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The Azalea Trail Maids are high school students who serve as Mobile's city ambassadors at various events. A Deep South city much like New Orleans, Mobile has become a boomtown -- businesses can't train workers fast enough to fill thousands of jobs. (MOBILE (ALA.) AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE) ()

In Mobile, aerospace is just part of a bolder vision of global commerce

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By **ANDREA JAMES**
P-I REPORTER

MOBILE, Ala. -- Years before many Seattleites would consider Mobile a jet-city rival, officials here set sights on the Pacific Northwest and its lucrative aerospace industry.

"We've been to Seattle several times, but I don't recall Seattle coming here," Mobile Mayor Sam Jones said in a recent interview. "While it appears that some people in Seattle don't know a lot about Mobile, Alabama, Boeing knows a whole lot about us. They've been here twice."



Indeed. Some in this Gulf Coast city speculate that [The Boeing Co.'s consideration](#) of putting 787 jetliner production in Mobile is what ultimately led the parent company of Airbus to land here.

Now Mobile has emerged as a mini-challenger to Seattle, hosting Boeing's biggest competitor in America's backyard. With a \$35 billion contract endorsement from the Air Force (which Boeing is protesting), Airbus' parent company, the European Aeronautic Defense and Space Co., has pledged to build commercial airplanes along with military tankers in Alabama.

How did this happen? Mobile officials cite an embrace of globalization, an outpouring of Southern hospitality toward big business and an ability to put aside political differences at all levels of

government.

The city's leaders share a common dialogue and a distaste for those who would prevent progress. Port of Mobile Director Jimmy Lyons, for example, calls people who grouse all the time, "cave people," for "citizens against virtually everything."

The city has made a "deliberate effort" to attract investment, Lyons said. "Some of the old guard in Mobile, for many years, they didn't want anything new. Those people have been pushed way aside into the minority."

The strategy works. The Southern city, pronounced Mo-BEEL, is America's fastest-growing small metro, according to Forbes magazine. Symbolic of the positive benefits of globalization, Mobile is thriving on foreign corporate investment and international trade at its port.

"Our target for recruitment is not just limited to the U.S.," Jones said. "It's global."

As Mobile sheds an outdated backwater image, local perceptions are changing, too.

Mobile County Commissioner Stephen Nodine said that until recently, he was skeptical of free trade. "I've always been a buy-American person," he said. "I was closed-minded about how global of an economy that we live in. Within the defense industry, everything is global."

Now, the Republican leader finds himself welcoming foreign corporations. "I keep reminding people," Nodine said of the French and the Spanish, "they're the ones who founded Mobile 300-something years ago."

International city?

Mobile shares a common heritage with New Orleans and has a unique culture. Though it is firmly planted in the Bible Belt Deep South, its residents enjoy white-sand, turquoise-water beaches and weeks of parades and galas leading up to Mardi Gras. It is Jimmy Buffett's hometown.

Immediately after World War II, the city began a slow decline, suffering from a brain drain as educated youth fled for bigger cities. When its Air Force base -- the future tanker-production site -- closed in the 1960s, the city took its biggest dive.

But in the past four years, Mobile has become a boomtown -- businesses can't train workers fast enough to fill thousands of job openings.

Evidence of the boom is everywhere: In the newly opened chic coffee shop downtown, in the port's \$500 million expansion over five years, in new condominiums, and, most visibly, in the RSA Battle House Tower skyscraper, which opened in summer 2007. At 35 stories, it is the tallest building in Alabama; its shiny spire hovers above ironwork balconies, juxtaposing corporate wealth against Old South.

Some of the growth is related to Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina, which knocked out nearby Gulf Coast cities for a few years.

But much growth also comes from overseas. Among the region's top 10 manufacturers are Evonik Degussa of Germany; Austal, a shipbuilder owned by an Australian firm; Mobile Aerospace

Engineering, owned by a Singapore firm; and Ciba Specialty Chemicals of Switzerland.

ThyssenKrupp of Germany will surpass all of them when its steel plant opens in 2010, employing nearly 3,000. An aircraft and tanker assembly plant, operated by Northrop Grumman and EADS, would be next.

