Tucked between the mountains of Southeast Tennessee, along the beautiful Tennessee River, the city of Chattanooga and Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 43 are quietly making a name for themselves. Contributing factors that have helped cultivate new businesses in Chattanooga are its location, infrastructure, workforce, institutions of higher learning, abundant water supply and quality of life. The city’s growth can also be attributed to its leadership taking some bold initiatives and forging strong relationships with the building trades. The leadership and members of Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 43 have been part of the team in this right-to-work state that has brought this city’s success to fruition.
Local 43 Business Manager Dave Tolley is a second-generation United Association member. His dad, 61-year member Bobby “Sonny” Tolley, was the state plumbing apprentice contest winner in 1960. Through the generations, Brother Tolley has firsthand knowledge of the growth in this region. In September of 2013, the Brookings Institute ranked Chattanooga’s growth in the top third of large U.S. cities. With a city expanding twofold, the majority of the membership of Local 43 has reaped the benefits of steady employment. Brother Tolley and his team, which includes Business Agent Joe Collins, a third-generation member; Training Director Larry Morrison; and Tennessee Business Development Representative John Brown, who is also a Local 43 member, have all been proactive, flexible and responsive to their contractors’ and owners’ objectives, creating one of General President Bill Hite’s top initiatives—true tripartite relationships.

Local 43’s home base of Chattanooga wasn’t always a shining star. In the 1960s and 1970s, like so many other American cities, the city was devastated by industrial decline. It was reported that in 1969, Walter Cronkite once referred to it as the “dirtiest city in America.” Today, the locals revel in its latest accolade—being named “the best city ever” by Outside magazine.

The city needed a facelift, and first on its to-do list was addressing its notorious air quality, which stemmed from being an industrial town for so many years. With the help of Local 43 signatory contractors, it then launched a $120 million revamp of its riverfront, which now touts a venue for outdoor enthusiasts and a world-class aquarium. Brother Tolley stated that the influx in commercial work brought increased competition to the area that would bring new challenges. Next on the city’s agenda was to revitalize downtown—a project the membership monopolized, is very proud of, and is ongoing today. Restaurants and storefronts complete the landscape of Chattanooga and are within a short walk from the riverfront. Riverfront condominiums and townhouses now dot the backdrop, creating an urban living environment that has recently become Chattanooga’s center stage. Everywhere you look downtown the footprints of world-class construction completed by members of Local 43 are evident.

Dave Posey stated, “When I first visited Local 43 as an International Representative, I was amazed at the initiatives put in place in several areas by the leadership team to grow the local. At the 2011 General Convention, the delegates adopted General President Hite’s five-year strategic plan, which included skills training and workforce development, industry relations, political action and government affairs, and union administration. The Local 43 leadership team and the membership have incorporated all of these initiatives as a strategic plan for their local. They continue to build on
these core ingenuities on a daily basis.”

Brother Tolley stated that in 2007, several announcements were made that would mold Local 43’s future. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) announced it would resume construction at Watts Bar 2 (WB 2) with the help of a Bechtel workforce. Bechtel Labor Relations Manager Charlie Duckworth said, “WB 2 is a one-of-a-kind project doing first-of-its-kind things. It is the only project in the world that stopped construction and restarted the project 20-plus years later, with a single-focused objective in mind—to be the first U.S. nuclear power plant completed and licensed to operate in the 21st century.”

WB 2 would be TVA’s largest project in 25 years.

UA Special Representative Tim Cooper, TVA, commented, “The UA has been a leader in the Tennessee Valley, working with TVA and its partner contractors for over 50 years. The local has been a huge contributor to the valley by completing construction on three nuclear units in the early 80s and late 90s (Sequoyah 1 and 2 and Watts Bar 1) and is now looking at having four operating units in its jurisdiction with the completion of WB 2 by year-end. Not only were these plants built by the members of Local 43, they are also maintained by Local 43 members.”

