Welcome to the first installment of the “Dixie Dozen.” The following 12 cities and counties in Alabama, Florida and Kentucky represent the most active small markets (under 125,000 in population) in capturing manufacturing sector projects since the recession ended in 2009.

With 424 projects announced in the South meeting or exceeding $30 million in investment and/or 200 jobs in calendar year 2015, the region saw more large manufacturing deals than any year since 1992. There is no question that the data shows a manufacturing revival in the South that began when the country came out of the recession in late 2009.

If you are looking for a suitable small market in the South for your manufacturing project, the following profiles of each state’s “Dixie Dozen” may help in your search. A short writeup of the new and expanded manufacturers in these small markets is included. Other Southern states will be featured in later editions.

**Decatur, Ala.:** In 2015, Switzerland-based RUAG announced it would launch a manufacturing operation in Decatur after forming a strategic partnership with United Launch Alliance, which produces rockets there. RUAG is a leading supplier for the space industry in Europe.
Anniston-Oxford

While Calhoun County’s largest employer is Anniston Army Depot, the region has become home to a variety of industrial operations. A growing number of federal defense contractors call Calhoun County home, including Honeywell Aerospace. But the region’s most rapidly growing sector has proven to be the auto industry. Honda now employs 4,000 people locally, in addition to suppliers for Hyundai, Mercedes, Volkswagen, Nissan and a number of others.

Auburn

Auburn has intentionally focused on industrial development over the past 20 years. The result has been the addition of more than 6,000 jobs and $1.25 billion in capital investment. The city’s industrial sector has grown more diverse during this time, too, adding 34 new and expanding industrial projects in the last five years. From specialty plastics to auto drive shafts, textiles and wireless technologies, Auburn has attracted an array of national and international employers, including Briggs & Stratton, ACI Worldwide, GE Aviation, Alabama Power Company and Daewon America.

Chambers County

Infrastructure, quality workforce and exceptional cost of doing business have drawn a growing number of national and global companies to Chambers County. Across a variety of sectors, growth here has been steady – drawing auto suppliers, manufacturers, distributors and many others. Companies like MeadWestvaco, AJIN USA, Great Lakes Metal Stamping and Daewon USA have found success here in recent years.

Cullman

In 2015, Cullman announced 448 new and expanding jobs, with more than $100 million in industrial investment. This growth included three new industries and was spread across 54 new and expanding companies. Goat Island Brewery, Jelco and Design Technologies have joined companies like REHAU, Topre America, Yutaka and Wal-Mart Distribution who have established operations here, as a result of the area’s modern infrastructure, market access and low cost of doing business.

Decatur

Nearly 20 Fortune 500 companies have operations in Morgan County, where Decatur is a primary commerce hub. The area’s accessibility via highway, water and rail has made Decatur a draw for a diversified industrial base. Once proclaimed as “The City of Opportunity,” Decatur’s largest employers, like GE Appliances, Wayne Farms and 3M find the area’s low cost of doing business and access to raw materials perfect for manufacturing success on a local and global scale.

Enterprise

Home to a diverse mix of business, agriculture and industry, Enterprise is
a thriving community with a rich tradition. In 2010, Enterprise was named Alabama’s “Boom Town,” based upon its extensive growth in the previous decade (25.3 percent). The city’s top employers show this diversity and growth – ranging from Pilgrim’s Pride (poultry) to Hwaseung Automotive to Enterprise Electronics (Doppler Weather Radar). Growth continues to be fed by the community’s economic advantages, proximity to neighboring Fort Rucker and infrastructure.

**Franklin County**

With a close proximity to many food-related, automotive and metals industries, Franklin County has become home to a diverse industrial community in recent years. Centrally located between Birmingham, Memphis and Nashville, Franklin County is both exceedingly accessible and provides a low cost of living for its population. With much of its skilled workforce, it is little wonder companies like Pilgrim’s, Tiffin MotorHomes, Sunshine Mills and Innovative Hearth Products have found Franklin County a great place to call home.

