



Don Pierson



Paul Helton

A FastStart for Louisiana

An Interview with
**Don Pierson, Secretary of Louisiana Economic Development,
 and Paul Helton, Director, LED FastStart**

EDITORS' NOTE In January 2016, Gov. John Bel Edwards appointed Don Pierson to serve as Secretary of Louisiana Economic Development (LED). Pierson served as Assistant Secretary and Senior Director of Business Development for LED since January 2005. He is Gov. Edwards' primary representative to governmental officials, local communities, and site-selector consultants on all economic issues. Pierson has over 27 years of economic development experience and is a certified economic development professional.

Paul Helton assumed his current post in March 2017. Helton has served as the interim director since late last year. In 2002, Helton began working for a similar program in Georgia called Quick Start, and joined LED's FastStart management team in 2009. Before that, Helton served in the U.S. Navy.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Louisiana Economic Development (opportunitylouisiana.com; LED) is responsible for strengthening the state's business environment and creating a more vibrant Louisiana economy. The mission of LED is to cultivate jobs and economic opportunity for the people of Louisiana through nine integrated economic development strategies. With dedicated and knowledgeable professionals committed to Louisiana's economic future, LED strives to help businesses find the resources they need to make relocation and expansion a successful and profitable endeavor.

Will you indicate how LED is run today and what you see as the key advantages that Louisiana offers from a business perspective?

Pierson: We have experienced an amazing time over the past four years, with a pretty big shift in commodity pricing for oil and gas. We are the number-two energy producing state in the nation when one considers the offshore waters.

Being a very powerful energy state, we tend to prosper when oil and gas prices are at a reasonable level. Today, with those being depressed, it's providing challenges for us.

Even so, we almost have to flip that story and look at the other side of the equation. We have had some significant layoffs in our communities that are driven by oil and gas production, but low oil and gas prices also mean tremendous double-bottom line opportunity for many of the companies that are engaged in chemical manufacturing, petrochemical, gas to liquids, and liquefied natural gas.

These low feedstock and energy costs that run these plants have these plants now producing at record levels, and many of them are actually expanding their footprint in Louisiana.

Where we have pockets of small businesses being impacted by the oil and gas companies that have driven that sector of our economy, we now have \$125 billion of announced expansion projects with approximately \$65 billion of that under contract, undertaking bidding or engineering, with some in pre-construction and some in construction.

There is an amazing industrial renaissance taking place in other quadrants of our state. One powerful impact we're enjoying with our world-class, best-in-the-nation, workforce development program is being able to multitask not just in job training but also in placement of workforce skills from areas where we have an available labor resource because of layoffs to where they can move into project management and administrative skills that construction opportunities require for the same sector of the workforce.

This is all in addition to our legacy strengths in agriculture, forestry, and some manufacturing throughout our state.

Will you talk about how the vision around the workforce programs was created, and how it has evolved?

Helton: One of the top one or two concerns all companies have, regardless of what location they go to across the globe, is workforce. We had to understand what we have available in Louisiana as well as what we need to have and also work with the companies to anticipate their needs and prepare accordingly.

We created LED FastStart over eight years ago to take that on. We were able to start from scratch and hire the best people, put the talent team together, and allow them to integrate and collaborate with the other state agencies, including K-12 and two- and four-year institutions. We have been fortunate to have phenomenal collaboration with a very focused, well-trained, and experienced team on the FastStart side to accomplish those goals.

We have programs that we've taken into high schools to prepare employees to go to work for manufacturing and/or matriculate to two- or four-year schools so they can continue their degrees.

We're doing that not only in manufacturing, but also in IT, which is our fastest growing industry sector right now across the state.

Pierson: It has been an amazing journey in terms of workforce training. If one were to roll the clock back maybe 10 to 15 years ago states were generally clumsy when it came to deploying workforce training – it was not seen as a governmental function *per se*.

With the advances in technology, the jobs of the future lie in the hands of people who are educated and trained. The idea of workforce availability and the skill sets represented in that workforce are now the most significant factor in location decisions.

There will be a workforce survey that looks at not only one's employable workforce that is available related to unemployment, but also underemployment – the type of people that one could train for specific positions, as well as younger workers who are willing to relocate.

We're tackling all of that and we're doing it in concert more so than ever with higher education in Louisiana.

If we've done a good job of identifying skill sets for highly-qualified positions in the workforce, and they work in concert with government, we can deliver this world-class workforce.

Does this include a public/private partnership focus?

Helton: It varies by company and industry sector, but we're working with 11 of them across the state and have close to \$100 million in grants being applied with very strict cooperative endeavor agreements with each school.

The most innovative thing is that we're breaking down that proverbial barrier between university and company. The companies are talking about what they need for the future, so we're embedding that skill training within the curriculums of the schools and producing students who can go to work right in our state.

We're also recruiting many professional people from other locations to fill the short-term gap.

Pierson: It's a three-dimensional approach that takes the analysis of existing opportunities that are arrayed around a number of major corporations and bringing the local talent through the existing training programs on university campus. These deliver not just today's workforce but essentially a pipeline of future workers to that company. Where we don't have as many as they may need embedded organically, we have external opportunities to recruit and augment the workforce.

The end result is one that is making these corporations pleased with their Louisiana locations. ●