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Oklahoma Sees Hope in its Wind, Wings and Thunder

A state without an indelible image has plenty of strengths to leverage.

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By Josh Cable There's an image crisis in Oklahoma, and economic development officials in the state are working hard to solve it.

It's not that Oklahoma has a negative image. The problem, says Oklahoma Secretary of Commerce Dave Lopez, is the state doesn't have much of an image at all.

"We don't have a quick recall with most people outside the state," Lopez asserts.

There was a time, Lopez says, when Oklahoma had a reputation as "boom-or-bust" economy -- going back to the Oklahoma Land Rush of the late 1800s and the oil boom that spawned companies such as Halliburton and Phillips Petroleum.

If anything, though, Oklahoma in recent years has become a model of stability.

The state's unemployment rate stayed well below the national average during the recession, and as of May stood at 5.3% (fifth in the nation).

"We didn't have the roller-coaster ride with the housing boom, so from a risk-aversion standpoint I think we're a very strong play," Lopez says.

Aerospace and Energy

The state certainly has good reason to lay claim to being identified as [a center of aerospace](#): Oklahoma's aerospace industry employs nearly 150,000 workers with a payroll of \$5 billion.



Lopez: "We don't have a quick

It is home to Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City and American Airlines' Maintenance and Engineering Center in Tulsa, the latter of which is considered the largest commercial-aircraft maintenance, repair and overhaul facility in the world. recall with most people outside the state."

Economic development officials see the unmanned-aerial systems sector (UAV) as a potentially lucrative offshoot of the aerospace industry.

"In just five years this cottage industry, rising from obscurity to global prominence through the U.S. military's Middle East war applications, has already generated \$323 million in orders through Ponca City's Oklahoma State University Multispectral Laboratories," Kirby Lee Davis wrote in the Tulsa Journal Record in June.

But while aerospace now accounts for 10% of the jobs in Oklahoma, the state's bread and butter has been the energy industry.

Even with Halliburton and Phillips now calling other states home, the beat goes on with oil and gas companies such as Enid, Okla.-based Continental Resources Inc. and Oklahoma City-based Chesapeake Energy Corp.

Chesapeake and other Oklahoma energy companies been on the forefront of "the horizontal-drilling and fracking revolution," Lopez says, helping create an entrepreneurial environment in the state.

"The companies that are here now are homegrown companies that have become some of the biggest players in the independent energy industry," Lopez says. "So that seems to create this culture of organic growth that I think really plays out in many areas of the economy."

Money Blowin' in the Wind

Oklahoma also is making a name for itself in the wind-energy industry.

In May, Siemens Energy said [it plans to build two wind-service warehousing facilities](#) in Woodward, Okla. With a total of 64,000 square feet, the complex will be Siemens' largest wind-power service distribution center to date in the United States, according to the company.

"Woodward's location in the central region of the U.S. gives us great access to our wind-power customers in that area and allows us to address their distribution needs in a cost-effective and efficient timeframe," Tim Holt, Siemens' CEO for renewables service, said in May.

"Those of us who live here and contend with the wind sometimes see it as a challenge," Lopez says. "We're thinking that in future years, we'll feel the wind against our cheek and says, 'That's money happening.'"

Reforms Making State More Business-Friendly

A case could be made that Oklahoma is becoming one of the more business-friendly states.

In CNBC's "America's Top States for Business 2011," [Oklahoma](#) ranked No. 6 for cost of doing business and No. 3 for cost of living.

Lopez also points out that Oklahoma is riding "what folks around here are calling a historic session for making the business environment more positive."

In April and May, Gov. Mary Fallin signed a number of business-friendly measures into law, including a tort-reform bill that places a \$350,000 cap on non-economic damages; several bills intended to reform the state's education system; and a much-needed reform of the state's workers' compensation system.

So where does that leave Oklahoma in terms of its image crisis?

"Probably one of our biggest challenges is to transition from that 'best-kept secret' stage to greater awareness," Lopez says.

But maybe not too much awareness. Lopez asserts that younger workers find Oklahoma attractive because it is such a well-kept secret, offering a high quality of life without the congestion and hassles of more densely populated states.

"We're finding more and more young professionals seeing the value, particularly as they start families, to be in a place that has a good quality of life and opportunities for entertainment but isn't so discovered that it's crowded," Lopez says.

"And it's great to have the Thunder."

The NBA's Oklahoma City Thunder -- Oklahoma's only major professional sports franchise -- has helped unify the state, Lopez says.

"It also propels the state pride when you get the chance to share with folks in other communities around the nation and around the world who may not have known us if we didn't have the Thunder."

This is the second article in a two-part series on economic development in Oklahoma. To read Part 1, click [here](#).

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