**Jasper**

Last year, Mar-Jac Poultry announced a $10 million expansion of its operations in Jasper, as part of an overall $25 million plan to grow in Alabama. That expansion is bringing 50 more jobs to the community’s biggest employer, and is a clear sign that the local facility is getting the job done. Jasper doesn’t just produce poultry, however – other local industries include coal mining (Drummond Company and North American Coal), lumber (Jasper Lumber) and automotive parts.

**Chambers County, Ala.:**

Chambers County has become a hotbed of growth for companies manufacturing auto parts. One of the largest is A-Jin Industrial Co., which stamps metal parts for vehicles assembled at the Kia plant just a few miles away in West Point, Ga., as well as Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama in Montgomery. Three of Chambers County’s auto suppliers have located in vacant textile facilities.
tomotive (HTNA and Nitto Denko). It all proves that this community, less than an hour from Birmingham, is one to watch in the years ahead.

**Limestone County**

Limestone County has seen rapid industry growth in multiple sectors in recent years – especially those that draw a higher-educated workforce. While the county has become an attractive option for companies in the aerospace, biotechnology and robotics industries, it has also maintained steady growth in traditional manufacturing. Major employers like Steelcase (office furniture), Federal Mogul (automotive) and Aviagen-North America (poultry) continue to thrive here, due to the county’s location on Interstate-65 and low cost of doing business.

**Opelika**

In 2015, we named Opelika one of the “Ten Smoking Hot Economies in the South.” This rapidly-growing economic dynamo continues to smolder – having announced more than $1 billion in capital investment in the last 11 years. Not only is Opelika home to a large Wal-Mart distribution center and another for JoAnn Stores, it has become a center for a variety of manufacturers in the auto industry – including Mando America Corporation, Daewon America, Hanwha Advanced Materials and Cumberland Plastics. Opelika was also the first and only city in Alabama to deploy a 100 percent fiber network, bringing technological speed to the infrastructure and economic advantages it provides employers.

**St. Clair County**

The news has been profoundly good in St. Clair County in recent years. Last year, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that
the county had the largest increase in median household income of any county in Alabama since 2009 (15.4 percent) and the lowest unemployment rate (4.4 percent). The I-20 corridor provides easy access to a 3.1-million-square-foot Honda manufacturing facility, which has resulted in St. Clair County becoming a center for automotive companies. As a matter of fact, the county’s largest employer is WKW Erbsloeh North America, which makes trims and functional components for the auto industry. But the manufacturing sector is diverse here, including Fontaine Trailer (the world’s largest platform trailer manufacturer), Red Diamond (food distributor) and Vulcan Industries (display fixtures).

**Talladega County**

Recently, Honda Manufacturing of Alabama celebrated the construction of its four millionth vehicle. This milestone is demonstrative of the successful partnership between Honda and the workforce in Talladega County, where the company employs more than 4,000 people, and an additional 1,100 are employed by Honda supplier New South Express. The auto industry has certainly made its mark here, including several other supplier companies (Nemak Aluminum Components and Fleetwood Metal Industries, among others). But this area is also home to a variety of other manufacturing companies, including Legacy Cabinets (employing 300), MasterBrand Cabinets (300) and Resolute Forest Products (a paper mill employing nearly 300 more).

**Jasper, Ala.:** HTNA, a tier-one auto supplier that manufactures carpet and interior trim components for Honda, Toyota and other automakers, announced in 2013. The company has had a presence in the community since 2011 and continues to grow there.
Bay County

Bay County is known for having some of the nation’s most beautiful beaches, but it also is emerging as an economic engine for manufacturing. This Florida area, located in the heart of the Panhandle and at the center of the southeast Gulf Coast, is focused on several key industry clusters, including manufacturing. One company that recently located in Bay County is Edge Aerodynamix, Inc. The aviation manufacturer selected a site near the Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport in Panama City to invest $77.92 million and create 120 jobs.

Charlotte County

Instead of large manufacturers that make and ship a huge volume of products, advanced and niche manufacturing are growing trends in Charlotte County and other parts of Southwest Florida. Specifically, the area is working to attract advanced manufacturing, realizing a Southwest Florida location will make it easier for companies to attract talent. The county is home to APG Avionics, which makes airplane parts. And recently, Florida’s governor announced that a partnership between Punta Gorda-based Aviation Partners Group (APG) and OMA SUD, a leading Italian aeronautical manufacturer, would establish a manufacturing facility in Charlotte County.

