

# Bartlett

Area Chamber



# ***EDUCATION, GROWTH, PROSPERITY, CARE***

***the Sounds of a City  
Marching to the Beat of its Own Drum***



**Bartlett**  
Area Chamber



### Written by Pauline Müller

The City of Bartlett in Shelby County, Tennessee, is just northeast of Memphis, American music's southern capital. But Bartlett has been calling its own tune since the arrival of a number of international medical-device manufacturers over the last 15 years.

The medical industry has initiated an era of positive development for Bartlett, giving rise to the arrival of multiple competitors, complementary industries and even a brand-new school system that is attracting families from across the country.

As a result of this economic upsurge, Bartlett, has grown from about 40,000 citizens to around 60,000 in a decade and a half. Founded 190 years ago in 1829, a once quiet little city saw tremendous growth during the 1970s. Once established, the prosperity continued, and Bartlett earned a reputation as rewarding place to establish a new business or relocate to.

This is largely due to astute leadership driven by a vision for the city's future, but its robust workforce and a refreshingly wholesome quality of life should also take credit. ►►



- We spoke with mayor Keith McDonald and John Threadgill, President of the Bartlett Area Chamber of Commerce, about the city's impressive economic position, its expanding manufacturing industry and recent developments in and around.

Mayor McDonald's secret to success is in leading with a firm belief in "meeting the need, but exceeding expectations." In this way, he and his team have seen the city through good times and bad. John Threadgill says: "Our mayor has done an excellent job guiding the city forward. He's had some real challenges during his tenure [of 17 years.] He is fiscally very conservative, but he also realizes what cities have to do in order to grow."

### Big business born here

The City of Bartlett is a dynamic place. It has as much to offer families as it does people who are retiring, and companies with big and small business interests. It is so business-friendly that it has made a name for itself as a great base for business incubation, with several home-bred businesses starting here. These include well-known IT services, and snack and soap brands that were all honed in garages throughout the city before making the big time. A number of international greats such as Brother and FedEx are also nearby.

With its fast-growing economy, the city's industry is also expanding and it is busy preparing a mega-site below Brownsville, just north of Bartlett, to house new manufacturers. The development is projected to create another large influx of people who will be taking up employment here. The city's fortunate location near Routes 40 and 55 also greatly strengthens the local transportation industry. The completion of Interstate 69, which should be ready in 10 years, is set to encourage further growth in this area.



### ***"The medical industry has initiated an era of positive development for Bartlett."***

Alternating between being Tennessee's 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> largest city, Bartlett remained financially strong throughout the recession of 2008, coming up trumps despite the widespread economic slump of that time. "Because we had done a lot of pre-planning, we made it through without having to lay anybody off or cut any salaries. I run it fiscally conservatively and citizens like that," says McDonald. And this is an important point because it is exactly this foresight that secures the city's financial prowess, even today.

In 2019 Bartlett received an AA1-rating on Moody's Investor Services for its \$6.32 million General Obligation Public Improvement Bonds. Moody's describes the city as "a wealthy suburb of Memphis" – a fact that hasn't gone unnoticed by investors.

## Birds of a feather

Its main industry is also the fastest-growing. With its thriving local manufacture of orthopedic and other medical devices Bartlett is considered part of the greater Memphis region's 'orthopedic cluster' – the second-largest base of this type in the United States.

As an indication of the area's potential, International giant Olympus Medical, a sister company of the famous Japanese camera manufacturer, recently completed a significant expansion in Bartlett focusing on colonoscopy equipment. Originally a leader in ear, nose, and throat instruments, Olympus found the city's existing orthopedic cluster the perfect environment to put down roots as the industries use similar equipment – among other reasons.

Another big industry player, Grace Medical Inc. has also settled in the vicinity, starting as an offshoot of Olympus. In the same way, ten or so other related companies established a specialist manufacturing hub in the vicinity. Among them was Surface Dynamics, an affiliate of UnitedCoatings Group.

This company provides coatings, 3D printing, and other world-class support services to original equipment manufacturers in the orthopedic industry. With the overall industry growing fast, the company announced a \$10-million expansion plan in August this year that is scheduled to add over 100 new employees across various divisions.

## Coming together

All this new manufacturing activity has spurred innovation and the regular introduction of new products. One such contributor is a nearby Memphis company, Engineered Medical Systems (EMS). Originally established to take on the overflow from a few of the bigger manufacturers, the company is reportedly investing over \$10 million in the greater area. And this is not all.

One of the more surprising results of EMS's work with smaller manufacturing runs is that it now supplies control boards – the same ones it supplies to the medical device industry – to the aerospace industry. Naturally, this symbiosis holds great potential for establishing a new specialty field for the greater Memphis area to branch into.