Dale Morgan, Bechtel Site Manager, WB 2, stated, “Watts Bar 2 has been challenging not only from a project completion standpoint, but in making sure that construction activities on Unit 2 do not disrupt the operation of Unit 1. Adherence to nuclear safety is heightened when working at a nuclear plant that eventually will become a dual-unit operating facility. Given the attention to detail we’ve asked the pipefitters and all our craftsmen to follow in their daily work activities, I’m proud of the way they’ve done it with the highest standards for safety (since March 2010, 25 million safe hours worked without a lost-time injury) and quality (97 percent first-time quality acceptance rate). Bechtel represents over 19 million of those hours, and the UA represents over 3 million of those hours (Bechtel pipefitters recordable rate: 0.86).”

Shortly after TVA’s announcement to resume construction at WB 2, Volkswagen (VW) announced it was building a plant in Chattanooga. The Local 43 workforce is rightfully proud of the work it did on the $1 billion LEED® Platinum certified Volkswagen factory, which started production in 2011. As of February 2014, Chattanooga is the frontrunner in the bid to build VW’s new SUV. Hundreds of new jobs and several hundred million dollars of investment are at stake. Volkswagen’s Chief Executive stated, “This would be part of the $7 billion that VW wants to invest in North America in the next five years.” The final decision should be made soon (Chattanooga is competing...
Local 43 team working for Bechtel at the Watts Bar Unit 2 project.

Leslie “Chop” Swanson (LGF), Bechtel

Bruce Burgess (GF), Bechtel

Ronnie Dahon (F), Bechtel

Thomas Shipley (F), Bechtel

David Kudla (F), Bechtel

Justin Walker (F), Bechtel

Farrell “Peanut” Cochran (F), Bechtel

Jayson Manley (J), Bechtel
UA Bechtel Scope of Work on WB 2

Pipe, hangers, instrumentation, and valve quantities installed:

- Large bore hangers added/removed/modified: 3,249
- Large bore valves: 370
- Small bore pipe: 6,914 linear feet
- Small bore instrumentation pipe: 14,173 linear feet
- Small bore instrumentation pipe supports: 2,459
- Small bore hangers added/removed/modified: 3,442
- Small bore valves: 817
- Mechanical instruments: 1,016
- Instrumentation tubing: 18,278 linear feet
- Instrumentation tubing supports: 2,290

Non X-ray pipe welds made and performance accomplishments:

- Large bore pipe welds: 868
- Small bore pipe welds: 4,560
- Pipe support welds: 9,492
- Orbital (automatic welding) instrumentation tubing welds: 738
- Quality control acceptance rate: 99.4 percent
against the carmaker’s facilities in Mexico), because VW would like the car distributed by 2016. With an expansion to its current facility being considered, the leadership of Local 43 is watching this news closely.

It was stated that Local 43’s workforce was significantly ramped up once TVA announced it was going ahead with the construction of WB 2. Housed on the 1,700-acre site on the northern end of Chickamauga Reservoir, WB 2 is designed to have two Westinghouse pressurized water reactors. Watts Bar Unit 1 received its full-power operating license in 1996 and was the last power reactor to be licensed in the U.S. Bechtel, the predominant contractor on site, has employed Local 43 piping professionals to complete the job at WB 2.

Mr. Duckworth added, “We’ve had the need for strong labor-management cooperation to get us through the many challenges on this project, and the UA has stepped up when we asked for its help and support.” At peak, there have been a total of 456 pipefitters on the job, 250 of those have been Local 43 members. Business Manager Dave Tolley and Business Agent Joe Collins did an outstanding job of manning this job with 206 travelers, representing 51 UA locals. In addition, Bechtel employed 45 apprentices for a portion of their apprenticeship training, with 13 graduating to journeyman status during their employment. Additional Local 43 workforces are working for Williams Plant Services and Day & Zimmermann (D&Z).

