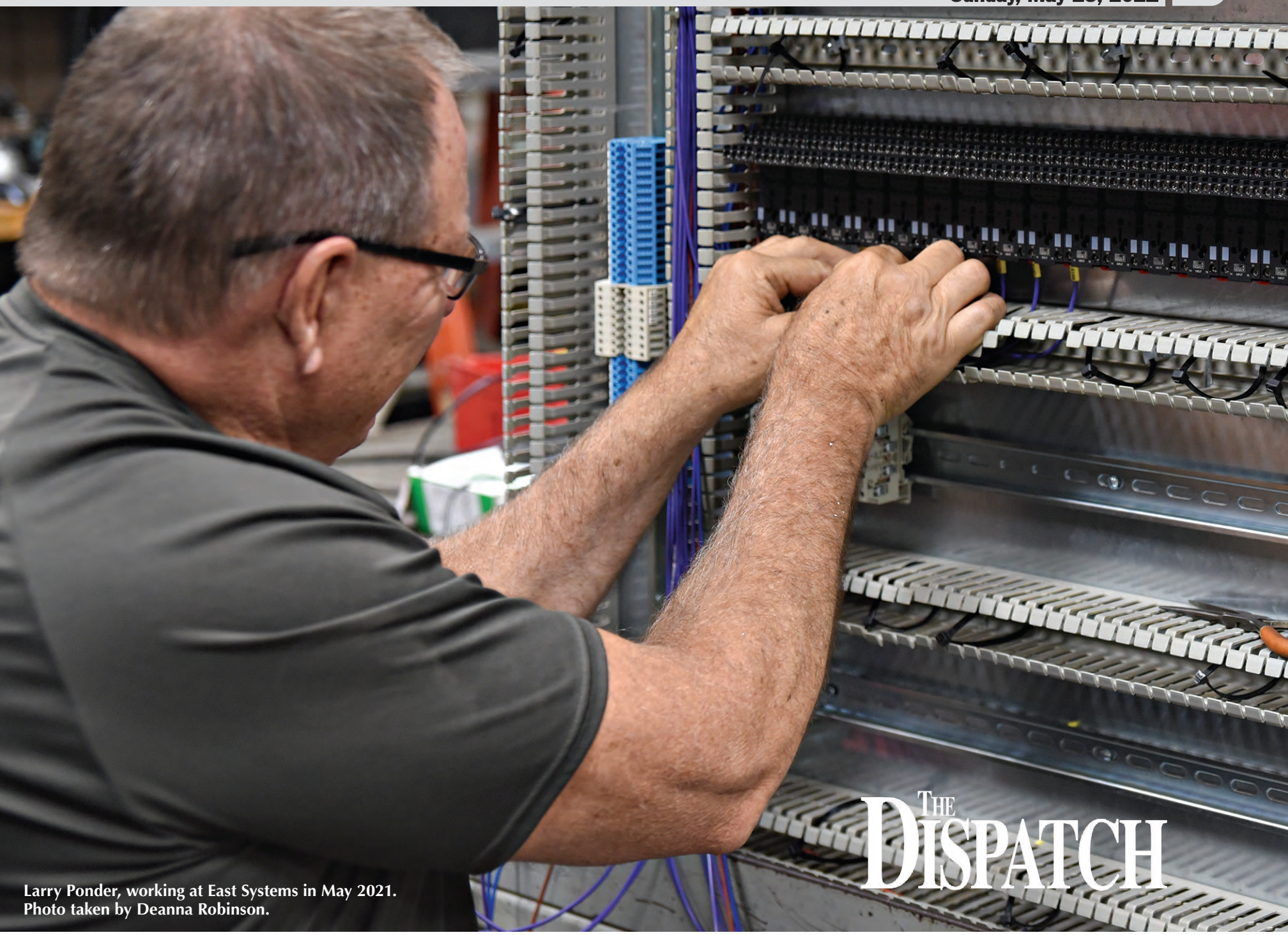


Salute to Industry

Sunday, May 23, 2021



Larry Ponder, working at East Systems in May 2021.
Photo taken by Deanna Robinson.

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“Made in a Day”

Columbus Airbus facility featured in National Geographic series

Story by Isabelle Altman
ialtman@cdipatch.com

This past year, Airbus' Columbus facility was featured in a National Geographic video series on manufacturing in America. The documentary series “Made in a Day,” which viewers can stream on Disney+, is about making different brands and products, from space rockets to electric guitars to whiskey. But it's the episode on helicopters where the series gives viewers a look at Golden Triangle workers building the H125 at Airbus' Columbus facility on Airport Road.

