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## Japan-America Society of Tennessee Public Awareness Initiative

### Impact: Japanese Business Investment in Tennessee

*In association with the Tennessee World Affairs Council*

Verbatim Transcript

#### **A Conversation with Mandy White**

Chief Economic Development Officer, Jackson Chamber  
Member of the Board, Japan American Society of Tennessee  
Past President Tennessee Economic Development Organization  
Former Board Member, Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Video Recording on the JAST YouTube Channel

**Patrick Ryan** [00:00:23] Hello, I'm Patrick Ryan from the Tennessee World Affairs Council, and this is Impact: Japanese Business Investment Tennessee, a special project of the Japan-America Society of Tennessee. And today we're talking with Mandy White from Jackson, Tennessee. Mandy is Chief Economic Development Officer from the Jackson Chamber, and she's also former President of the Tennessee Economic Development Organization and a board member of the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and currently serves on the board of the Japan-America Society of Tennessee. Mandy, welcome and thanks for taking time to be with us today.

**Mandy White** [00:00:58] Thank you so much for having me. I look forward to speaking with you.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:01:01] Well, we're very interested in what's happening in in your area, in Jackson concerning the Japanese foreign direct investment there and what it's meant to your community. But first, let's talk a little bit about your background. Where were you born and raised, your education, and how did you come to be in your role with the Jackson Chamber now?

**Mandy White** [00:01:24] Sure. Well, I'm originally from Middle Tennessee, near Nashville, a small town there called Ashland City and chose to go to college here in Jackson, Tennessee, at Union University. After graduating, I frankly didn't know what a Chamber of Commerce was, but took a job here as a temp. And now, some twenty-three years later I've not only learned what we do, but I've grown to really appreciate and love what we do. And in my role here, I work with others in Madison County to recruit manufacturing companies to Jackson, to retain those that are here by building very mutually beneficial

relationships and really helping to create a culture and a community that entices growth and investment.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:02:11] That's terrific, and Jackson certainly is an important city in Tennessee, in Western Tennessee, closer to Memphis than Nashville, but along Interstate 40 for those who aren't familiar with where Jackson is in the state. Can you tell us a little bit about the economic landscape in your area? What sorts of commercial activity do you enjoy there?

**Mandy White** [00:02:33] Sure. And you described it nicely. We are along Interstate 40. We're the hub of Western Tennessee, the largest community really between Memphis and Nashville and right along I-40 with 10 exits here, four lane highways that really radiate in every direction, which means so much as I describe for you about our regional approach and how we draw people from the area to Jackson. Our retail trade area is about 400,000 people, so we look a lot different in person than we do on paper, with our county being just under 100,000 and we really have amenities of a much larger city. People come here for work, for play, for medical care, really for quality of life. We have a diverse landscape. Our distribution of labor is balanced. Nice blend of health care - one of the top 10 largest not for profit health care systems in the U.S. is located here in Jackson. But all of our eggs aren't in one basket we have manufacturing, which represents about 14 percent of our workers. And then, of course, you know, retail, commercial professional services as well. But where I work every day in the manufacturing, we have more than 60 of those located here in Jackson. And in the last five years, those companies have created right at 4,000 new jobs and have invested \$1.1 billion into the local economy.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:04:04] Well, that's terrific, and let's turn to the Japanese companies that are in your area. Can you tell us something about the background of how Jackson came to be a place where Japanese investment found itself?

**Mandy White** [00:04:17] Sure. Our first Japanese company and we have seven currently - our first Japanese company located here in 1990. At the time, it was called ... Now it is TBDN Tennessee Company, which is Toyota Boshoku and Denso. So I wasn't quite working here yet in 1990 to know why they chose to come here. But I can tell you that the reason that they have stayed here and have grown here and the other six companies have come here - really, a lot of things that that probably are common sense - our business friendly environment in Tennessee. Tennessee itself is within a day's drive of 76 percent of U.S. major cities. So location, of course, is important for both the receipt of the raw materials, but also the finished products getting where they need to easily and quickly. Our available sites have all been well vetted, our workforce and training opportunities are here, but mostly it's about relationships and it's relationships that the state has forged for years with Japan, its relationships with suppliers and vendors, and really the relationships that we have had and maintain with our existing industries. In my experience, the Japanese know that if another company has been successful somewhere that they will be too. So I think just doing what we say we're going to do and really supporting our companies and building those relationships on a local and a corporate level have allowed us to be successful.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:05:49] Yeah, we talked with John Gregory, who was one of the early hands in attracting Japanese investment to Tennessee. He was at the Tennessee Economic Development Department and his interview is one of those in the series. And he emphasized relationships at all levels - public-private partnerships. And he kept actually started using it - he would say the 'R' word - relationships. So it seems to be the universal

application of welcoming businesses to communities that get them involved. Tell us a little bit about the sectors that are represented. Denso is an automotive supplier, I believe. And what other companies do you have there? And I suppose that the advent of business in Jackson, the Japanese investors, if Denso was among them, was probably coincident to the introduction of automotive manufacturing in Tennessee as suppliers and such.