“We have had many challenges in resuming construction at WB 2,” said Special Representative Cooper. “This plant has been sitting idle for 20 years. One thing is that many of our members who once worked on the construction of nuclear power plants have now retired. This is the first time many of our members have ever worked on the construction of a new nuclear plant, so training plays a huge role in the success of this project. One thing that the General President implemented is that all UA members on this project must complete and sign the UA Standard for Excellence policy. With the help and support of John Yale (the UA’s consultant responsible for implementing the Standard), we went through this policy, not only with 350 UA members, but with Bechtel and TVA management teams as well, completing the program in a four-day period.”

Mr. Duckworth said, “When I speak of doing first-of-its-kind things, the UA Standard for Excellence comes immediately to mind. A truly breakthrough labor/management initiative was undertaken to teach leadership and supervisory skills to the pipefitter and electrician Foremen and General Foremen on the project. I say ‘breakthrough’ because we put the electricians and pipefitters in the same classroom and used the UA Foreman Training program as the core curriculum. We formed a planning team that included local and International Representatives from the UA;
Chris Haslinger, the UA Director of Training; local and International Representatives from the IBEW; and the Bechtel site management team. Instructors from both the UA and Bechtel taught the individual modules. We trained 113 electrician and pipefitter Foremen and General Foremen. At the conclusion, the participants filled out evaluations. One stated, ‘This was one of the best and most informative training sessions I ever attended,’ and another, ‘I appreciated everyone taking the time to make me a better Foreman and a better person.’

“Every person involved had a role in the success of this training program, and they deserve recognition. The UA led the way on this important initiative by helping Bechtel bring the electricians and pipefitters together. The training initiative also demonstrated a deep-rooted commitment by the UA, IBEW, and Bechtel, which reflects, ’It’s not only the right thing to do, but it’s imperative for union labor and contractors in today’s marketplace in order to remain competitive.’ The WB 2 project owes John Yale, UA Director of Training Chris Haslinger, UA Special Representative Tim Cooper and Local 43 Business Manager Dave Tolley a sincere thanks for their outstanding efforts.”

“We organized over 300 members in the last five to six years,” Brother Tolley stated. “In 2006, we had 1,037 members. When TVA announced it was going ahead with WB 2, we started planning on how we would man the work. We knew welders would be critical. After numerous meetings with Bechtel, we devised action plans and immediately got to work. I would be remiss if I said at times it has not been a challenge, especially manning the job with qualified welders, but today we have over 1,270 members with over 450-plus working at Watts Bar.”

Bechtel Lead Field Welding Engineer Mark Pitre, stated, “I consider this project to be the most challenging nuclear project I’ve worked on. The welding program at WB 2 and the resultant quality are the most robust for a project of its size and complexity.” In the end, a portion of Bechtel’s success on this project will depend on the success of its workforce. In April 2013, The American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) stated in a report associated with the certification of the service air system (a WB 2 and nuclear industry milestone), “The pipefitters’ work on the service air system made a significant contribution to the first ASME certification of a system at WB 2 and the nuclear industry in nearly two decades. The ASME certification (N-stamp) assures that the plant is being built in accordance with strict safety standards.” This milestone laid the groundwork for the certification of follow-up systems at WB 2.

Training Director Morrison stated, “As work really started to ramp up in this area, we took a hard look at our training programs and the number of apprentices we had enrolled. With the anticipation of the Watts Bar job, the first step was to upgrade our welding portion of our school, and we worked with Brother Brown to heavily recruit welders. Once we finished the weld shop, we ended up remodeling the entire school, purchasing 6,000 square feet to include advanced training for all Local 43 members. At the time, we had 57 apprentices. Today, we have 154. In the last few years, we have tested roughly 400 welders, most of them
coming from the non-union. We have crippled the non-union by bringing in welders through organizing. As we continue our efforts to organize, we have found that one out of 10 is qualified to pass the required tests. This has prompted us to increase our welding program to four nights a week, and we currently have 50 apprentices in class.”