Since the plant's opening in 2003, it has produced more than 14,000 helicopters for departments and corporations from the U.S. Army to individual law enforcement agencies around the country to NASA. The facility employs more than 250 workers locally and stayed open during most of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Erin Callender, head of communication from Airbus' North American region, said Airbus representatives were “extremely pleased” to be included in “Made in a Day,” which gives viewers an insight into the facility's operations and shows the parts and processes of the helicopters’

See **AIRBUS**, 4



An Airbus technician works on a H125 helicopter while being filmed for a National Geographic documentary series on building helicopters last year.

Photo courtesy of Tello Creative

Airbus

Continued from Page 3

design and assembly.

"The National Geographic piece is a really good, comprehensive way to see from A to Z what we do when we're manufacturing a helicopter," Callender said.

The 22-minute episode gives facts and figures about the H125 (the facility also manufactures Lakoa helicopters for the U.S. Army, but those were not featured in the episode) and includes interviews with facility employees. Calendar said about 40 percent of the facility's employees are veterans, a fact of which Airbus is extremely proud.

"We have really competent workers who are extremely dedicated and do a fantastic job of supporting customers and building helicopters out of Mississippi," she said.

The facility saw other changes this year, including a new facility manager in Johannes

'The National Geographic piece is a really good, comprehensive way to see from A to Z what we do when we're manufacturing a helicopter.'

Erin Callender, head of communication from Airbus' North American region

Dienemann, who has worked for Airbus since 2007 when he worked with the company in France in 2007. Originally from Berlin, Germany, he moved to the U.S. in 2008 and has spent the last few years going between Airbus' facilities in Columbus and Dallas. When he took the reigns for outgoing facility manager Mike Spears, he said he was happy to be in Columbus permanently.

"Now I get the opportunity to spend my

time in Columbus and I'm excited about that," Dienemann said when he started full-time at the facility in March. "It's exciting what's happening here and to be a part of it."

Calendar said the COVID-19 pandemic has also made the past year "an interesting one" for Airbus, but said the facility remained open with only about a 10-percent drop in activity due to the pandemic and resulting economic downturn.

"We've stayed open since the beginning," she said. "We've continued building helicopters, we've continued supporting all of our customers, especially since most of them are essential missions and essential business, so we've done everything we can to keep our employees safe so that we can keep our doors open."

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Off the training wheels



Photo courtesy Colin Kennedy

Recipients of silver cords for the WorkKey certification program. 15 students received stipends for scoring bronze or higher with the Gateway Training Program, each earned \$600.

LINK grant helped lead way for WorkKeys testing throughout state's high schools

Story by Slim Smith
ssmith@cdipatch.com

When a grant expires, it may be a sign that it has failed to achieve its goal or is no longer relevant. But in the best cases, grants expire because they have achieved their goal.

That's why Macaulay Whitaker is talking about....bicycles? Yes, bicycles.

Whitaker, Chief Operating Officer for the Golden Triangle Development LINK, says the

LINK grant that funded WorkKeys testing at area high schools, was a lot like the training wheels used to teach children how to ride a bike.

The initial grant was for five years, providing \$5,000 to each high school that would provide juniors and seniors. The grant, which began in 2015, was extended another year because of COVID-19 and other factors, but expires this year.

"The training wheels are coming off," she said.

WorkKeys is owned by the American College

Test, a nonprofit educational organization that developed the ACT to measure student readiness for college. ACT founded WorkKeys in 2001 to measure applied skills commonly used in the workplace. Although it is a complement to ACT rather than an alternative, the nature of the WorkKeys test has led to it being used to assess workplace readiness for students who may not be on a college track.

When The Golden Triangle Development LINK was pursuing certification as a Work

See [LINK](#), 7



Photo courtesy Colin Kennedy

Recipients of platinum cords for the WorkKey certification program. 15 students received stipends for scoring bronze or higher with the Gateway Training Program, each earned \$600.



Photo courtesy Colin Kennedy

Recipients of gold cords for the WorkKey certification program. 15 students received stipends for scoring bronze or higher with the Gateway Training Program, each earned \$600.

