

COLUMN FOR CLARION LEDGER  
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On November 9, 2000, the Governor, Legislature, members of our Congressional Delegation, Nissan officials, and citizens gathered in the State Capitol for one of the most exciting announcements in the history of Mississippi.

Nissan announced that they planned to build a \$930 million automotive manufacturing facility in Canton, Mississippi that would create 4,000 direct jobs, and upwards of 20,000 indirect jobs. The wages of these jobs are more than double the state's current per capita income.

On that day, a 4 1/2-month effort by public and private officials came to fruition. The world was watching at 9:30 a.m. and every floor of the Capitol was filled with the citizens of Mississippi waiting anxiously to hear the news. Television crews and media from around the world captured images of Mr. Carlos Ghosn, Nissan's chief executive, as he made the announcement that Nissan had selected Mississippi as its location of choice. Applause was frequent and emotion was high.

When Nissan made this announcement, it gave Mississippi the opportunity to shine bright, and it gave our citizens hope for the future. With this announcement, the economic landscape of Mississippi changed. The world now knew that we were no longer the underdog, but were rather, a true competitor and winner. This project has been awarded designations from major economic development magazines as the Top Deal of the Year, Top Job Creation Project, and one of the Top Investment Deals announced during the year.

However, Nissan is only one of 195 new projects that located in Mississippi last year. An additional 11,992 new jobs were created with an investment of over \$2.5 billion. We have rarely heard about those new jobs because of the focus on the Nissan landowner issues.

Now people around the world are still watching us, but for very different reasons. Competing with other states for a near-billion dollar project is a massive undertaking that includes many different components of economic development. Land acquisitions, environmental concerns, labor, training, incentives, and quality of life are among some of the most critical factors.

In the Nissan competition, Mississippi initially was competing with the entire Southeastern United States. Then it was narrowed to a "short-list" of 5 competing states, and later to two....Canton, Mississippi and Opelika, Alabama. Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina and others had been successful in the location of automotive manufacturing plants while Mississippi accepted rejection...but not this time. This time Mississippi became a winner, or so we thought.

On November 10, the work began. To date, we have acquired over 1,400 needed acres for the 2 and a half million square foot plant. We have negotiated successfully with 62 landowners, Caucasian and African American alike. Only 5 remaining parcels consisting of 34 total acres remain to be acquired in the main core site. An additional 347 acres are being sought for an engineering school, detention pond, cloverleaf highway exchange, and much-needed supplier sites.

We have also completed construction projects on time with sometimes near-impossible time frames. Now after over 7 months of negotiations, we are still unable to reach a settlement with the remaining landowners which is unfortunate.

A lot of attention has been focused on this issue, but let's not lose sight of the big picture. The Nissan plant, hopefully, will be one of many new projects locating or expanding in Mississippi. However, if the focus remains on unsubstantiated accusations and sensationalism relating to these issues, then we have only helped to perpetuate an undeserved, negative image of the Great State of Mississippi.

This year, as in past years, companies and consultants responsible for site selections along with the worldwide media are watching Mississippi closely.

How will this affect their opinion of Mississippi in the future?