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## Gladewater Economic Development

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## Gladewater Hires Economic Development Executive Director

*By admin*

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Forty-year-old Robert Johnson is a Minneapolis, Minn., native who spent the past two decades living in Austin, continuing his education, serving in the military and promoting economic development and better business through the Texas Historical Commission.

Johnson, hired this month as the next Gladewater Economic Development Corp. executive director, is no stranger to his new East Texas residence. For more than five years, he met business owners, hosted seminars and helped secure grants for Gladewater and several area communities. As Austin's appeal faded, he said he wanted to find a community where he could see through his economic development ideas.

"That's part of the nice thing about being here," Johnson said this past week during a visit with the Longview News-Journal. "I would suggest things and leave. I could never see a project of my own. In some cases, it would get done, in other cases, it would not."

Johnson is spending the next month working alongside GEDCO Executive Director Lon Welton, who will retire Sept. 30 after seven years at the helm. Welton said his tenure has been successful because of the city's success in

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luring start-up companies, which despite their risk has given Gladewater rewards.

"Gladewater is getting a reputation for wanting to help start-up companies," Welton said. "A lot of communities want to run away from start-up companies because it is risky, but we have been very fortunate with our start-up companies, and I think there is a good future."

Welton and Johnson have known each other for years. Welton credited Johnson with securing grants through the Texas Historical Commission that led to brick work on Quitman Street, resurfacing of the local library's parking lot and other projects.

Cutbacks at the Texas Historical Commission led Johnson to look for another job, he said, after the final six months of his tenure turned him into a numbers-cruncher rather than an economic developer.

"This job was open. I applied for it. I like the fact that I know Lon and have a good relationship through (the) Main Street (program)," Johnson said. "It's been a smooth transition, and the area is attractive to me."

Johnson, who will earn \$57,000 annually, suggested the city consider establishing wireless Internet connectivity throughout downtown to make it attractive to customers and tourists seeking coffee shops and retailers. He believes local retailers should increase their Web presence, and he wants to lure local retailers into staying open during hours when studies show retail works its best magic.

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&quot;So many business owners say, 'Well, Walmart is moving into town. They're going to shut us down' ... Before I hear that, I want to hear how you are operating at that highest level of sophistication that is possible ... and hopefully you are doing everything that you can to capitalize on trends like 75 percent of all retail transactions happen between 4 and 11 on a weekend,&quot; Johnson said. &quot;So are you only open at 9-5 or 8-5 or whatever? Let's look at some of those issues and see how we can do better business.&quot;

Johnson also wants to look at job training taking place at a career center at Gladewater High School. Having a trainable workforce is key in securing high-skilled, high-wage jobs, he said.

&quot;It's not just about creating jobs, but about creating the best jobs possible and retaining the jobs that you have,&quot; he said. &quot;I would rather get 50 high-skilled, high-wage jobs over 75 low-skilled, low-wage jobs that are really a drain on social services.&quot;

Welton said he is pleased with the potential that Johnson can bring to the job. Meanwhile, Welton is working with several companies that might announce expansion in the Gladewater area within the next two months.

&quot;One of the things that hurts us is space available and buildings available,&quot; Welton said, &quot;but we always come up with it, and if we don't, we refer to Longview or Kilgore or White Oak, because if it helps Kilgore, Longview or White Oak, it helps Gladewater, and if it helps Gladewater, it helps those other three.&quot;

Johnson holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas at Austin, and a master's degree from St. Edward's University. After high school graduation, he served full-time active duty in the U.S. Air Force, and after graduating from UT, he joined the Army National Guard, he said. He has been deployed to Iraq and the Gulf Coast region

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following Hurricane Katrina, and he travels to Austin once a month to serve in the Guard.