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Chad Chancellor: Welcome to this week's episode of the Next Move Group We Are Jobs podcast. This is Chad Chancellor, co-founder of Next Move Group and today we've got Will Coppage with us who is the executive director of the Washington County Economic Alliance in Greenville, Mississippi. So, Will, thank you for being with us today.

Will Coppage: Chad, thanks for having me.

Chad Chancellor: Tell us about all the good stuff going on in Greenville. I know you got yourself a recent announcement, so there's some good stuff going on.

Will Coppage: We did. Washington County, we're growing. We really are. We have a lot of good things. Probably the most recent though that you're speaking of is our Nufarm announcement. That announcement happened in the last part of 2018. They are a crop protection company with seeds and other agribusiness and they're based out of Australia and it's about \$20 million investment and then they're looking to hire 68 jobs starting and we see them growing more and more in our area.

I think one of the main drivers there was workforce in the region, the logistics. They saw how they can move goods and so, that's what was really eye-opening for them for the southeast. We're in the hiring phase right now. They've been a pleasure to work with. The most exciting thing is going back to workforce. That's a key driver for any project I think that you've seen as well as we've seen and what we have done to help tell our story as well as help mitigate any questions we've had about our workforce is the ACT work-ready system.

We are an ACT work-ready community. We became a work-ready community starting in 2017 and for our listeners or anybody else that might not know as much, once you become a work-ready system or work-ready community, that's just not the end all be all. ACT continues to give you criteria to move on. So, if you want to continue, if you want to stay current, they give you more criteria to keep on.

Chad Chancellor: That's good.

Will Coppage: So, if you want to keep that certification, you can't. You have to keep on going. You just can't put the certificate on the wall and say hey, I've gotten this. We are excited to say that Washington County, a rural county of 45,000 is the only county-- participating county in the United States to reach the fourth tier of the continuing of that and that's huge. So, this shows that a rural county can compete and I think that Next Move Group thrives on rural communities and as a rural community myself, we're always asking how can we compete with other metro areas and that is one of the key drivers.

So, circling back to Nufarm, so they are in their hiring phase. What we did for them is we helped them out by doing job profiles and what that was in the ACT system we paid for an ACT job

profiler to go up to their plant to follow their key positions around they'd be hiring and see what actual criteria they needed. Once that would happen--

Chad Chancellor: So, they followed them around literally. So, it's not just to plug it in to a system; they put boots on the ground.

Will Coppage: Boots on the ground. Right and then they came back and that did two things and so for other economic developers, that did two things. One, it provided them with skills so we could then work on closing that skills gap with training, but also in the recruitment phase, we were able to take what they said. So, they needed a silver certificate and so then we were able to show the company itself that we had the silver certificate. So, in recruiting ACT also that's a huge framework to use for us as economic developers in recruiting.

Chad Chancellor: Right. Well and rural towns always have to-- I don't care where you are and what states you're in, labor is a question and so now, you literally can show these people. As I understand it, what they can do is show how folks can transfer into other jobs based on their skills.

Will Coppage: Correct.

Chad Chancellor: If I could do this, I have a great percentage chance of being able to do X,Y, or Z. So, when you're hiring people even if they don't have that direct skill before they got something transferable and they kind of have--

Will Coppage: 100% and so to mitigate that gap, what you're saying is a transferable skill, but you still got to kind of shave off the edges or add to. Also add to to create that skill that's focused on the company. So now, when Nufarm is doing the hiring, we're helping them with the hiring. They're building out. They're loving what they are getting.

They can now put the hiring announcements require a silver and so we have worked so hard to build a strong database in the county of certificate holders. Folks are coming in, they've got their certificate or if they don't have the certificate yet, it's paid for by the community college or some people might have a certificate, but only have a bronze and we will help-- WCEA will help re-test.

Chad Chancellor: That's good.

Will Coppage: And that's what we-- we have a workforce coordinator in our office that will help mitigate that and help retest, but that's just one step of the equation for Nufarm. So, also what we're doing is they are requiring us or requiring the hirers to go through our main instruction skills basic class, which again-- So, some of those people from other sectors, this is a class. It's a nine-weeks class that goes over lean manufacturing, OSHA, forklift driving, team building, team work, computer skills, and by requiring that, it's given all the hirers another base knowledge and so, for acquiring it, it's also drawing a line on the sand saying I am going to make sure my employees are set a certain level and other businesses in our area such as USG are requiring that also and they found success.

We now had 23 classes. We've had over 300 graduates and we just started that last year in our high school for 11th graders-- 11th-12th graders; a two year program. So, they can graduate. They'll get that certificate and if they want to, they can go straight to USG or Nufarm to work.