LINK

Continued from Page 6

Ready Community as part of its economic development efforts, it focused on incorporating the existing WorkKeys program at East Mississippi Community College's workforce development program with local business and industries.

"What we discovered was the high schools were the missing component," Whitaker said. "So in 2015, we started a grant program for \$5,000 for any school in our area that wanted to provide WorkKeys testing."

The grants covered the \$50 charge for the testing, enough for 100 students at each school.

"The goal of the (grant) program was to get the high schools started and then track what was happening in the Legislature and Department of Education."

In 2019, the Legislature appropriated \$1 million for WorkKeys at high schools in the state. This year, said Lenora Hogan, Director of Starkville High School's Millsaps Career and Technology Center, WorkKeys will be incorporated into the state's accountability standards, making it available at all high schools through

state funding.

The LINK's WorkKeys grant arrived at the same time Hogan took over as Millsaps director. While she immediately saw the potential of the program, she confesses selling the idea to some people in the community was more difficult.

"There was some misunderstanding at first," Hogan said. "The first year, I made (WorkKeys) a requirement for the seniors, some parents were calling and asking why their kids, who were going to college, were having to take this test for people going into factory work. I had to explain to them that WorkKeys was something that was for every kid. I told them that if their kid wanted to be an engineer and was looking for an internship, that WorkKeys certification would help them get better internships. I want my students to have every certification they can get. WorkKeys are as much for college-bound kids as anyone. It's a real value."

Courtney Taylor, director of EMCC's Community said bringing WorkKeys to high schools has been a real boost.

"I think it's been very important," Taylor

said." It allows for a couple of things. First, it's a separate measure than the ACT in giving high school students a frame of reference as to where they stand in terms of being ready for the workforce. On our end, it gives us a lot of good data about where students' needs are coming into our program. Do the scores on the math section show a little more work is needed there? Things like that. It really helps us identify and tailor our programs to meet areas of need."

Whitaker said the success of the LINKS' WorkKeys grant program is an example of the teamwork applied to enhance the Golden Triangle's reputation in the competitive world of economic development.

"I think the Work Ready certification demonstrated something we here in the Golden Triangle are particularly good at: Teamwork around an initiative," Whitaker said. "We had to have everybody involved to make it work: The LINK, EMCC, community leaders, county and city government and the high schools. Establishing WorkKeys as a tool at every level was a big part of that."

East Systems expansion well underway

Husband and wife team mark the next step in a successful journey

Story by Tom Ward

George East answered his cell phone quickly. After operating a local business for 25 years with his wife Judy, the phone rings now more often than ever.

New customers and the expansion of their company have made 2021 the busiest year yet for East Systems Inc. First launched in their garage, East Systems designs, manufactures, installs and maintains specialized electric control equipment for the printing, mining, packaging and converting industries and more. "It's like taking on another job,"

George said with a laugh about their business expansion. "We're about halfway through. The slab is done and the construction is going great."

The business expansion, at a cost of approximately \$890,000, marks the next step in a successful journey for the husband and wife team. Judy, an accountant, deals with the finances while George, an electrical engineer, handles production.

Although the expansion is still underway, it has begun paying dividends by inspiring the confidence of new customers. An Alabama com-

See *EAST SYSTEMS*, 15



Photo by Deanna Robinson

East Systems Inc. owners, George East and his wife Judy, are in the process of expanding their business.