"Developing aerospace products is something the medical device industry has been talking about for years. [Now], one [company] has done it. It would be great if [the City of Bartlett] could branch off into another industry besides medical devices," says Threadgill.

## Preparing for opportunity

When it comes to education, the City of Bartlett marches to the beat of its own drum - and very successfully. Education began taking center stage when competitors in the medical devices market realized that, in today's pressured employment conditions, they needed decisive action in educating their future – and present – workforce.

Hanging in balance was the vital issue of a constant supply of sufficiently professional staff for their facilities. As technology rapidly changes, and with the sheer complexity of the fabrication process and the sophisticated machinery employed, sourcing skilled labor is naturally paramount – the key to growth and prosperity.

In this case, stakeholders swung into action, establishing the Greater Memphis Medical Device Council in Bartlett in 2014. As a nonprofit, membership-based group, the council held talks and negotiations over the next few years. The result today is a number of committees, each charged with its own function, from handling finances to marketing, with the shared goal of improving industry education from the factory floor and beyond. "We have great people with a great work ethic. We just have to get them trained in these complex machines. I'm excited about the future and what that holds for us," says the Mayor, Keith McDonald.

Wisely, Bartlett's schools are in on the action. The city established its own, very well-received municipal school system around six years ago. It was a formidable task, but two legislative bills and a federal law-suit later, families are now moving to Bartlett for its great schools.

"[Our new municipal school system] has just been fantastic. We educate our children in a way that they can be useful and productive adults, and not just for the sake of finishing school," says mayor McDonald. The revised educational system received a number of plaudits this year as nearly all its schools were entered into state reward programs for higher-achieving schools. ➤





### ► The right path

A dual high school enrollment program allows students to choose between entering mainstream education or the Tennessee College for Applied Technology's (TCAT's) industry-focused programs. Run by the state, TCAT is a vocational institution that is setting up training in the field of medical device manufacturing at no cost to students. Its Bartlett expansion broke ground earlier this year. The project should be completed in about two years, when it will welcome students of industrial studies to its brand new premises.

Currently, around 40 students are enrolled in this program, acquiring the skills they need to get straight to work. The City of Bartlett is also working to equip surrounding schools to introduce this vocational training program, crucial to ensuring a steady stream of trained youngsters entering the workforce.

The state of Tennessee offers scores of other attractive educational options, from community colleges to its largest institution, The University of Tennessee-Knoxville, home to more than 33 000 students.

## Quality of life

This, coupled with ample job opportunities, and with Memphis only 15 minute away, has resulted in a healthy millennial-retention rate with many incoming families making Bartlett their home, drawn to its quality educational options. The city's robust industry profile has also positively affected the local residential-property market, with younger families typically buying houses from retirees who move on to senior-suitable accommodation.

The increase in population has spurred a need for mixed-use developments, something that the city is currently tackling alongside the City of Memphis. Ultimately to the benefit of all residents, Bartlett is also blessed with a large, caring community of faith-based groups who serve the economically vulnerable and the aging through volunteer work and charity organizations.

Life is great here and there's a lot to do, thanks to the city's promotion of a healthy lifestyle amongst its citizens. With the Mississippi and the Loosahatchie rivers nearby, outdoor and waterside activities are popular amongst locals. Around 30 gardens and parks can be found in and around its precincts - plus a luscious greenbelt.

The city's latest project is the 70-acre Freeman Park, currently receiving some special attention. Until recently, only 38 acres or so of this beautiful recreational area was used. But with plans to revitalize this verdant space, a 7-phase development promises to add a much improved recreational park to the city's existing collection. Then there are the Arkansas mountains and the Tennessee River, two hours away by car, offering great hiking and fishing opportunities.

## Smart growth

With a majority of existing commercial properties already developed, the City of Bartlett is now upgrading and improving older sites. As the need for office space grows, Bartlett is working to respond to market demands, including accommodating the local hospital's plans to expand its administrative footprint.

Nevertheless, a large part of the city's work is still in supporting existing commerce, alongside the new enterprises. The local Chamber of Commerce partners with all businesses to grow local economic strength and, simultaneously, local communities. Vitaly, this work extends to maximizing local employment, and all aspects of business development, as well.

With regard to the future, the City of Bartlett's plans are already fine-tuned. While growth is an obvious driver, 'strategic growth' best describes its goals, with mixed-use, commercial and industrial real estate development being the current top priorities.

But it's not all work and no play. The overall well-being of its communities is essential to the city's social spark. To this end, Threadgill sees the city's plans for a gradual, mindful approach to growth as the best way to ensure that progress benefits all - that no citizen of this fine city ever has to play second fiddle to its burgeoning success. ■

Content Developed by Tom England | Designed by Yoana Ilcheva





City of Bartlett, 6400 Stage Road, Bartlett, TN 38134 | P: 901-385-6400

[www.cityofbartlett.org](http://www.cityofbartlett.org)

