

Salute to Industry

Saturday & Sunday, May 24-25, 2025

1,500-acre CINCO Megasite could welcome first tenant by 2028

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THE
DISPATCH

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About the Cover: This shows an aerial view of the west half of the Cinco Megasite, a near 1,500-acre site located north of Highway 82. The Cinco Megasite, which will be the Golden Triangle's fifth Megasite, was formally unveiled on May 15. Gov. Tate Reeves said he hopes to see a groundbreaking on the site within the next three years, and officials involved with the project say this may be a possibility. Photo courtesy of The Golden Triangle Development Link.

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Cadence Harvey/Dispatch staff

Gov. Tate Reeves announced during the CINCO Megasite's unveiling on May 15 that he expects to see a groundbreaking on the site before his term ends in two years, seven months. Trip Hairston, president of the Lowndes County Board of Supervisors, says this goal is "fairly feasible."

CINCO Megasite could welcome first tenant by 2028

'We can expect big things'

By Cadence Harvey
charvey@cdispatch.com

The CINCO Megasite could see a groundbreaking for its first tenant within the next three years. At least, that's what Gov. Tate Reeves is hoping for.

During the site's unveiling celebration May 15, Reeves announced that he expects to see a groundbreaking at the CINCO site before his term ends in two years, seven months.

Trip Hairston, president of the Lowndes County Board of Supervisors, said he believes it can happen.

"I think it's fairly feasible because of all the work that's being done on the front end," Hairston said. "And how awesome would that be?" Hairston said. "Within two years, to have another large corporation paying high salaries and building jobs?"

Located along Highway 82, the nearly 1,500-acre CINCO site marks the Golden Triangle's fifth Megasite.

A Megasite is a large swath of land dedicated to industrial development for several companies to build and operate.

The Golden Triangle has already welcomed four Megasites that are home to Steel Dynamics, Aluminum Dynamics and PACCAR in Lowndes County and Yokohama Tire in Clay County. The Megasite program is operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Joe Max Higgins, Golden Triangle Development LINK CEO, said Reeves' announcement has "turned the heat up a skosh." Though Higgins plans to do everything he can to make Reeves' hope a reality.

To keep pace, LINK is bringing in three premier site selectors in August: Darin Buelow of Deloitte, Jeannette Goldsmith of Site Selection Strategies and Robert Boehringer of KPMG.

These consultants helped land past tenants like Yokohama and PACCAR, Higgins said.

"We're asking them to tell us: what you like, what you don't like, what do you think our area offers, what do you think some of our shortcomings are?" Higgins said. "If you were going to spend time and effort fixing something, what would you do? How would you do it?"

If the site attracts a tenant as a result of those visits, Higgins said a deal could



Cadence Harvey/Dispatch staff

Golden Triangle Development LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins speaks to a crowd of about 150 during the CINCO Megasite's unveiling celebration May 15. The CINCO Megasite, according to Higgins, should be capable of providing between 2,000 and 2,500 jobs once a tenant is selected.

be reached in about nine months. From there, construction would likely take about two years, mirroring the development timelines of the area's four other Megasites.

Higgins has opted not to formally

predict when the site will see its first tenant, though he expects that which-ever tenant moves in will be of equal or greater caliber to those on the other four sites.

See *CINCO*, 14

Golden Triangle Travelers Now Have Options



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New westbound flight at GTRA hopes to increase connectivity, attract more industry

Airport's location key to regional industrial development

By Emma McRae
emcrae@cdispatch.com

Just land at the airport, and we'll have you to your site in five minutes."

That's the pitch Golden Triangle Development LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins makes to industrial developers considering a location in the region – one that wouldn't be a fair claim without the Golden Triangle Regional Airport.

Ever since the first Tennessee Valley Authority-certified Megasite in the region was established in Lowndes County, the airport has been the center of the region's influx of industry during the last two decades. That is no accident, Higgins said.

"You might be hard pressed to find a better spot for a whole lot of reasons. It's centrally located to all three of our towns," he said. "Having the airport that basically bisects, in a way, four Megasites – one to the north, two to the west and one to the east – that's not happenstance."

When it comes to recruiting industry, Higgins characterized GTRA as both a convenience and a catalyst, providing an easy method of transportation while also serving as a selling point.

