

A Coup for Gulf Breeze

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Opinion Editorial

Congratulations to the City of Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa County and TEAM Santa Rosa for their aggressive, comprehensive, team-oriented approach to securing a commitment from two of the area's top high-tech firms to locate there — and not abandon the area for greener pastures.

For the City of Pensacola and Escambia County, it's another opportunity lost.

Flash back to 2006, and Avalex owner Tad Ihns, bursting at the seams in his current Pensacola location, was looking for a downtown site to build his company's new high-tech home. Ihns was open about his love for downtown and his desire to build a new, bigger business home there.

Ihns represents the kind of energetic, aggressive, high-tech entrepreneur economic developers say this area desperately needs. He pays good wages, does business with major international companies, and hires from the University of West Florida engineering technology program.

He put in a bid to develop a project on a city-owned downtown parcel on Ninth Avenue in 2006, but the city opted to grant the project to a more conventional — and politically connected — group, and then watched the project wither and eventually die.

Ihns, meanwhile, is now poised to partner in a \$12 million, 80,000-square-foot building with another aggressive, local high-tech company, AppRiver, which was also bursting at the seams of its present Gulf Breeze location. The City of Gulf Breeze is putting a \$5 million parking garage on the table, and the county's economic development agency, TEAM Santa Rosa, helped the development group secure \$895,000 in state grants.

Yes, the project will benefit Pensacola and Escambia County, as the impact of development in either county spills across city and county lines. But it's hard to see it as a net gain for Pensacola or Escambia, which already had Avalex.

So Escambia County — scrambling to restructure its economic development effort — and the City of Pensacola, desperate to inject new energy into leadership of a city many think has "This is the way we've always done it" emblazoned on its city seal, can only watch as Gulf Breeze and Santa Rosa County show them how it's done.

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