Chad Chancellor: Right. Well, now that you've had the Nufarm announcement, success usually brings success. That will spark a little momentum. You will have more companies looking so it's going to be even more important that you can continue that step and I had no idea you were the only one to go to tier four. So, that's really something to brag about. Tell these folks your location. So, people might have heard of Greenville, Mississippi, but can't picture-- You're basically between Jackson and Little Rock. Is that the way to think about it or how would you?

Will Coppage: I've never described it that way, but you are exactly right. I always say we're in Mississippi. We're on the river and we're I say a three hour south of Memphis, four-and-a-half hours north of New Orleans.

Chad Chancellor: Yes. So, right between Memphis and New Orleans and I know you have commercial flights to-- is it Nashville and Dallas if I remember correctly?

Will Coppage: Well, they changed the Nashville route to Orlando. So, we are--

Chad Chancellor: Okay. That's even better.

Will Coppage: Yes. That's even better. So, Orlando and Dallas; two flights to Dallas then one flight to Orlando by Boutique Air. Again, a rural community with global reach.

Chad Chancellor: That's right. That's right. Talk about your airport hangars. So, I know Boeing years ago, like in the '80's had huge airport hangars there. They are available now. So, talk about that because people would probably-- especially airspace executives might be surprised to find that there are still hangars this big that might be available.

Will Coppage: Going back in World War II, our airport was airbase use for pilot training in the Korean War. It turned over a COCO which is a contractor owned contractor operated flight training base or airport set up as an airbase and so if you can think of logistically how it's set up; two runways, 8,000 foot, 7,000 foot, you fly, we land at ILS, man-controlled tower and then in the '80s, Chad, as you said, Boeing came in with some thoughts or some projects and started building some massive, massive hangars one being over 200,000 square foot hangar along with some 40,000 square foot 30,000 square foot, all the way down to 20,000 square foot kind of back shop buildings and those projects that Boeing had them on never really came to fruition, which was unfortunate for the city of Greenville, but the good part about all of this is that where the airport is situated with Agland it never had commercial or residential encroachment.

So, we still have the flight space, we got the mowers, we got everything ready and in the past few years, we've really ramped up our efforts at making this a competitive airport for airspace as well as a MRO type facility.

Chad Chancellor: And you really don't see 200,000 square foot hangars everywhere, so it's something to see.

Will Coppage: And it's city-owned.

Chad Chancellor: City owns it so you can be aggressive with it.

Will Coppage: Yes, publicly owned. Right, correct. You try to build that right now and you're going to be spending some money right now.

Chad Chancellor: Well, Will, I know you've won quite a number of awards. You won the Jimmy Heidel Leadership Award for the Mississippi Economic Development Council which is a big deal in Mississippi. You were named top 50 under 40 by the Mississippi Business Journal. You're air force veteran. So, thank you for your service. How did you get into this business?

Will Coppage: I think like most of us, we decided earlier on that we wanted to be in economic-- no, I'm joking. I think like most of us, we fell into it very randomly. My academic background as far as college-- like I went to grad school for creative writing. I have a creative focus which everybody asks me how does that relate to this and if you would have asked me that 10 years ago, I'd have said it doesn't, but now it matters completely.

Looking at projects outside the box, using kind of a creative mindset, artistic mindset, working with people, communicating with people, we're writing every day, we're marketing every day, but really how to answer your question how I got into this field, in 2013, my wife and I who is an amazing competitive gymnastic coach had the opportunity to move back to my hometown at Greenville, Mississippi from North Carolina.

She was offered a great job coaching competitive gymnastics and being the director of gymnastics at the local YMCA. I did not have a job back home yet, so I'm in my Penske truck with my mutt dog Jolene in the front seat and I get a job offer from the local newspaper who Delta Democrat Times, which is a really-- has a great legacy of documenting the delta.

It was a great opportunity to get back and get back into things and seeing what's going on and through that though, I made a really good impression with the mayor. At the time it was Mayor John Cox and within six months, he asked me to head up his staff, be the executive director or executive assistant to him and I made that move and when he decided he didn't want to run again, I stated putting feelers out.

During that process also, the city went through a 20-year comprehensive plan and I got to meet these kind of community development professionals came in and I was really amazed by that process and so I was trying to figure out how can I get into more community development and it was during that time also I met Cary Karlson. When you see something that you like, you kind of got to mind that and the staff at the time with the WCA I really liked the staff. I liked what was going on and through that mining, I luckily went and when an opportunity came up and an opening happened, I was asked to join WCA in 2015 as project manager.

