



BUSINESS

OPENING WORLD TRADE

CURRENTLY THERE ARE ABOUT 330 WORLD TRADE CENTERS AROUND THE WORLD. SAVANNAH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY PRESIDENT AND CEO, STEVE WEATHERS, ALONG WITH A LARGE TEAM OF LOCAL SUPPORTERS, IS WELL ON THE WAY TO BRINGING THE NEXT ONE TO SAVANNAH

WRITTEN BY LAUREN HUNSBERGER

Steve Weathers has been in Savannah working as the president and CEO of Savannah Economic Development Authority (SEDA) for only about eight months, a short amount of time to do business in a tight-knit community notorious for operating by long-standing family and friends connections. But you'd never guess it by watching him command a room full of the heaviest hitters in the city, a group that collectively governs over the sea, land and air in the Creative Coast.

During the succession of meetings he's been having with local leaders, he's calm and direct. He stands at the head of the room sharply dressed, with well-managed hair and a trim figure, indicating his level of attention to detail. He's a man with a grand plan for the city and everyone can sense it.

"Should we get plugged into world trade?" he asks. It's a question he's been asking a lot lately—to community leaders, to himself, to business owners and world trade experts. And by that he means, Should Savannah's next big economic move be to bring a world trade center to the city? It's a sexy idea, he admits.



* STEVE WEATHERS HOLDS REGULAR MEETINGS WITH CITY LEADERS TO PUSH THE MOVEMENT TO BRING WORLD TRADE TO THE CITY.

"There's a big world trade center in Dubai, UAE, and there's also one in the small town of Missoula, Montana. And they do business. Can you imagine any other reason those two places would have to ever communicate? It's amazing," Weathers says. And it's true. An instant connection into world commerce is intriguing. Add on the fact that Savannah has a prime location, a range of industries already heavily involved in importing and exporting, and a tourism driven economy, and it seems like a perfect idea. Right? Some local leaders think so and are throwing themselves behind the campaign. However, others, including Weathers, aren't sold just yet.

"You really need to have the numbers to back it up," he says. So that's exactly what he's determining. Called a comparative analysis, Weathers' very first priority when he took the position with SEDA was to have an outside party analyze where Savannah stood economically in comparison to 11 other cities its size. **The purpose was to quantify what the city's economic strengths and weaknesses are and to determine which industries and companies would last,** what the power of the workforce is, where there is room to flourish, and where the city would be treading water. "We're looking for economic fruit," he explains. Among other benefits, the analysis serves as a litmus test of sorts for whether a world trade center is a good idea for Savannah.

In May, the results came back. They were pretty much on par with what Weathers was expecting. Savannah has potential—lots of it. But still, Weathers is a perpetual risk evaluator and says he has a lot of work ahead of him.

Despite arriving in the city just a short time ago, Weathers has quickly put the city on a fast track. He has a five-year strategic plan to propel the city forward in terms of economic development, the comparative analysis and world trade center being two critical parts of that plan. But first he has to carefully evaluate exactly how best to do that. The good thing

is this is not Weathers' first rodeo. A member of the founding board for the San Diego World Trade Center and driving force behind economic development in Tucson, Arizona and Toledo, Ohio, he knows exactly what to look for, how to start the process and how to communicate with the community.

"We need to find out exactly what our footprint on the global culture is," he says. That's where the numbers come into play. Aerospace, emerging advanced materials, forest-based product manufacturing and, surprisingly, special food production all ranked very high as industries that could help Savannah flourish and provide sustainable long-term growth. "The thing I really liked about the results is the diversity," Weathers says, adding that while the previously mentioned industries are big players, there's a second tier of smaller economic ventures that also popped up on the radar.

"In terms of potential for digital media, around the country, we ranked very high," he says. Similarly, the potential for energy sustainable design and interactive entertainment is also very high in the city. This was very good news for Weathers as the final leg of his five-year strategic plan is to ramp up innovation, which according to the results concerning things like patents per capita and technology-based employment is one of the areas that Savannah desperately needs to catch up in. As his plan unfolds, he wants to eventually hire a director of innovation who will help initiate and nourish emerging industries.

The results from the comparative analysis are lengthy but chocked full of telling information about the city. Weathers' challenge now is to distribute the information to the rest of the city in a way that they can understand the impact of the project. It will then be up to his board to determine whether a world trade center is appropriate for the community. The local board of leaders will vote in September, and if they decide to go through with the plans, the World Trade Center Association in New York will vote on it in early October. One thing is for sure though, the city will be anxiously waiting to see what happens. **▶▶ TO SEE HIS DETAILED PLAN FOR THE CITY, GO TO SEDA.ORG**



WORLD TRADE 101

The World Trade Centers Association is defined as an organization whose aim is to promote business growth and international trade by uniting government agencies and corporations to create a global trade expansion.

\$200,000

is the sum of the fee required to be a regular member and have a licensed WTCA

by the numbers:

1970

was the year the first WTC was established in Tokyo

91

countries currently have membership with WTCA.