

Chamber honor award winners

Billy Fortson highlights big night for Newton County

By Bryan Fazio

bfazio@covnews.com

Posted: January 15, 2015 10:55 p.m.



Dick James Small Business of the Year honoree: Sunbelt Builders, Steven Kapp.

There was a lot of change at this year's Covington-Newton County Chamber of Commerce annual meeting and awards reception at the Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center Thursday, but it was the lack of change that was the big moment of the evening.

William D. Fortson, Jr. of Ginn Motors was presented the R.O. Arnold Award, recognizing a local business person and his contributions to the community.

Fortson is not only on several civic boards, including the Chamber of Commerce Board and hospital Authority Board, but also has been an important part of Newton County for years. That includes the difficult economic times recently, in which Ginn Motors has not only survived, but also expanded.

During the ceremony Fortson didn't say much in gratitude, but displayed the selflessness of what drives him to be a charitable person in Newton County.

"I am speechless," Fortson said in his acceptance speech. "With that, I say thank you, and thank you very much."

Another company which has persevered through tough economic times is Sunbelt Builders. Steve Kapp of Sunbelt Builders accepted the award for the Dick James Small Business of the Year.

The company, founded by Sam B. Hay Jr. started in 1982 with two employees and bringing in an average contract of \$20,000 to now employing 16 full time and working contracts up to around \$5.5 million.

While Sunbelt Builders has been in Newton County for a while, the Mystic Grill has been around for just about a year. The quality of the business in that short amount of time is what led to it being awarded the Emerging Business of the Year.

The restaurant owned by Ronnie and Kelley Johnston and John and Angie Beszborn employs 80 people and has helped solidify the tourism market while keeping people from heading to Madison for dinner, according to chamber president Hunter Hall.

Another award presented that evening was the Spirit of Excellence given to the volunteer of the year. The winner of the Spirit of Excellence was Newton Federal Bank's Jimmy Tanner.

Among the work in the community Tanner was recognized for is serving as Chamber Ambassador, Vice Chairman of the Small Business Committee and chairing the Hwy. 278 CID.

"The only other time I remember being this surprised," Tanner said. "Is the time I came home from college to find a real estate sign in my yard and the house empty."

Also acknowledged at the Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center was the 2014 Partner of Excellence Award from the Newton County Office of Economic Development.

The award went to several partners representing around \$100,000 of investment in in-kind work to Newton County.

Among the major development areas for manufacturing is the so-called mega site in the eastern portion of the county connecting with Walton County, which would host business with the availability of hundreds of jobs.

Ralph Forbes and Jason Chambless of Thomas and Hutton have been working diligently with the Office of Economic Development to bring in potential clients to this area.

Shane Short, Executive Director of the Development authority of Walton County was also presented an award for work with the mega site.

Keith Hanson of Dublin Construction Company has been a help with the mega site, as well as the Covington Municipal airport, which is set to see large growth in the coming years.

Another award-winner was Aubrey Brown, Manger of Regional Development for CSX Railroad in Georgia. There is more than 20 miles of railroad in Newton County, presenting investors with ample opportunity to ship goods to and from the county.

Rick Standard of KPS Group has been diligently working on the architectural drawings for what is called Project Landmark, garnering him an award as well. Project Landmark consists of a hotel and arts center near the Newton County Administrative Building on Pace Street. The project is awaiting a feasibility study to proceed.

Peter Sherman and Scott Luton of Riverwood Associates were honored for their work with the county in training employees as well as students on Lean Sigma Six business practices.

Other highlights from the evening at the Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center was the 2014 Chamber of Commerce' Chair handing over the gavel to 2015 Chair Hillary Edgar.

It was also the final Chamber of Commerce dinner for President Hunter Hall, and the introduction of new president Ralph Staffins.