

Georgia's GRAD sites invite economic development

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Accelerating the time to market has never been a more critical site selection factor for companies than it is now. Shovel-ready, certified sites — particularly land tracts that have all the requisite zoning, permit approvals and utilities in place — go to the top of the short list when corporations are on a fast track to select a facility location.

Economic development leaders in Georgia know this, and that is why the Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD) program now offers 62 certified sites around the state for companies ready to make a decision, with many applications in the pipeline for approval. Parcels range in size up to 2,000 acres, representing a variety of geographic locations and rural and suburban settings.

Since 2008, the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD) and the Georgia Allies, a public/private partnership that supports the state's job creation efforts, have partnered with communities around the state to establish this pool of certified sites for which all due diligence has been completed. Briefly, when a site is GRAD-certified, a company knows that the requisite boxes have already been ticked: site availability, rail and highway access, utilities infrastructure, environmental and wetlands assessments, zoning and geotechnical considerations.

While GDEcD's project managers market both GRAD and non-GRAD sites depending on a company's requirements, a turn-key site can easily give a community a competitive advantage. In fact, the GRAD initiative is already paying dividends for communities across Georgia: 18 sites have already been selected by companies who are creating more than 4,500 jobs in the state, including Starbucks in Richmond County, Chicken of the Sea in Toombs County, Baxter International at Stanton Springs/4-County Industrial Park, Vanguard in Dade County, Adidas in Cherokee County, Aviagen in Brooks County, and most recently, Irving Consumer Products in Bibb County.

A GRAD site requires no more due diligence than is typically done for any industrial site or business park development, and does not require detailed engineering studies. The difference is that, by the time the company sees the site, not only have basic preparations been completed, but they have been reviewed and certified by a professional site location consultant.

We encourage communities to consider GRAD certification for promising sites, which can be submitted by a local economic development organization, a real estate broker or a land owner. It takes about three to six months to complete the entire application and approval process. A site receives an approval certificate good for two years. After that, a community must then re-apply to extend the certification, assuming no development has taken place during that period.

Having a certified GRAD site is also a good indication to a company that a community committed to the considerable investment of money, time and resources involved in the process is likely a business-friendly place to locate and one in which they will have a pleasant experience. Possessing a GRAD

site is certainly not the only way a community can attract prospective companies, but it's a powerful one with proven results. It's good for communities, and good for Georgia.