"All RFPs that we get from the major site consultants, they want to know about proximity to a four-lane highway," Higgins said. "They want to know proximity to ocean or river or water ports. They want to know how far it is to a commercial airport, and to be able to say (it's) on site is pretty good."

The airport's location and willingness to work with industry has also played a direct role in its relationship with the LINK. By the end of summer, the organization will be moving into its new office beside the airport.

"We've been working with the airport in long-term planning to make sure that they're not just in existence or a place to land and have an airplane out there, but they're viable," Higgins said.

GTRA Executive Director Matt Dowell believes the airport's relationship with area industry is exemplifies its primary purpose.

"I think that just kind of speaks to what our function is essentially, which is a gateway to the region, a gateway to all the communities in the Golden Triangle," Dowell said. "... It's really our connection to the global transportation network."

With the long awaited addition of a westbound



Emma McRae/Dispatch Staff

The first American Airlines flight from Dallas Fort Worth International Airport taxis to the terminal May 5 at Golden Triangle Regional Airport. Now offering a westbound flight, the airport serves as both a convenience for local industry and a major selling point for potential industrial developers.

flight to Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport in May, that network is only expanding.

The airport in January announced a partnership with American Airlines to offer the flight, a goal that took more than a decade to meet. A daily flight each way began taking off May 5. That added to its longstanding eastbound service through Delta.

Dowell said the addition expands the airport's offerings, connecting travelers from the Golden Triangle to the country's two largest airline hubs in Atlanta and Dallas.

"By having that connectivity, it just makes it so much easier for business people to come and go who are looking to invest in our community or already have invested, and they're trying to get people back and forth," Dowell said.

GTRA is also doing its part in attracting more of those investors to the area. Working with the LINK, the airport hopes to acquire about 109 acres between Airport Road and the southern end of the runway. The roughly \$1 million purchased would be financed through a loan repaid by the airport's invested munic-



Dowell

'By having that connectivity, it just makes it so much easier for business people to come and go who are looking to invest in our community or already have invested, and they're trying to get people back and forth.'

GTRA Executive Director Matt Dowell

ipalities, all of which have already agreed to the deal.

Three companies – Stark Aerospace, Aurora Flight Services and Airbus Helicopters – are already located on airport land. The land, once acquired, will be a place for aerospace-related manufacturing to continue expanding near the airport.

"So we really see that being a site that can be developed and utilized by industry, especially aviation and aerospace companies that need access to the infrastructure that we have specific to the airport, which is our taxiways, our ramps and runways," Dowell said.



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Gig driving offers 'good money,' but market may be getting crowded

New opportunity for hustlers opens with Amazon facility

By **ABIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER**
arochester@cdispatch.com

When Douglas Cockrell Jr. gets off of work, he has two choices. He can sit in his house in Columbus, bored. Or, he can get behind the wheel and make extra cash through Uber.

Since he started driving for Uber as a side gig seven years ago, Cockrell has made the latter choice more than 2,988 times. Hustling like that, he said, comes with perks.

"Uber pays for all my vacations," Cockrell told *The Dispatch*.

Cockrell said he saved all of his Uber money for more than a year and then paid for a vacation in 2023 to Dubai and Abu Dhabi with those funds, flights included.

Uber services first came to the Golden Triangle in 2017. Since then, the ridesharing app has become an established part of the region's gig economy – its labor market based on short-term contracts and freelance work that is often facilitated through digital platforms.

Cockrell said he was one of the first drivers to join the Uber app after services began. Ever since, he has used the app when he has extra time. But Cockrell said he's particularly aware of when demand is high, often driving to Starkville and sometimes branching out farther to Oxford or Jackson on peak days.

"On a (Super) Bulldog Weekend, if I go on a Friday and a Saturday, I could make \$750 to \$1,000," Cockrell said.

Josh Herrington, owner and artist of Dunkington in downtown Starkville, said he has been driving for Uber for the past three years and he uses the funds to pay the occasional bill. Herrington typically drives on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, especially when he knows large events are happening and demand is high.

"You can't do it full time in Starkville because the population base isn't big enough," Herrington said. "But I usually do pretty good on ... Thursday

'I feel like, just based on the way the economy is and is headed, it's obviously going to get very crowded in that gig market like that.'

Josh Herrington, Uber driver

nights and the weekends."

