



GEO Group's prison in Santa Rosa County will employ 470.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Full Speed Ahead

The nation's economy continues to gasp for air, but Santa Rosa County's economic development team has been rolling out celebratory press releases in assembly-line fashion, reporting business deals adding up to 800-plus new jobs and nearly \$150 million in capital investment.

The accelerating string of successes, which began with GEO Group's decision last fall to build a \$120-million, 470-employee prison in East Milton, was capped this summer when two technology firms, AppRiver and Avalex Technologies, announced plans to share space and ownership of a new \$12-million addition to Quietwater Business Park in Gulf Breeze. AppRiver will add 80 employees; Avalex, 21.

Also announced: Food distributor H.T. Hackney will quadruple its regional operation and add 50 employees; Clearwire is adding 100 to its Milton technical support and customer care

operation; and WTEC, which provides cable to wind farms, will create 100 jobs in a \$10-million expansion it's calling Gulf Cable.

AppRiver CEO and President Michael Murdoch, whose company provides web security, credits Gulf Breeze's proximity to beach and urban amenities, plus bend-over-backward helpfulness of county and municipal governments. He has turned away recruiters from Austin, Texas.

Tad Ihns, president of avionics developer Avalex, considered moving to Atlanta after determining the timeline for a planned technology park near his current Pensacola location wouldn't work for him. Santa Rosa officials, he says, worked to move things along. "They try to make things happen quickly," Ihns says.

Cindy Anderson, Team Santa Rosa EDC executive director, says the county helps by making sure sites are available — typically at below-market price.

BUSINESS BRIEFS

GULF BREEZE — The Zoo Northwest Florida, \$4.5 million in debt and still hurting from losses in hurricanes Ivan and Dennis, closed permanently after both Santa Rosa and Escambia counties failed to approve the zoo's \$125,000 funding requests.

LEON COUNTY — A \$347,000 federal grant is enabling Leon County Schools to buy eight new buses that run on compressed natural gas, a better choice environmentally than diesel. The district's long-term goal is to operate 80 natural gas-fueled school buses and share a fueling station with the community.

MARIANNA — Chipola College has started construction of the \$16-million Chipola College Center for the Arts, its biggest project since its 1947 opening and expected to be a five-county regional cultural centerpiece when completed within two years.

OKALOOSA COUNTY — Former Sheriff Charlie Morris was sentenced to almost six years in federal prison by U.S. District Court Judge Lacey Collier and ordered to pay \$212,000 in restitution in connection with an employee bonus kickback scheme that netted him thousands of dollars. He was convicted of fraud, money laundering and conspiracy. He also faces state charges of racketeering.

PACE — U.S. District Judge Casey Rodgers filed criminal contempt charges against Pace High School Principal Frank Lay and school athletic director Robert Freeman, accusing them of violating a court order banning school officials from leading prayer at school events. The order was part of an agreement reached in a lawsuit filed last year by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of two

Players

»» Destin-based Gulf South Private Bank has opened a branch at Pensacola, its fifth location, with Carol Carlan as city president. Carlan is also CEO of Carlan Consulting and earlier retired as regional president for Wachovia Bank.

