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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 Vicki Bunch

Vice President of Talent Development of the Jackson Chamber of Commerce

Video Recording on the JAST YouTube Channel

Patrick Ryan [00:00:23] Hello. Welcome to this special edition of the Japan-America Society of Tennessee special project on the impact of Japanese investment in Tennessee. I'm Patrick Ryan from the Tennessee World Affairs Council. This series explores the investment of Japanese businesses in the state of Tennessee and the economic impact on the communities across the state. Today, we're pleased to welcome Vicki Bunch to our program. Vicki is the Vice President for Talent Development at the Jackson, Tennessee Chamber of Commerce. Welcome, Vicki. Thanks for joining us today.

Vicki Bunch [00:01:01] Good afternoon, Pat. Thanks for having me.

Patrick Ryan [00:01:03] Oh, you bet. We're looking forward to a conversation and learning what's happening in Jackson there. The more I read about the chamber and investment and the businesses there - it sounds like exciting times in Jackson with the economic development.

Vicki Bunch [00:01:22] You know, we are very fortunate in that we are very busy here in Jackson, Tennessee. We have a lot of exciting projects happening and it's a great time to be in economic development.

Patrick Ryan [00:01:35] Well, let's start Vicki with a little bit about you and your role at the chamber. Tell us about talent development and economic development and the chamber there. I know you have a large chamber that extends beyond Jackson to Madison County, so give us a bit of background and context about your work there.

Vicki Bunch [00:01:59] Sure, Pat, we have a chamber that has just over a thousand members. We are very involved in Jackson and Madison County, as well as in our entire workforce, region and economic and community development. We partner closely with our higher education institutes and our public school systems to create a talent of workers for our businesses and industries. I have been in economic development almost two decades

now. I have worked for a smaller chamber and within the last probably five to six years, transitioned more out of economic development - while I'm still very involved in that aspect - into a more niche area of workforce development, so excited to bring a certain energy to our projects with workforce.

Patrick Ryan [00:02:57] Well, it's an impressive amount of work that your chamber has done in your time there. I'm sure you've had a lot of experience with the relationship between the businesses there and the public sector and bringing in new businesses. I noticed a press release on the chamber website talking about new investment in Toyota. Give us a little bit of an idea of what the landscape looks like there with Japanese businesses. We talked before we started here about some of the acronyms that that you've got in terms of companies. Give us an idea of how big the Japanese footprint for businesses is there in Jackson.

Vicki Bunch [00:03:50] Sure. I will start with a big picture and then narrow down into what our Japanese companies have meant in that big picture. So when you look at the distribution of labor for Jackson, you will find a blend of health care, manufacturing and professional services. Our manufacturing sector makes up over 14 percent of the overall workforce in our region. And if you look within the nine-county region that makes up our labor shed, we're more closer to 18 percent. We have about 60 manufacturing companies that have created almost 4000 jobs and invested more than a billion dollars into our local economy.

So when you look at that investment, out of those manufacturing companies seven are Japanese companies. We have Toyota Motor Manufacturing Company, as well as some other suppliers to Toyota that call us call Jackson home. So out of the almost 4000 jobs represented in manufacturing, 24 are represented out of those seven companies, out of those seven Toyota companies. So needless to say, they have made a significant impact on our economy here in Jackson and proved to be very beneficial partners, not only in the manufacturing setting, but just in our community as a whole.

Patrick Ryan [00:05:22] Well, let's look at just one of those companies. The Toyota Boshoku Corporation and Denso Corporation have a joint venture called the TBDN Tennessee Company. And they've been in Jackson since 1989, so they were early into the landing of Japanese foreign direct investment in the state. And I understand that you've done some work with them on a project to encourage young people to learn technical vocations.

Vicki Bunch [00:05:58] Yes. In 2019, there was an initiative started within our local school system, Jackson and Madison County schools in an effort to create a work-based learning opportunity for students. The acronym LOOP, which is what the program's called, stands for Local Options and Opportunities Program. So the school superintendent at the time had one of his main pillars as making sure that every student, whether they graduate and go to a four-year university or graduate and go directly into the workforce, have the options and opportunities needed to be successful in life.