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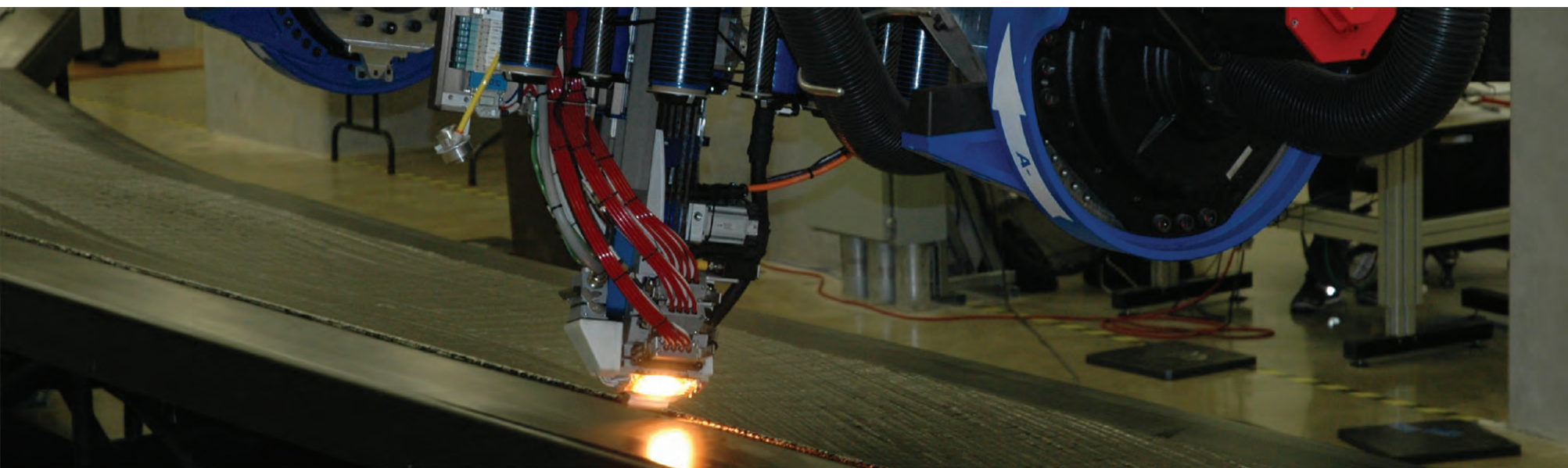
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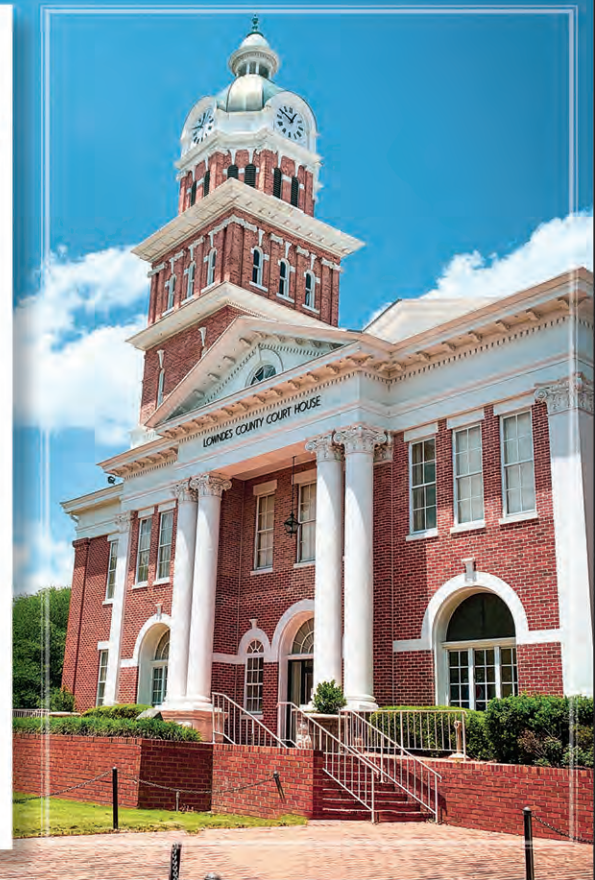
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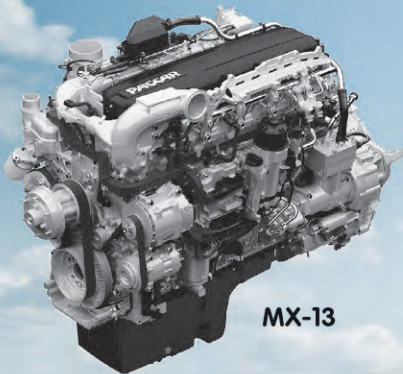
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This Origis Energy utility scale solar photo is representative of MS Solar 7 once completed.

Photo courtesy Origis Energy

Large scale solar energy production in Golden Triangle didn't arrive by happenstance

Story by Slim Smith

ssmith@cdispach.com

The old saying goes, "Cut your own firewood and it will warm you twice."

That idea, applied to economic development in the Golden Triangle, goes a long way in understanding the sudden arrival of a new industry, solar power.

Over the last 15 months, three large-scale solar energy facilities have been approved by TVA — two on adjoining properties in west Lowndes County and another in Clay County.