Flagler County

Flagler County offers many advantages to help its manufacturing sector grow such as a major road transportation network, infrastructure to accommodate innovative advanced manufacturing companies, and available land for large facilities and operations. Local manufacturing companies include American Radionics, Aveo Engineering, CEMEX Incorporated, Sunbelt Chemicals and many others. One success story has been Sea Ray Boats, which has reported solid growth and been able to expand from 400 employees to 675, increasing the number of models being produced from 12 to 17 within two years. This increase in production was the motivator for another manufacturing company, Gioia Sails, producer of canvas products, to move to Flagler County.

Haines City

Haines City, Fla. largely has been successful in attracting manufacturers because of pro-active efforts to prepare sites and buildings. The community has four planned industrial and business parks and has identified over 800 acres of land suitable for industrial and commercial growth. Also, the local economic development agency is involved with grants and incentives to assist with financing for training programs.
Hernando County
Manufacturing jobs now make up 5% of the jobs in Hernando County and products made in the area include pharmaceuticals, industrial safety signs and equipment, decorative aluminum fencing, circuit boards, and aerospace components. The county has set itself apart through several manufacturing training programs. For example, the American Manufacturing Skills Initiative (AMSkills), teaches youth through an apprenticeship program. One recent announcement in Hernando County came from Accuform Signs, a manufacturer of safety signs and related products. The company plans to construct a $15 million, 304,000 square-foot manufacturing facility near its current location at Hernando County Airport Corporate Park.

Lake City
One advantage manufacturers are finding in Lake City is an abundance of industrial sites. In particular, the North Florida Mega Industrial Site offers more than 2,600 acres of mixed use development potential. More than 800,000 workers live within a one-hour drive of the park, ensuring a steady supply of skilled workers. The site offers frontage along U.S. Highway 90 and access to CSX Class I rail. Connectivity is enhanced with fast, efficient service to the nearby JAXPORT ocean facilities and five regional airports, including the adjacent Lake City Gateway Airport.

North Port
Over the past 10 years, this thriving city in Sarasota County has seen its population nearly triple and the average age drop from 70 to 38. The area has set light manufacturing as one of its target industries, taking advantage of the skills of a young, educated work force. Strategically located in southwest Florida between Tampa and Fort Myers, North Port combines the advantage of easy access to several major metropolitan areas and multi-modal transportation with plenty of undeveloped space and affordable real estate. Three international airports and three municipal airports are located within 45 and 90 minutes of North Port, which is right off Interstate 75. The city also has easy access to local seaports, Port Manatee and Port of Tampa, to connect products and materials to customers nationally and globally.

Ocala
In 2014, Creative Foam Medical Systems made the strategic decision to open a manufacturing facility in Ocala, Fla. The advanced manufacturer chose this Florida community to produce diagnostic imaging equipment and do rapid prototyping. The company added value to Ocala’s extensive manufacturing industry, bolstered by Florida’s removal of sales tax on manufacturing equipment.

Okaloosa County
The Florida Panhandle’s Okaloosa County has experienced growth from several manufacturing companies post-recession, with recent expansions and new jobs. One of these companies, Fort Walton Machining, recently announced new jobs and capital investment. A second, Bay State Cable Ties in Crestview, recently completed a new 20,000 square foot expansion and is adding 40 manufacturing jobs. “To have not only one but two manufacturers expanding in our community is really a significant occasion,” said Nathan Sparks, executive director of the Okaloosa County Economic Development Council at the time of the expansions. Okaloosa also is home to many defense support companies, a specific niche for this area. To help all the county’s man-
Manufacturers, the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County has created the Technology Coast Manufacturing and Engineering (TeCMEN) to be the premier business advocate for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) industries. TeCMEN provides opportunities for innovative collaboration and advanced technical expertise locally, regionally, and in the competitive global marketplace.