Herrington said he has driven for DoorDash before as well, though the other app required drivers to schedule their hours in advance, which did not work well with his schedule.

Cockrell has also tried delivering Uber Eats and driving for Lyft, he said. But he's found there isn't high demand for Lyft in the area, and he only makes a few dollars per Uber Eats delivery if users don't tip, now that inflation has made food prices higher. The real money is still on Uber, he said, though he has also noticed recent changes there.

Uber uses surge pricing for its rides, meaning when there are a lot of users requesting rides and fewer drivers available, prices increase. But Herrington said he has seen more Uber drivers on the road lately, picking up odd jobs to make ends meet.

"I feel like, just based on the way the economy is and is headed, it's obviously going to get very crowded in that gig market like that," Herrington said.

Cockrell also said he's seen the money decrease in the game generally, thanks to inflation and gas prices. But he also said he's seen the number of Uber drivers on the road increase – which lowers the amount he can make, since Uber uses surge pricing for its rides.

"A lot of people have lost their jobs," Cockrell said. "Companies have closed, so people need something to do for income. So, you can work for yourself. It's like working from home, you work for yourself. I have seen the number of drivers increase.

Cockrell said he typically sees between 12 to 15 drivers working on any given MSU game day.

"I'm not hating or anything," Cockrell added. "People are trying to work."



Abigail Sipe Rochester/Dispatch Staff

Josh Herrington, owner and artist of Dunkington Art & Jewelry in downtown Starkville, gets into his car and switches on his Uber sign on Tuesday in the parking lot behind the store. Herrington has been driving for Uber for the past three years, making extra money in his down time.



A new gig?

Still, a new opportunity has recently opened up for gig work. Amazon's Last Mile facility came online at the North-Star Industrial Park in October, and the facility has been ramping up to meet its capacity since, Amazon Area Operations Manager Michael Bailey said in March during a Starkville Rotary Club meeting.

The facility has produced more than 400 job openings, including more than 200 drivers. That number includes Amazon branded drivers, drivers with a third-party contractor and drivers with the Amazon Flex program.

"Flex Drivers are kind of like ... if you've ever seen someone do Uber, it will pop up with a notification and they can accept the route," Bailey said to the club. "We have two and a half, three and four hour routes. And usually

they can accept the route for a certain amount of pay."

Typically, Bailey said, the company sends out about 70 vans a day and 10-15 Flex vehicles. The facility has opened up a new opportunity for those looking to fit a gig into their schedules, Golden Triangle Development LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins said.

"I started talking to people that are retirees that are delivering packages, or (Mississippi State University) students that are delivering packages, and all of a sudden, it suddenly dawned on me that there are people that seek that employment, want that employment, it fits in for their schedules, and I think it's providing people with that opportunity, and probably better than what I had envisioned when we did the deal," Higgins said.



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Solar power boom spreads to Golden Triangle

Projects completed in the region could use 15,000 acres

By Emma McRae
emcrae@cdispatch.com

The Tennessee Valley Authority hopes to add up to 10,000 megawatts of solar power to its electrical grid by 2035.

In a bid to ensure energy security, the organization, which serves customers across seven states including Mississippi, has already expanded its solar portfolio by about 4,200 megawatts either for commercial operation or industrial development.

“As power demand grows, TVA is focused on building an American-led energy future to create jobs and help communities thrive,” Spokesperson Scott Fiedler wrote in an email to The Dispatch. “Our work in Mississippi is a prime example. TVA’s diverse mix of generation sources help communities and businesses flourish.”

Partnerships with TVA customers have brought several solar projects to the Golden Triangle, where rolling pastures create the perfect environment for fields of solar farms.

Through the Green Invest program, in which business partners invest in renewable energy projects in the valley, TVA customers have made long-term commitments resulting in four utility-scale solar sites coming to the Golden Triangle, Fiedler said.

“These sites will help address the region’s load growth due to growing population, industrial electrification and onshoring of manufacturing and ensure the region has reliable, affordable energy to power American jobs,” Fiedler wrote.

Four solar sites are either operating or are under development in the region. Each is owned and operated by Origis Energy with TVA purchasing 100% of the energy for a 20-year term. The two sites that are already completed in Lowndes County – Golden Triangle I and Golden Triangle II – are currently producing 350 megawatts of solar capacity.