Chad Chancellor: And so, Cary just retired. He's the guy I've got great respect for. So, you took the reins and what I really like about it is you have really-- you know those buildings and sites. You came up through the ranks. You don't really have much of a learning curve. Sometimes you

hire somebody and they don't know where the industrial park is and Will's marketing of his buildings and sites really I think is cutting edge. He does a great job with it. Will, you were doing drones. Now, it seems like everybody is doing it. You were doing those before anybody was doing it. So, you really have an eye for that and I think a talent for it. So, I'm so thrilled that they gave you the position when Cary retired and I'm sure he's thrilled as well.

Will Coppage: Thank you for saying that. You know it is kind of interesting when we're at these conferences and you're seeing all the marketing agencies doing the drone footage, the videos and you're right that years ago, we started doing the videos and now we're trying to think of new ways to incorporate that and that kind of goes back to that creative artistic background.

Again, and I stole from somebody else. It's not-- we're not reinventing the wheel, but trying to figure out-- I do think virtual reality is kind of one of the next big frontiers. I still don't know how to break into that. I think there is a gap in getting that client or that CEO to put on that headset. I still think there is a gap in that.

So, I don't know what is the next digital frontier. I'm trying to figure that out. I do think you've got to know your metadata, your SEOs. I think that's the key more or less to marketing now. You do have to have a killer website. You got to be out there. We also have the Chamber up under us. So, a big part of our sell is community development and community attitude. So, a lot of my job is-- I don't want to say split in two, but a lot of my job is split with that side as well.

Chad Chancellor: Right, right. Well, I can't let you get out of here without talking music. So, being from the Mississippi Delta, I know you're a musician and a writer, so talk a little bit about that aspect of Will Coppage.

Will Coppage: Oh goodness. That's a past life I guess. I do play. I play a lot of instruments. I just got a new banjo. You know the birth place of American music is Mississippi and I want to give a shout out right now to Steve Azar who just wrote an amazing song for Mississippi and the governor asked him-- he said I want you to write a song the children can sing almost like a preamble type song and he did it. You can download it and check it out on YouTube.

So, Steve did a great job on that, but it talks about how Mississippi is the birth place and that is really going on and going back to Greenville and not just Greenville, but Washington County as a

whole. You've been there and I'm not dodging your question. I do play. I do love music, but you've been there times and you've even said hey, where can I go see some blues music? And that's been one of my big goals is to get the blues, get the traditional music back going in Washington County because in some of the other communities around Washington county, I know where to go, but we have such a great tourist space in our county and they're asking the same question, too.

So, I'm trying whether some sort of weird coop or shuttling musicians down from Clarksdale or from other counties, but I'm trying to mine that as well, but no. There are great musicians in the south. I do love blues, but just as much as I love blues, I love country. I love jazz piano. I can't play jazz piano well at all.

Chad Chancellor: I love the blues.

Will Coppage: Yes. Blues is where it's at and it really is just like the Mississippi river, it charms, it moves you and you can always tell when it's really authentic and it really does move you.

Chad Chancellor: Well, my last question for you. Now, a lot of people that are listening to this podcast maybe project managers where they are and one day aspire to be the executive director and so, you have just made that leap and I know you've been there four-five years now. What advice do you have?

I know you've done several different continuing education programs. I think you did the Oklahoma EDI and so for folks out there that you may be an inspiration that they one day want to run their own shop, what would you tell them they need to learn or what events maybe should they consider to go to to try to better themselves to have that shot?

Chad Chancellor: Chad, that's a great question. Definitely, EDI hands down. I say EDI it's great to go to, but I do think find your mentors. Find your friends. I said this just the other week on the economic development side. Somebody said are you nervous? And I said well, there's always nerves, but I said on the economic development side, if there's something up with a project, I have a network that I know who I can call whether it's somebody that I have met through just normal work in a project or through people I met with at EDI and I still contact a lot of them. I said that's almost the easy part because I know who I can pick up a phone and call.

That's what I would tell everybody is build your network. Listen and try to read as many books as you can on leadership. Keep on expanding your knowledge and that's what Cary Karlson-- The one thing he did to me when I first started as project manager, he kept giving me these books and I'm a reader, but I would always read fiction or southern literature and I'll be like stop giving me these books and finally I cracked open one of them. I can't remember what the first one was and then they kind of become addicting those leadership books. You kind of keep on wanting to read them and read them and now I can't stop, but find your mentors. Listen to them. Don't be afraid to ask questions. They're here to help.

Chad Chancellor: Will, thank you for being with us today. We're really proud of you and the job you're doing and your recent success. Give these folks the website for your organization in case they want to go check out more about it.

Will Coppage: wceams.com

Chad Chancellor: All right, thank you.

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