economy also requires governments to work together to generate growth rather than work individually.

#“We looked at what’s better for the three cities that share borders,” he said. “So, if we can at least figuratively remove the border, so to speak, and work across those lines to create some jobs and opportunities, then we all win.”

#Businesses that move into the opportunity zone, or ones already in the zone who add at least two new jobs, can earn a \$3,500 state tax credit for every new job created in the district. The catch is they cannot be temporary jobs.

#The state Department of Community Affairs, which must approve the application for the opportunity zone, requires the area to display poverty, underdevelopment, general distress and blight, said Gordon. He also said the census blocks next to designated zone must have at least 15 percent poverty.

#If an opportunity zone that big exists, county economic development officials will help the cities promote it, said county Economic Development Director Grant Wainscott. It would be a “huge calling card” for businesses looking at moving to the Atlanta area, he added.

#“The investment community, I think, would react extremely favorably to this,” said Wainscott. “The fact that three cities are coming together period, whether its an opportunity zone or anything else, they are coming together for a common good — for a common marketing good — and it can only be beneficial for the entire county, so we’re really excited about it.”

#Wainscott said there is a unique synergy among the three cities that doesn’t exist elsewhere in the county. One reason why they are unique is that their borders touch each other. The other reason is that Ga. 54 runs through each city, and Forest Parkway runs through Forest Park and Lake City.

#“You know 54 is what links these three municipalities, and that is logistics and retail,” said Wainscott. “That’s a major corridor for not only business, but commuters, so they really share a common thread between the cities and business will get that.”