

New economic CEO plans to hone organization's mission

By Anthony Clark

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After rising through the chamber of commerce ranks for 14 years, Susan Davenport said she knew her next move would probably be to the top. She just didn't know whether that would be in Gainesville.

Two years after coming to the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce as vice president of economic development, Davenport was named president and CEO on Sept. 20 after four months in an interim role following Tim Giuliani's move to the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce.

"I think I'm definitely ready," she said.

Davenport spent her first 12 years as a chamber executive with the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce in Texas, where she worked on business recruitment, started a business retention and expansion program, coordinated a regional tech startup program for the state and started a program for tech executives to support entrepreneurs. Her last role was as senior vice president of global technology strategies.

Giuliani called her out of the blue to recruit her to his team.

Several factors persuaded her to come to Gainesville. First, she knew it was a university town.

“A passion of mine is seeing that universities are leveraged for what I think are the advancements this country can realize and actualize,” she said.

She also said she was “blown away” by the rich pool of assets to build around, not just UF but the nation's top-ranked community college in Santa Fe College and the No. 1 business incubator in the Sid Martin Biotech Incubator, as well as the energy building around announcements by Mindtree, Mobiquity and Nanotherapeutics to locate or expand here and Plum Creek's plans for eastern Alachua County.

Then came her first visit to Gainesville, when Davenport, a runner herself, saw an active community full of people out running and bicycling.

“It was one of those picture perfect April gorgeous days,” she said. “I remember being somewhat stunned at the physical beauty of the environment.”

The linchpin, she said, was her interview with a group of business leaders when she found out how committed they were to spending their time working on economic development.

“I wanted to be a part of the story and I felt like my skill sets could help push this forward,” she said.

Facts

Susan Davenport,
president/CEO, Gainesville
Area Chamber of Commerce

PERSONAL: "I do not have any children, but have one nephew and one niece."

PETS: "Ferguson, the wonder dog white Westie who lives in Austin with my aunt and uncle."

DREAM PARTNER FOR LUNCH: "My father, who is now deceased. We were best friends and he was my closest confidant. I miss him every day."

LAST BOOK READ: "Go Set a Watchman" by Harper Lee

FAVORITE TV SHOW: "Probably CNN. I'm a bit of a news junkie."

FAVORITE LISTENING: "Contemporary country. I'm a Texas girl."

HOBBIES: Running, music and reading current events

EDUCATION: Masters degree in public administration and bachelor's degree in nursing

Davenport was born in Texas and grew up in Tupelo, Mississippi. She earned a technical degree and bachelor's degree in nursing and worked as a registered nurse in Mississippi and at the Texas Heart Institute before returning to school to work on a master's in public administration from the University of Texas. She intended to go into health care policy, but shifted her focus to economics after taking a business class about world financial markets.

She was working for a large firm in Austin, Texas, that handled liability lawsuits for pharmaceutical companies and hospitals when she learned from a fellow Texas alum in the governor's office that the Austin Chamber was looking for someone to recruit biotech companies. With a background in medicine and economics, she was hired for her ability to talk to pharmaceutical companies.

In her two years focused on economic development in Gainesville, Davenport has doubled the number of companies the chamber is working with on expansions or relocations to more than 70, with some announcements expected soon following verbal commitments; led marketing delegation trips to Washington, D.C., Chicago, New York and Silicon Valley; and coordinated efforts with more of the cities and counties outside of Gainesville.

As president and CEO, Davenport oversees a staff of 13 and what she calls the Chamber's five lines of business all aligned to serve the mission of creating an ecosystem that allows businesses to start, grow, relocate or open here: economic development, public policy, workforce development, regionalism and business development to help its 1,400 member companies grow.

“We're as committed to that as we are to growing the base of this community on a large scale,” she said.

Davenport sees her role as honing the chamber's mission rather than taking it off in any new directions.

“And engaging more of the community into it,” she said. “I would say that's one of my biggest pieces — more collaboration and community engagement because that's where we're going to get to that economic prosperity and that's how we're going to diminish this income disparity that we see here in this region. It's growing the whole community base and that takes everyone.”