Florida-based Origis Energy will build and operate all three facilities, which when fully operational, will generate a combined 550 megawatts of solar energy and 300 megawatts of battery, or reserve, solar power. The first of the three facili-

ties is scheduled to begin solar power production in October 2022 while its sister facility will come on line in the fall of 2023. The Clay County facility should be operational in 2024. Starkville-Ok-tibbeha county officials have signed a tentative fee-in-lieu agreement for the potential development of a facility there while the Clay County site has an additional 2,000 acres available for future expansion.

Combined, the two solar facilities in Lowndes County represent the largest solar energy facility in the state.

It might be a bit of a reach to say that the Golden Triangle has become the Solar Triangle, but the arrival of an emerging industry built on renewable energy will have a real impact on the community. While the solar facilities won't produce many permanent jobs — no more than four

or five employees are needed to maintain operations once the hundreds of thousands of solar panels are installed — it will produce millions of dollars in tax revenues for local government and schools.

To understand how it is that the Golden Triangle has become a key player in solar energy production, it began not with the first solar facility built in Lowndes County in 2014, a relatively tiny 1 megawatt facility built near the Lowndes County Industrial Park, but at the turn of the millennium when the area's industrial boom was in its infancy.

To accommodate the large factories that were arriving in the county, large transmission lines were needed to supply the power needed by the newly-arriving industries.

See *SOLAR*, 14

Solar

Continued from Page 13

“When I came here there was one 161 kV feed to the industrial park,” Golden Triangle Development LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins said. “So, with each new industry, we had to build that power infrastructure. We have five now, so when TVA started contracting for green power in big numbers, we had the electrical infrastructure they needed.”

Suddenly, those transmission lines to supply industry with power became the means of transmitting the power that will soon be generated by the solar facilities. Like cutting your own firewood, those transmission lines will soon serve a dual purpose.

Having that electrical infrastructure in place was an important

factor in Origis’ decision to develop facilities in the Golden Triangle, but it wasn’t the only factor, said Johan Vanhee, chief commercial and procurement officer for Origis. Vanhee began talking with 14 landowners to secure the 4,000 acres that will be the site of the two Lowndes County facilities in 2018.

“It all boils down to the ability to provide renewable energy to our customers in a reliable and affordable way,” Vanhee said. “Siting the right location for utility scale solar generation, especially when combined with an energy storage facility, is a bit of a science or art. There are a number of factors that are evaluated, such as but not limited to, solar resources. There is more sunshine in the south than in the State of Ver-

mont, so to speak. Second is there sufficient transmission capability to avoid new transmission line construction? Third, is there sufficient and cost-efficient land available that will not significantly impact the local environment? We take into account environmental and social justice aspects to eliminate negative impacts to the local communities. Finally, what is the local economic development culture and leadership support, which is very crucial, and can our investment contribute in attracting new businesses? The Golden Triangle is a rare occasion where all the pieces of that puzzle came perfectly together.”

TVA has been very aggressive in building its green energy portfolio, having increased its solar contracts

by 60 percent since the beginning of 2020.

“What’s important to remember is that these are spec facilities,” Higgins said. “All of the power that will be generated at these solar facilities have already been sold. “This is a gamble on TVA’s part. It’s a done deal.”

Vanhee said that while his company has the potential to expand on its operations in the Golden Triangle, it’s difficult at this point to predict what the future might hold.

“Much will depend on the capacity of the TVA transmission system to absorb more renewable generation,” Vanhee said. “Only the future will tell if there is room for more utility scale solar facilities in the years to follow.”

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Photo by Deanna Robinson

East Systems employee Jon Ferguson.

East Systems

Continued from Page 8

pany has already awarded one new contract to East Systems, with more likely to follow.

Despite today's booming business, success did not always seem so likely.

"It hasn't always been a glorious ride," Judy explained to The Dispatch in February. "We've had to use up a lot of our savings just to keep our doors open and our employees paid over the years."

Eventually, another challenge loomed even larger than the ebb and flow of daily business. The company had lost great opportunities because their workforce and facilities were too small to handle many customers and contracts. They knew they needed to expand, but like most small business owners, they could not just write a check for the construction and new equipment.

That was when they called Joe Max Higgins, CEO of the Golden Triangle Development LINK.

"They really helped us get started," George East said of Higgins and the LINK team.

Higgins connected George and Judy with the Mississippi Development Authority, which ultimate-

ly awarded the Easts a grant of \$89,800, 10 percent of the expansion cost.