**Mandy White** [00:06:55] You know, and you're right. And really, in the southeast in general, I think that, you know, Tennessee, the automotive sector is really important to the state of Tennessee, and Jackson is no different. Six of our seven Japanese companies are related to the automotive industry, and one of them is a recycler that works with our local automotive companies and others. But we have Toyota Motor Manufacturing Tennessee here, TBDN Tennessee Company that we previously discussed, which is Toyota Boshoku and Denso. We have Toyota Boshoku Tennessee, which is a separate company. UGN, which is Nittoku. MOST Missouri Smelting Technologies, which is a Toyota Tsusho company, as is Green Metal, the recycler that I spoke about moments ago. And then our news company came here in 2015 and that's Pacific Manufacturing Tennessee, which is part Pacific Industries in Japan.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:07:55] Do you know if there are Japanese expats, Japanese citizens who have come over to the states to be working with these companies?

**Mandy White** [00:08:03] There have been. You know, we have noticed a change in the last decade or so that whereas previously a lot of those people brought their families over, some still do, but we're finding now that they come over as individuals and are allowed, of course, opportunities to go back and visit with their families, but they might do two or three year stints here at the local facilities and then they're transferred elsewhere to one of the other plants stateside, or they're sent back to Japan to work at one of the plants there.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:08:34] Okay, anything noteworthy about interaction between the Japanese who come to live and work in your area, in the local community?

**Mandy White** [00:08:43] You know, I think much like my two experiences having traveled to Japan, the Japanese as a whole are some of the most polite and friendliest people that I have had the pleasure of working with and that really translates into how they are in the community. They have genuinely been some of the most pleasant people to work with, both at the company level and then as you get to know them on a personal level, many have become friends, and several are usually really sad when they have to leave here because they have felt so welcome and engaged in the community on both a business and a philanthropic and personal level.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:09:26] Well, that's great to hear. Can you talk a little bit about what the community has gained from the foreign direct investment from Japanese corporations there in terms of - you know, we talk to the economic and community development people and they beat the drum jobs, jobs, jobs, and that's certainly a component of it. So tell us about the - you know, how many jobs that the community has been given by the investment, the scale of the investments, workforce development, impact on workers in the community - those kinds of things that we're really interested in highlighting in this project.

**Mandy White** [00:10:02] Of course, our Japanese companies represent over 2,400 direct employees here in Jackson. Of course, that's probably nothing new to you that for every one job in manufacturing about three are created elsewhere in the community. So not only are our manufacturing companies being successful with those 2,400 individuals, but look

at the small businesses they're able to support. Look at the other ways they're able to get involved. Their investment has represented over a billion dollars in the local economy. Much of that goes toward schools, so even indirectly, they've had a great impact on the workforce and the schools here. But we have found that our Japanese companies and really our manufacturers as a whole are really great corporate citizens and they care about our community. They're genuinely very well connected and it's not uncommon at all for them to reach out to us or through the local school system to be involved in I think it's called STEAM now, what we know as STEM programs or robotics clubs or engineering programs, co-op programs. They're really some of the first to step up to the table to say, look, we know what we need, but we want to be a part of the solution, and that's just one of the many reasons why we enjoy having them here.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:11:22] So in addition to the wages that are brought in and the taxes that are collected from these businesses, there is a sort of payback or at least paying it forward in education, training and development. Are there any training programs, specifically community colleges or other efforts that corporations there might be getting hands on involved in either financially or by participating in those kinds of programs?