**Pasco County**

Just 30 miles north of Tampa and 50 miles west of Orlando, Pasco County is connected to Tampa Bay’s vibrant economy and cultural amenities with easy access to major highways, airports, railway lines and deep seaport. One of the fastest growing counties in the U.S., Pasco has been busy out-pacing the rest of Florida in terms of new employers. Today, the area is home to more than 350 thriving manufacturing companies employing more than 7,000. Accelerating growth is the fact that it is easy to export from this Southwest Florida location. The most recent Industry Survey conducted by Pasco Economic Development Council showed that 89% of the products manufactured in Pasco County are destined for areas outside Pasco to other parts of Florida, throughout the United States and international markets.

**Plant City**

Manufacturing growth continues to pick up in Plant City. Industry leaders already with a presence there include Highland Packaging, Morrow Steel, M&N Plastics and numerous others. These companies point to the city’s pro-business attitude and great location along I-4, the corridor connecting Orlando and Tampa, as critical to success. More than a million people live within a 20-mile radius of Plant City, with a labor pool of more than a half-million.

**Sebring**

Sebring, located in Highlands County in the heart of Florida, has more than 82 percent of the state’s population within 150 miles. Manufacturers there include CitraPac, a specialty food manufacturer based there for more than 90 years.

**St. Johns County**

In Florida’s St. Johns County, local manufacturers grow through exporting. The area is home to a diverse group of manufacturers producing a diverse range of products from military aircraft and aluminum fencing to acoustic wood panels and power supply systems. Many of these companies are involved in international trade, exporting their products worldwide. Several local manufacturers, including Northrop Grumman, Solar Stik, and Carlisle Interconnect Technologies are defense contractors. Northrop Grumman has established a new Aircraft Integration Center of Excellence at its existing facility in St. Augustine, one of five such centers nationwide. Along with Northrop Grumman, the county’s other leading exporters include Rulon International, iDeal Aluminum, David Dobbs Enterprises and Germany-based 2G Energy. The region’s international trade is supported by the Northeast Florida Export Plan and Global Cities Initiative, which promotes the benefits of exporting. Along with a great quality of life, individuals and business leaders are being attracted by access to a multi-modal transportation network, a growing regional airport, and a Foreign Trade Zone designation linked to nearby JAXPORT.
Why are business executives choosing St. Johns County?

- Top 20 fastest growing county in the United States.
- Home to the nation’s oldest city, St. Augustine.
- Florida’s top-ranked school system.
- Award-winning career academies providing skilled workforce.
- Access to multi-modal transportation networks.
- Located in Foreign Trade Zone #64 with close proximity to JAXPORT.
- Partnership providing export assistance resources.
- Cost-effective location with a pro-business climate.
- World-class beaches and recreational amenities.
- Long-standing history as one of Florida’s first counties.
Bardstown, Ky.: Thai Summit America Corp., which supplies stamped and welded parts to automakers, announced plans in March 2016 to build a $110 million facility in Bardstown – its first in Kentucky – creating 216 new jobs.

Bardstown

In 2012, Bardstown was chosen “Most Beautiful” small town in America in the Rand McNally/USA TODAY “Best of the Road” contest. The “Bourbon Capital of the World” continues to impress visitors with its charm and beauty, and manufacturers with its ability to get the job done. That’s why we named Bardstown top in the state in four different categories in our 2015 “Best of Economic Development” issue – and why companies like Luxco (distillery), Thai Summit America (auto) and American Greetings call it home.

Bowling Green

Bowling Green Metalfoming announced last year that they are investing $210 million to expand operations and bring 450 new jobs to their hometown. This announcement led to a number of other announcements this year – including SCA Personal Care, who are investing $23.9 million in Bowling Green. A favorable business climate and excellent location have led many other companies to locate here in recent years, including Sun Products (household products) and BlueCotton (clothing).

Bullitt County

Perhaps best known as the headquarters for Beam Suntory (vodka and bourbon distillation), Bullitt County has also become a distribution hub in recent years – for companies like Amazon and Best Buy – thanks to its proximity to Interstate 65 and pro-business climate. In addition, Indianapolis-based Browning Investments has committed $175 million
in building an industrial business park in Bullitt County that will exceed 4 million square feet. Little wonder, then, that manufacturers like Louisville Seating Systems and Sabert Corporation (disposable plastic food packaging) have found success in Bullitt County.