"We really appreciate everything they did to help make this happen," George added.

Armed with needed seed money, the Easts launched the construction. They said they have been pleased with the work so far.

"We're keeping the money in town because we're using local contractors," George said. "We've hired local people."

Hiring local people is especially important to the Easts, who have made Columbus their home over the past quarter century after both growing up in Houston, Mississippi.

"We're proud to live here," George said. "We have made this our home."

When asked what advice he had for anyone wanting to start their own business, he said the answer was easy.

"Always be planning for the long-term future," he said. "Always plan for what might happen next. Find your own pace and move at the right speed. And you should stay here in our community. There's a lot of opportunity here."

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- Joe Max Higgins, CEO
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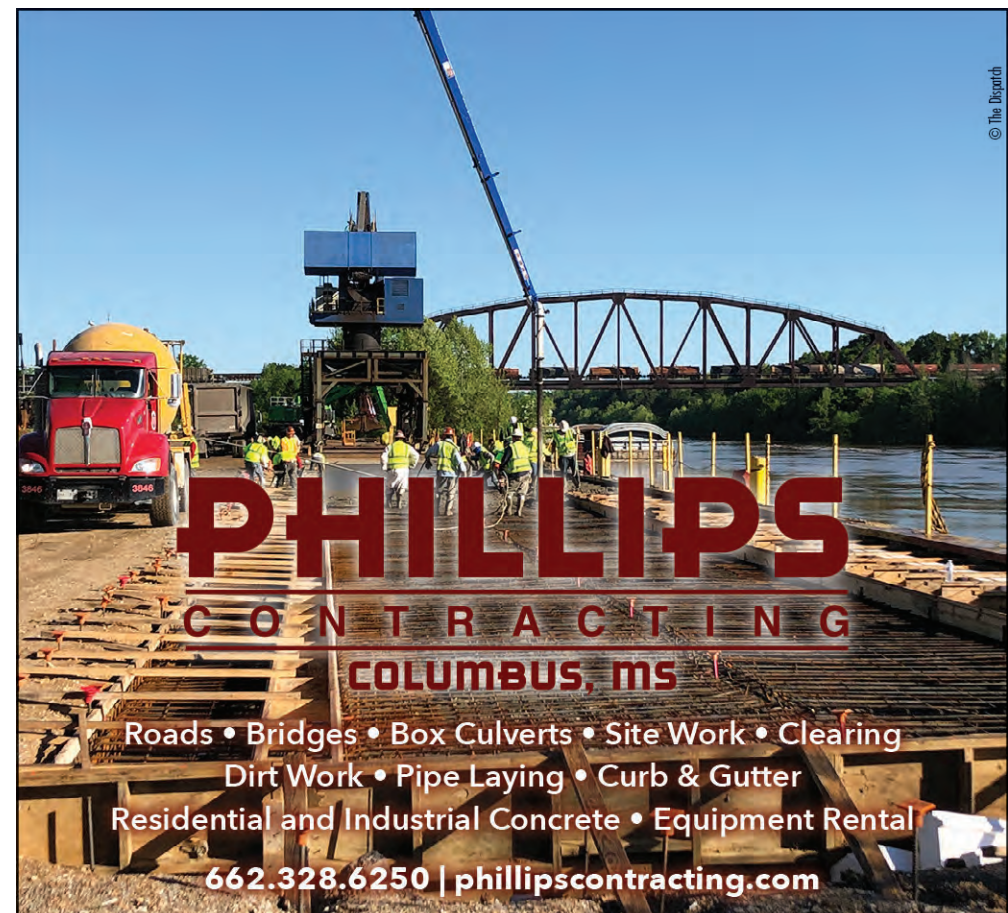


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Employees: 261

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Employees: 46

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Products: Paper mill roll covering and reconditioning
Employees: 109

Xeruum

Starkville • 662-323-4064
Products: Papermaker's felt
Employees: 220

Yokohama Tire Manufacturing, LLC

West Point • 800-423-4544
Product: Commercial tires
Employees: 668

EAST MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITY COLLEGE

EAST MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITY COLLEGE THANKS LOCAL INDUSTRY PARTNERS FOR THEIR CONTINUED SUPPORT.



East Mississippi Community College provides access to high-demand career pathways, experiential learning, and supportive services to ensure students are prepared for work.

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