**Mandy White** [00:11:53] Sure. One of the first that comes to mind is the AMT program, the Advanced Maintenance Technician Program at Jackson State Community College. Toyota at its OEM facilities - and let me back up and say here in Jackson, Toyota Motor Manufacturing Tennessee manufactures engine blocks and transmission casings. So while a significant employer here and one of our best partners, we don't have an OEM facility here, but we still are one of about a dozen cities in the country that can boast that we have a Toyota facility here, but at their OEM facilities, they have this program for advanced maintenance technicians where they have enough need that they have a whole class of students that graduate from a two year co-op program, with part of the week spent in the classroom, part of the week spent in the plant, and they had the need here but with a place of 400 people instead of 4,000, it's a little more difficult to justify having a brand new program. So they called me and we met with Jackson State Community College several years ago and have created a community wide AMT program with nearly 30 consortium partners now. So by taking the Toyota model and the curriculum that was developed at the Toyota facility, they were willing to share that for the betterment of, of course, their own plant here, but really our industrial community as a whole. And now we have 30 industrial partners that participate in this program and hire and employ these students during their two years while they're in school. And then, of course, the goal is that they would hire them permanently after graduating, and most often they do. So to me, that's just one example of Toyota and our Japanese companies really being selfless in providing information that they spent time, they spent dollars creating this program that they saw success in in other communities, and they really decided to share it with our community. And we've been benchmarked all over the country now. I think it's pretty unique to have so many companies participating collectively and together on this one goal, and we sure are grateful for the difference that it's made.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:14:10] Well, that's terrific to hear that kind of story that companies coming into your area aren't just - you know, we hear people talk about Tennessee being attractive because the business environment and the quality of the workforce, but obviously these companies are interested in workforce development down the road that they have long term investments and that they're interested in continuing the education and training of the future employees.

**Mandy White** [00:14:37] Sure.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:14:37] Well, what other impact might we share with us? Any anecdotes or case studies, things that interaction between Japanese businesses in the area and the community? What's the attitude in the community as to Japanese companies coming in? Is it a mutually compatible relationship?

**Mandy White** [00:15:02] It certainly is. We have a community - you know, I mentioned our health care system being so large - because of the 60 plus manufacturing companies that are here, many of whom are international companies, because of our large health care presence, many of those employees have are from outside of the country. We've been really blessed to have a great and diverse culture here. Our Japanese companies have been really involved in things such as the Jackson Symphony. They were an integral part of starting our international festival, which I believe is in its seventh year now that celebrates and embraces diversity and cultures. And really, our community does that as a whole. We as a chamber want to make sure that our business leaders are prepared to interact appropriately with our international guests and residents here. So we do things such as, you know, training on Japanese etiquette so that when we do have someone here from Japan and they meet with a banker or a realtor or with us, they feel comfortable. Our business cards are in Japanese. You know, the small things that might seem like they wouldn't make a difference. Almost always when I present my business card with two hands, as you should, to someone visiting us from Japan, they're often really pleased and surprised that we would have our business cards in Japanese. And that small thing, I think, goes a long way in saying, you know, you are important to us, we welcome you here and we want to work with you. So those things have been very helpful for us.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:16:39] To be sure. And it goes back to what you pointed out earlier - relationships being key to making the best of these investments and the community response and what the community gets out of the investment. Now, as you mentioned, Jackson is a hub to Western Tennessee, so I suppose that there are employees in these companies that come from surrounding counties. So the impact, the economic impact and prosperity is not just in Jackson, but throughout the region.

**Mandy White** [00:17:07] Very, very much so. In fact, the census will tell you that 50 percent of Madison County's workforce commutes from outside to work here. In manufacturing it's even higher - as much as 60 to 70 percent. So absolutely our Japanese companies here have an impact not just on Jackson, but in our surrounding areas as well.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:17:28] Well, that's what we hear from other stories around the state that when a business lands in one place, the impact - it is spreading prosperity in the connected region. Well, Mandy, thanks for taking your time to talk with us. Any last thoughts on what it means in your community to have Japanese businesses investing there?

**Mandy White** [00:17:51] Just that, you know, one of the things we pride ourselves on, we think we do a good job recruiting but we think we do a great job on those relationships and those existing industry connections that we have. And it's nice to work with our Japanese companies because they value those relationships as much as we do. They're some of the most welcoming and helpful and innovative. They're just - they bring so much to this community, not just in the jobs or the investment, but just their presence here and their concern for our community and making it a better place for their employees and their team members. And we are sure grateful for their presence here.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:18:29] Well, thank you for that. That's something I'm sure people are going to appreciate hearing. Last call on your pitch to Japanese businesses that might be looking at this and want to know more about Jackson? What would you tell them?

**Mandy White** [00:18:44] I would tell them that if they want to be in a place that has great infrastructure, a great location, sites that are well vetted that would eliminate risk and they can move on quickly, that they would be in good company with not only our Japanese companies here but others and with business leaders that understand what it takes to support our industries. I would encourage them to give Jackson a look. We would welcome that chance.

**Patrick Ryan** [00:19:12] And there's always the benefit of the Tennessee business environment and the geographic positioning within a day's drive to most of the eastern United States. So Jackson has that going for it as well. Well, we've been talking with Mandy White. And she is the Chief Economic Officer at the Jackson Chamber in Jackson, Tennessee, and also a current member of the board of the Japan-America Society of Tennessee. And this has been our special project on the impact of Japanese investment in Tennessee. Thanks again, Mandy, and we appreciate your time.

**Mandy White** [00:19:49] Thank you, Patrick. Have a great day.