So one of our local manufacturing companies agreed to pilot the program, and we have a couple of our Japanese partners that have been significant partners in the program. So the students - it's a competitive process, so the students apply for the slots available to participate in LOOP. They are hired directly by the company. They are employees of the company and at the same time still remain full time students within the school system. So they will attend school or class half a day in order to get the credentials needed to

graduate with their certification and their diploma. And the other half of the day, they're working on the industry floor, learning the skills and getting the work-based learning experience needed to be successful in life. The students are paid a competitive wage. They do have to work when their peers are off on spring break or summer break. They are full time employee, so they show up at 7 a.m. or whatever time their shift starts and work just like their peers within the manufacturing setting do.

Patrick Ryan [00:08:03] So I assume that many of the participants in the program go on to work with the companies that they become involved with as students. Any sense of how that's working out in terms of young people staying in the community? I know there are a lot of areas of Tennessee that don't have those kinds of programs or those kinds of business investments where young people find that they have to go off somewhere else to find a job.

Vicki Bunch [00:08:33] Sure, absolutely, some do stay with that company and just continue employment. Some see that they want to work in manufacturing but maybe want to become an engineer or something related to the work that they've been exposed to. One unique thing about this year's cohort is that all of the applicants and the hires were female, so it's been a strong initiative here in Jackson to have more women in the workplace. And so we were excited to see that. It definitely is refreshing to break down some of those barriers. So that's been exciting work for us. It's also exciting when you have a student graduate and at their high school graduation, the principal shakes their hand and says, you know, your 401k is going to make a tremendous difference in your life. So not many 18-year-olds graduate high school with a 401k already in place. It's very transformative for our students.

Patrick Ryan [00:09:41] Sure, sure. Now that's invaluable background. Now, of the companies, the Japanese companies in the area, you said there were seven - are they all in the automotive industry?

Vicki Bunch [00:09:59] Yes. Yes, I believe they are. We have - and I believe they're all suppliers to Toyota, so we have a smelting technology that is a supplier to Toyota Motor and manufacturing. We also have other Toyota components manufacturers that that supply to Toyota.

Patrick Ryan [00:10:24] And I saw in the press release that the Toyota Tennessee or TMMTN recently invested another 17 million on top of, I think it was 240 million announced last November in the plant there that produces cast hybrid transaxle cases. And those parts go to every Toyota and Lexus in North America. That must be quite an impressive facility.

Vicki Bunch [00:10:52] It is an impressive facility and they continue to invest in Jackson, which is very exciting. They also support our school systems. They sponsored transportation for our students. They donated five brand new vans for the students to be transported to and from work from school. So they continue to make STEM investments and just are great, great business partners for our community.

Patrick Ryan [00:11:24] You know, some communities, probably early in the process when Tennesseans weren't used to foreign companies coming and investing in communities may have been concerned that the companies might not have the community in their best interest, but it seems that Jackson has found that the companies are interested in developing the community and being involved. Is that fair to say?

Vicki Bunch [00:11:51] Absolutely. Our Japanese companies are great corporate citizens. They really, truly care about our community. They've invested over a billion dollars in our local economy. They work well with our local government and they partner with us on the economic development side. Any time we call and ask up something, they're more than willing to help out and vice versa. They're truly integrated into our community. Their thrilling philanthropic organizations are very generous and they're truly making a difference and giving back.

Patrick Ryan [00:12:31] Well, that's terrific. Vicki, any last thoughts about the impact of these Japanese businesses on the community there, what it's meant to the community?

Vicki Bunch [00:12:42] You know, I just will reiterate that their partnerships are - we're blessed to have them in our community and being engaged in helping us to start our co-op program and just the investment they're making, not only in the community but in the lives of our citizens and students here in Jackson. It's very refreshing. It definitely is a game changer for us.

Patrick Ryan [00:13:08] Well, that's great. Thanks for taking time to tell us the story of Japanese businesses investing in the Jackson Madison County area. We've been talking with Vicki Bunch. She's the Vice President of Talent Development at the Jackson Chamber of Commerce. And this is Patrick Ryan with the Tennessee World Affairs Council. Thank you again, Vicki, for joining us.

Vicki Bunch [00:13:31] Thank you, Pat.

Patrick Ryan [00:13:32] And this is the Japan-America Society of Tennessee special project on the impact of Japanese businesses in Tennessee. Thank you.