Two other Origis sites called Optimist and Hope, both in Clay County, are currently in development. Once completed they will produce a combined 400 megawatts of solar capacity for TVA.

Fiedler said the more than 500 megawatts of capacity produced by the four sites is enough to power about 300,000 homes.

“These solar projects are important to meet summer power peaks,” he wrote. “Plus, they provide environmental attributes to Green Invest customers to support their sustainable operations, which in turn can help attract and retain more Golden Triangle economic opportunity.”

But those aren’t the only solar projects filling up space in the Golden Triangle.



The Golden Triangle II battery bank and substation is pictured. The site, which began operating in May 2024, is one of four solar projects Origis Energy has brought to the Golden Triangle region through the Tennessee Valley Authority’s Green Invest program. The increase of solar projects in the region reflects a bigger push by the TVA to add up to 10,000 megawatts of solar to its electrical grid by 2035.

Courtesy of Origis Energy

‘As power demand grows, TVA is focused on building an American-led energy future to create jobs and help communities thrive.’

TVA Spokesperson Scott Fiedler

Golden Triangle Development LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins estimates there are about 3,500 acres dedicated to solar in Lowndes County and another 4,300 acres in Clay. Additionally in Caledonia, there’s another 1,000 acres for solar, 2,000 acres on the Lowndes side of the Lowndes and Noxubee County line, two sites of 1,000 acres each in Oktibbeha County and another 1,000 acres at Hickory Grove, Higgins said. Some industries in the region have dedicated acres for solar on site.

Adding everything together, Higgins expects there will be about 15,000 acres across Lowndes, Oktibbeha and Clay counties dedicated to solar energy by the

time each project wraps up.

Higgins believes the consumer is the primary driver of the growing number of solar projects coming to the area.

“The consumer is driving it because they’re being told it’s the right thing to do,” he said. “... What happens is, the public ... gets sold. You go, ‘I want to buy green. I want to look out for the environment. I want this for my kids and my grandkids. I want this to be a good place to live, so I’m willing to pay more, I’m willing to do with less or whatever.’”

But as more projects pop up in fields in more conspicuous locations, like the site on Highway 45 Alternate in West Point dedicated to the Hope project, Higgins wonders if consumers will be less tolerable of the additions.

“I think what people are seeing is, is renewable power all that and a bag of chips?” he said. “Are we really getting from solar what we want to? But more importantly, how many thousand acres are we going to see in solar farms?”

Cinco

Continued from Page 4

"We're going to be very selective," Higgins said. "... We're not going to recruit a company to this region that doesn't pay as good or better as the ones that are already here."

Higgins said he hopes the CINCO site will attract between \$2 billion and \$3 billion in capital investment. While he believes the site to be capable of providing between 2,000 and 2,500 jobs, Higgins emphasized that the quality of job matters more than the quantity.

"We're going to pick somebody that's going to be the right fit for the community," Higgins said. "And when I say the right fit, we're more concerned about capital investment and rate of pay than we are the number of jobs."

Comparatively, PACCAR's facility, valued at \$650 million, employs around 950 workers with average wages of about \$70,000, while Steel Dynamics and the upcoming Aluminum Dynamics sites exceed \$2 billion in value and offer average wages of about \$120,000. Higgins doesn't plan to select a

tenant who pays an average wage below \$60,000.

Three renderings for the site have been drawn up with configurations featuring multiple buildings between 1.2 and 4 million square feet. Higgins envisions one large anchor company supported by several smaller developments taking up space on the site.

Higgins and Hairston both said they aren't partial to any one type of manufacturer moving onto CINCO.

"We don't care if it's a pretty blonde, a pretty brunette or a pretty redhead," Higgins said. "If it's the right deal and it works, they're going to go over there."

Though no tenant is confirmed yet, optimism for the site's future is high.

"I think our site in Lowndes County will probably be the most sought after, the most marketable site in the state," Hairston said. "... We can expect big things. Progress is the name of the game, and certainly having a 1500-acre developable site is very much progress."



Cadence Harvey/Dispatch staff

Trip Hairston, president of the Lowndes County Board of Supervisors, addresses an audience of about 150 community leaders during the May 15 CINCO Megasite unveiling celebration while Gov. Tate Reeves sits behind him. Hairston said he anticipates the site to be the most marketable site in the state.



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