Danville

Danville is home to an ever-increasing array of manufacturing industries, including 15 corporate expansion announcements in the past three years, representing more than $44 million in investments. Several paper products companies are prominent here (AmericanGreetings, R.R. Donnelley), as well as furniture manufacturing (National Office Furniture), conveyor equipment (Intelligrated) and diesel and gas engine gaskets (Dana Corporation).

Elizabethtown

The greater Elizabethtown area continues to be a strong manufacturing center for the automotive industry, with companies like Metalsa Structural Products, Akebono Brake and AGC Automotive employing a large percentage of the local work force. It also has continued to attract a variety of other industries with the presence of companies like Dow Corning, Flint Group (organic pigments and printing inks) and Mouser Custom Cabinetry. Additionally, several major road improvements have only made the "Hub City" more appealing in terms of accessibility and quality of life. Between June 2011 and June 2016 in fact, this area has added 3,000 manufacturing jobs. Factors contributing to this success in landing Elizabethtown in our Dixie Dozen include the quality of work force and business-friendly attitude of the community. A central location and transportation accessibility also are contributing greatly. The area is directly on I-65 with easy access to I-24 to the west and I-75 to the east. With two rail lines, it also is 37 miles from Louisville Airport and the UPS Worldport hub.

Franklin

With companies like Harman (audio), Toyo Automotive Parts, QuadGraphics and New Mather Metals (auto stabilizer bars), Franklin has become a center for manufacturing in a variety of industries. The community’s solid track record in

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auto supplies manufacturing led to the announcement this year that Sumitomo will invest in their fifth facility in Kentucky in Franklin – bringing 145 jobs and a $10.5 million plant.

Harrodsburg

The largest employment sector in Harrodsburg is manufacturing – approximately 30 percent. With companies like Hitachi, Wausau (paper) and Corning finding success here, it’s not surprising the area continues to attract development attention.

Hopkinsville

Though the region’s top employer is Fort Campbell Army Post, Hopkinsville has developed a large auto manufacturing presence as well. Among the community’s top employers are Martinrea, Grupo Antolin and T.RAD – all focused on developing specific components for auto companies. The strength of Hopkinsville’s auto manufacturing workforce is so renowned that many other, smaller industry suppliers have located here as well, including DENSO, Autotec, Metalsa and TGASK.

Marshall County, Ky.: In April 2016, Champion Home Builders, a recognized name in modular, mobile and manufactured housing, announced it is investing $6.3 million in a production facility in the Marshall County community of Benton, creating up to 150 jobs. Champion is eligible to receive tax incentives through the Kentucky Business Investment program, along with recruitment and customized job training through the Kentucky Skills Network.
**Madisonville**

For more than 30 years, GE Aviation has been a primary employer in Madisonville – now with more than 500 employees making high-pressure turbine blades and nozzles. But the local workforce is amazingly diverse in the manufacturing sector, with companies like Berry Plastics, Ahlstrom Filtration, Land O’Frost (pre-packaged lunch meats) and B&K Wood Products all having an established presence here.

**Marshall County**

In August, Westlake Chemical acquired Axiall Corporation for $3.8 billion. Westlake has a number of facilities throughout North America, Western Europe, Asia and India, and the company has found great success. The company has found great success in Marshall County, becoming the community’s largest employer. That success has led to other chemical companies taking advantage of the area’s tremendous accessibility and workforce – including Ashland Chemical and Arkema.

**Paducah**

For more than 20 years, Dippin’ Dots has been making tasty treats in Paducah. The innovative ice cream manufacturer has grown to an internationally-acclaimed company in that time and remains a staple of the local economy. Paducah’s diverse and innovative manufacturing culture includes ViWinTech Windows, H.B. Fuller (industrial adhesives) and Trinity Marine Products. All of which continues to make Paducah an appetizing location for business.

**Somerset**

In August, Continental Refining Company announced it was now using an existing intermodal transportation facility to ship products more efficiently to national markets and receive crude oil and petroleum products. It’s a sign of just how much of a manufacturing dynamo Somerset has become. Industries as diverse as hardwood flooring (Armstrong Wood Products), charcoal (Kingsford Manufacturing), transportation (Hendrickson USA) and dairy (Prairie Farms Dairy) have found success here; because of the area’s transport accessibility, quality workforce and natural resources.