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Garstka is new Wilkes EDC director

by Jule Hubbard

A man with about seven years of experience recruiting businesses to the Triad area has been named president of the Wilkes Economic Development Corporation (EDC).

Jeffrey M. Garstka, 34, was introduced during a meeting of the Wilkes EDC Board of Directors this morning at the Stone Family Center for Performing Arts in North Wilkesboro.

"He is the guy who can sell Wilkes County to the outside world," said Wilkes EDC Board Chairman Blake Lovette, adding that helping existing local businesses prosper and grow is just as important. Lovette said Garstka officially starts in his new job on Sept. 20.

He had been vice president of Winston-Salem Business Inc., a private, nonprofit economic development corporation, for five years when he accepted the Wilkes EDC position. Before that, he spent nearly two years in a recruitment and investor relations role with the Greensboro Economic Development Alliance.

Lovette said Garstka was directly involved in recruiting Caterpillar Inc. to Winston-Salem. It was announced Friday that Caterpillar has chosen Winston-Salem for a new \$426 million plant that will create 392 jobs over the next five years.

The Wilkes EDC executive committee, composed of Lovette, Wilkesboro Mayor Mike Inscore, North Wilkesboro Commissioner Bart Hayes, County Commissioner Charles Sink and Bill Warden, agreed to hire Garstka from three finalists it interviewed. The three were among five contenders submitted by Jorgenson Consulting, which the EDC hired for \$25,000 to help find a new executive director.

EDC Vice President Robin Hamby has been the only paid EDC official since Don Alexander resigned as executive director in late January.

Lovette, re-elected EDC chairman this morning, said Garstka was hired with an annual salary of \$90,000 and no contract. He and his wife, Claire, and their two sons, 3 years old and 3 months old, currently live in Clemmons.

"One of his first challenges will be trying to improve the product we have to offer" in trying to recruit new employers to Wilkes, said Lovette. "We need an industrial park with closer access to U.S. 421." He said this tied in with the goal of promoting increased private sector funding.

Lovette said a strategic plan for the Wilkes EDC, developed earlier this year by Atlanta-based Garner Economics LLC, provides guidance for economic development in Wilkes.

Among other things, the plan recommends branding the Wilkes area as an "agribusiness corridor." This includes an emphasis on food manufacturing, ranging from large scale food processing to niche market operations like local and organic food and wine. It also identified opportunities in bio fuel production.

With Winston-Salem Business Inc., Garstka manages a diverse portfolio of clients and projects. He also manages the organization's marketing and public relations projects, advertising, website and social media.

Garstka has a bachelor's degree in communications from Appalachian State University and a master's degree in communications from the University of Tennessee.

He is also a graduate of the University of Oklahoma Economic Development Institute and has been a certified economic developer since 2008.

Garstka is a native of Pittsburgh, Pa., but moved to Orlando, Fla., at an early age. He graduated from Winter Park High School in Orlando.



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