

Q&A: Loren Hill looks back on 20 years as head of the High Point EDC

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Triad Business Journal
December 30, 2020*

7:56 am EST

The end of the year brings the exit of an economic development veteran who says he's not retiring, but rather redirecting. Loren Hill reflects on deals that didn't happen — and then did — as well as opportunities and challenges ahead for the community.

On Dec. 31, High Point Economic Development Corp. President Loren Hill will call it a career after 20 years at that post. But the High Point resident isn't going anywhere, nor does he have any plans to retire.

Since announcing his departure in August, Hill has frequently stated he intends to pursue other opportunities in economic development without leaving the area.

During his tenure, the former hospitality professional, real estate industry consultant and two-term Jamestown city councilman led dozens of successful economic development efforts as the city has diversified beyond its furniture manufacturing heritage.

Before he finished packing up his office this week, Hill took a few minutes to answer some questions for Triad Business Journal about his career and the city's economic development growth over the past two decades.



Loren Hill is retiring as the president of the High Point Economic Development Corp. after 20 years.
ANDY WARFIELD

In what ways has High Point developed in accordance with your vision when you started 20 years ago?

I started this job wanting to have our city work closely and effectively with our neighbors — to help bring economic development benefits to us all.

The city manager who hired me said at the time that my connections with many folks in Guilford County and the region was one of the reasons he hired me. I hoped then to accomplish that goal by using my working relationships with elected officials and business leaders in Greensboro, my experience as a consultant with the real estate industry in High Point-Greensboro-Guilford County, and my time as a Jamestown councilman.

That close economic development relationship certainly has come to fruition these last five years since the Guilford County Economic Development Alliance was formed. It wasn't always smooth, though. There were bumps in the road along the way.

How did High Point become a destination for direct foreign investment?

The High Point Market and furniture industry brought many of the internationally based companies to town.

The city's tagline "North Carolina's International City" is a selling point our office uses whenever we work with internationally based companies, whether furniture related or not. City government and the High Point EDC encourage foreign investment and work closely with High Point's more than 80 existing internationally owned companies.

In addition to its legacy as a furniture manufacturing center and showcase, what is High Point known for in economic development circles?

Site selection consultants know High Point for our industry clusters: innovative manufacturing, supply chain and logistics, aerospace, life sciences, specialized business services and arts and design. Furniture's reach continues to be wide-ranging. It extends into all but one of those clusters.

High Point shares those economic development focus areas with Greensboro.

How will the catalyst that is Truist Point Stadium reshape downtown?

The city's multiuse stadium provided the spark to get downtown revitalization started.

Growth and impressive project announcements around the stadium have been made due to the resolve and efforts of the High Point City Council, city management, The Earl and Kathryn Congdon Family Foundation, High Point University President Nido Qubein, Dr. Lenny Peters, other business and community leaders and benefactors, the downtown revitalization organization Forward High Point, and master developer Elliott Sidewalk Communities.

What do you see as the greatest economic development challenge High Point faces?

High Point needs to continue working with our allies in efforts to train and develop our workforce for the skills that businesses need now and in the foreseeable future.

What do you consider to be your greatest victory and your biggest near miss of the last 20 years?

It's important not to focus on projects lost. Companies pick other locations all the time. It's important to be flexible, to stay focused on moving forward and to look for the next opportunity.

"Greatest victory" and "biggest near miss" are not necessarily opposites. Two examples immediately come to mind of a big miss leading to an impressive win.

- A tract on Pendleton Street was a finalist for a big project that ultimately chose a location in another state. A few months later — and with our office staffers by then being very familiar with that tract — we proposed that land for Ralph Lauren Corp.'s second facility in High Point. The company indeed built there and, by gaining the company's trust that the city of High Point would deliver all we promised, we landed two more major distribution/office operations of Ralph Lauren.
- Amada has opened two of three buildings on its High Point campus. We could not be more proud of having the company in town, and it is already growing more than we had anticipated. A couple of years before Amada picked High Point, the land where it is located had been the finalist location for another company's big operation. It was an impressive project that we very much wanted to land, and all that remained was to make the project public. Circumstances outside our local control caused the project to go to another state at the last minute. High Point, though, was the clear winner in landing Amada instead because that other project has since closed down operations.

What are you doing next?

I am so honored to have had a 20-year career with the city of High Point and its economic development department.

I've not coasted these last several months since publicly announcing my "redirection, not retirement." We have been busy with many projects, hosted a virtual annual meeting in November, and released our office's 2020 annual report just before Christmas.

In January, I'll take a week off and then will focus on the right economic development work option. I'll be closing one book that had a great beginning and ending, and I look forward to then opening another.