MOBILE VS. SEATTLE

South Alabama is growing a number of industries that parallel Washington: international shipping, cruising, timber, cancer research, tourism and now aerospace. Here's how the two cities compare.

	MOBILE	SEATTLE	U.S.
Unemployment rate	3.9%	4.0%	4.8%
Annual salary			
Computer programmer	\$43,510	\$90,550	\$69,500
Elementary school teacher	\$38,510	\$49,710	\$48,700
Engineering manager	\$110,560	\$121,450	\$110,030
City population	192,830	582,454	
High school graduation rate	80.5%	89.5%	80.4%
Bachelor's degree or higher	25%	47%	24%
Median home value (2000)	\$81,400	\$259,600	\$119,600
Average commute In minutes	22	25	26
Union membership (statewide)	9.5%	20.2%	12.1%

Sources: Most recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census Bureau

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Airbus is already making itself at home at its Mobile engineering center. On a small hill nearby, the Airbus logo is arranged in blue and white stones, shaded by live oaks and Spanish moss.

Three flags fly outside: those of Airbus, the U.S. and the state of Alabama.

Rosemarie Waters, 34, of Mobile works at the front desk. She saw the job opening on Monster.com.

"You get to meet lots of different cultures," Waters said of her job. "I never even knew who Airbus was until I applied. I said, 'Airbus, what are they, an elevator company or something?' My husband said, 'I think they make airplanes.' "

That was a year ago. By now, [nearly everyone](#) in Mobile is aware of the company, which is part of their changing fortunes.

The engineers do product development on the A350XWB and the A330-200 freighter, as well as production engineering work on the A380, A330 and A340, site director David Trent said. The office is the "first step" of Airbus and EADS committing to the region and building aerospace business in Mobile, he said.

Seattle's image

The Mobile jet-production site, still undeveloped, would be an acorn compared with Boeing's operations in Everett and Renton. It could produce about four planes per month, compared with Boeing's 40.

Still, when it comes to attracting aerospace investment, Alabama has the advantage, said Tom Captain, a senior principal in aerospace and defense at Deloitte Consulting.

"I'm working right now for aerospace companies who are looking to place work, and I'm telling you, Washington is not on their top 10 list," said Captain, who has worked in the industry for 27 years.

The high cost of living in Seattle and high wages make it harder to compete, even though Washington promises aerospace incentives, he said.

"After this tanker loss, the state is going to have a defining moment, a gotcha moment," Captain said. Washington would do well, he said, to model itself after South Carolina, Virginia and Alabama.

Alabama politicians trumpet their wooing of ThyssenKrupp Steel and Stainless USA LLC to build plants.

"One of the strengths of the Alabama team is a whole lot of alignment. There's a consistency of a message and a continuity," said Bob Soulliere, chief executive of the steel operation.

For example, the city, the county and the state make permitting easy, and all levels of government have kept their promises.

"People are very receptive, very warm," he said. "When you build a \$3 billion investment and 3,000 jobs, they are even more receptive and more warm."

Not everyone thinks that the Alabama strategy is best for the United States. The country benefits most from hosting headquarters companies -- an area in which Seattle has excelled -- because innovation happens in the head office, said Usha Haley, director of the Global Business Center at the University of New Haven. She said that Boeing should have won the tanker deal.

"We're in a recession in the U.S., we're losing employment," she said. Aerospace "is a strategically important industry for the U.S. There are very few global players. A country or region can sustain just one of these players."

Mayor Jones doesn't see things that way. With foreign investment, homegrown start-ups could follow. Thirty foreign-based companies in the Mobile area employ more than 5,600 people, according to the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce.

Foreign companies "are coming into Mobile to do business and hiring American workers," he said. "Is that a bad idea?"

In contrast to Western Washington, labor unions are not as welcome in South Alabama. "The unions don't have a foothold here as they do in other areas," County Commissioner Nodine said. "Nor do I believe they should."

But jobs they'll take, gladly.

"Tell Mr. Gates, we'd love to have a Microsoft facility down here," Nodine said. "We'll ask for anything."

P-I reporter Andrea James can be reached at 206-448-8124 or andreajames@seattlepi.com.

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