

# Ginn Motor Company owner Billy Fortson receives R.O. Arnold Award from Chamber of Commerce

Newton Chamber presents annual awards



By Alice Queen and Wade Marbaugh  
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The R.O. Arnold Award, considered to be the most prestigious award in Newton County, was presented to William D. “Billy” Fortson Jr. Thursday night at the Chamber of Commerce annual meeting. Shown here with Fortson is his wife, Stephanie. (Staff Photo: Alice Queen)

COVINGTON — The prestigious R.O. Arnold Award was presented to William D. Fortson Jr. during an awards presentation and annual meeting of the Covington-Newton County Chamber of Commerce Thursday night.

Fortson, owner of Ginn Motor Company, received the award following remarks by 25-year employee Deon Gibbs. Gibbs noted that the Arnold Award is designed to recognize a local business person who contributes to the community, and recognized Fortson’s long list of civic involvement — including service on the Chamber of Commerce Board, the Hospital Authority board, and a number of other local boards. More important, said Gibbs, is Fortson’s dedication to the success of his employees.

“We all know when we are blessed ... we should be good stewards of what we have,” said Gibbs. “I can tell you, from 2007 to 2010 there were hard times through this entire country, and Newton County was hit severely hard. I saw a lot of good people get hurt, get burned. That man stayed diligent and made sure he kept his place open for his employees and their families — not for him and his family.”

Gibbs added that Fortson often works behind the scenes for the betterment of the community.

“He’s been a mentor for me without even knowing it,” said Gibbs.

In accepting the award, Fortson was characteristically brief and succinct.

“Well, I am speechless,” he said. “And with that, I say thank you, and thank you very much.”

A number of other annual awards were presented at the Chamber dinner meeting, held at the Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center, including:

- The Spirit of Excellence Award, which is given to a Chamber volunteer who has been selected by the Chamber staff

This year’s award went to Jimmy Tanner, business development officer at Newton Federal. Tanner was recognized for his service as a Chamber ambassador and as vice chairman of the Small Business Committee. He also chaired the U.S. Highway 278 CID initiative on the Chamber’s behalf.

“I’m very humbled to be here and to accept this award,” said Tanner, who is a Covington native. “I’m very happy and blessed to be back here and to be serving,” he added.

- The Dick James Small Business of the Year Award, named in honor of the former Chamber president

The award was presented to Sunbelt Builders. In announcing the award, Chamber President Hunter Hall noted Sunbelt’s growth from two employees in 1982 to 16 full-time employees today. In the early years of the company, which was founded by Sam B. Hay Jr., Hall said the average building contract was \$20,000; today design and build contracts range from \$30,000 to more than \$5 million.

Hall noted that Sunbelt President Steve Kapp has served on a number of local civic and business boards. In addition, under his guidance, Sunbelt is a noted contributor to local charitable causes.

Kapp said much of the credit goes to the company’s founder, who is also his father-in-law.

“The bottom line for me is we have just been doing the same thing that Sam Burney Hay Jr. had been doing for a lot of years before us,” he said. “We’ve got a great team of people at Sunbelt, and they really deserve this award.”

- The Emerging Business of the Year award, which recognizes a local business that has made an impact in the community

Hunter Hall presented the award to Mystic Grill, noting that the restaurant’s owners model best business practices, particularly in developing a quality workforce and in branding.

Hall noted that the opening of Mystic Grill had benefitted other businesses on the Square and “reversed the trend” of local people who previously would travel to Madison for a dinner out.

The award was accepted by the four owners of Mystic Grill — Covington Mayor Ronnie Johnston and his wife, Kelley, and Angie and John Beszborn.

- The 2014 Partner of Excellence Award, which was presented earlier in the afternoon at the Chamber office in Covington

“We would not be where we are today without the investment these people have made in Newton County,” said David Bernd, the Chamber’s director of commercial development. “You all represent just short of \$100,000 of investment in Newton County.”

Receiving the award were Ralph Forbes and Jason Chambless, vice president and engineer for Thomas & Hutton Engineering Co.; Aubrey Brown, manager of regional development for CSX Transportation; Keith Hanson, director of business development for Dublin Construction Company; Rick Standard, director of hospitality design for KPS Group Inc.; Scott Luton and Peter Sherman, partners of Riverwood Associates; and Shane Short, executive director of the development authority of Walton County.

Bernd took some extra time to introduce Forbes and Chambless, who received the award on behalf of Thomas & Hutton, an engineering-consulting firm in Savannah.

Thomas & Hutton has contributed to plans to convert the Covington Municipal Airport into a regional airport with sites for aviation industries, and now is working up plans for development of a major industrial “mega-site” in the eastern part of the county.

Located between Interstate 20 and Social Circle on both sides of Ga. Highway 11, the mega-site has unique logistical advantages, according to Forbes, Chambless and Bernd, who first identified its potential.

“This site is 1,100 acres with more than a mile of railroad frontage and only 40 minutes from a population of 2.5 million people (metro Atlanta). Those kinds of sites are few and far between,” Chambless said.

“We’re taking a virgin piece of ground and putting a vision to it,” Forbes said.

In addition to the awards presentations, Chamber President Hall was recognized for his service to the organization over the past five years. Hall is leaving the Chamber at the end of the month for a new position with Kelly Services.

Succeeding Hall will be Ralph Ralph Staffins, who previously served as executive director for Forward McDuffie in McDuffie County and the city of Thomson.

Staffins was born and raised in Newton County through the 10th grade and is a graduate of Georgia College and State University, earning a bachelor’s degree in 2006 and a master’s in public administration in 2008.

He also has served as economic development director and Chamber president for Wilkinson County and as special projects coordinator for the Regional Commission of Middle Georgia in Macon.

On Thursday night, incoming Chamber board Chairwoman Hillary Edgar of Alexander and Royston, referred to Staffins as “a rising star in economic development and chamber work.”

Staffins said he is happy to be able to return to Covington and Newton County with his wife and two daughters.

“Newton County and Covington is not the same place I left 15 years ago to start my college education, and I’m excited to see what the next 15 years hold for us all,” Staffins said.