“Their approach has resulted in membership growth, as well as their ability to market their membership as being a highly educated and productive workforce available to the construction and service industry,” Brother Posey said, “and their training is really paying off. In just the last two years, Local 43 has sent three apprentices to the National Apprentice Contest. That is a credit to the entire leadership team.”

Chattanooga is now referred to as Gig City, a nickname that stems from its fiber-optic network that supports speeds of one gigabit a second—the first of its kind in the nation. That alone has helped attract $4 billion in foreign investment since the downturn, and a flock of new tech entrepreneurs have arrived in the city. Utilizing tax incentives and land grants, city leaders
made it their mission to woo manufacturing back. This success has been nothing short of miraculous, and Local 43 is engaged for the ride.

Andy Berke, Chattanooga’s mayor, said, “We certainly work hard on our quality of life. Businesses are looking for ways to tap into existing infrastructure, and the web is part of that. But they also want to know there are logistical opportunities, that the city leadership is forward-thinking and committed, and that we will provide a great place for their workers.”

And there is plenty of work to go around. During the same time as the Watts Bar and the Volkswagen plant projects, Memorial Hospital announced it would undertake a $349 million expansion that would span over five years. Local 43 members, working for Chase Plumbing, are on the job completing all of the mechanical work at the hospital. In addition, Wacker Chemical announced its plans to build a polysilicon plant, estimated at $1.9 billion. This project will be ramping up in the summer of 2014.

International Rep. Posey added, “These are big owners—Wacker Chemical, Volkswagen, area hospitals, and TVA, to name just a few. They are reaching out to Local 43 for its workforce, which they know will be highly trained, certified, drug and alcohol free, safety conscious and productive, for their project needs.”

These big name projects are not all that is going on in Chattanooga. As large projects come out of the ground, the need for specialized prefabrication becomes critical. Jake Marshall, LLC, a Local 43 signatory contractor, is one of the oldest and largest mechanical contractors serving Chattanooga and the
surrounding area. There are currently 75-plus Local 43 members working for Jake Marshall completing all of the fabrication for various high-profile projects. Spread out across 10 pristine acres, this fabrication facility is a vision of excellence, and its workforce is involved in a complete array of mechanical services, such as plumbing, heating, air conditioning, process piping, and ASME pressure vessel repair.

Another fabrication facility that is signatory to Local 43 is W.J. O’Neil Company (WJO). With its corporate offices in Livonia, Michigan, WJO has a regional office located in Chattanooga. WJO specializes in solving complex, highly technical projects with outstanding design-build services and was instrumental in assisting Volkswagen in attaining its LEED® Platinum rating. Local 43 members make up the skilled workforce, and the company also offers process piping, HVAC, plumbing, piping fabrication and 24-hour service. At the Volkswagen plant, WJO installed 52 air-handling units for HVAC, built the piping utility mains (chilled water, hot water, city water, welding water, compressed air, natural gas, high-pressure compressed air and argon), and completed the air distribution ductwork system and exhaust air system. Additionally, their scope of work included door heaters, gas-unit heaters, gas-infrared tube heaters, restroom facilities, and three rainwater-harvesting systems. “Volkswagen and W.J. O’Neil have many common values,” John O’Neil Sr., President of WJO, said. “Both are serious about environmental sustainability and 21st century manufacturing.”

“While things are going well,” Business Manager Tolley stated, “we have to pay attention to areas we consider to be weak, which is currently our commercial sector. With the expansion of our training center, we have upgraded our plumbing and HVAC classes, with the objective to create a workforce for years to come. We want to ensure that we maintain the plants we are building. This will help us continue to grow, which will create contributions to our funds. Training Coordinator Morrison designed an indoor plumbing training venue that allows our members to hone their skills in bringing a plumbing job out of the ground. It is equipped with stud walls, and the footing is rubber playground composite that emulates dirt. When pipe is installed, we bring in Local 43 city inspectors to conduct a full inspection per city code. Recently, we have added an orbital welding room with six machines in a controlled environment to support our nuclear and specialty welding requirements. The HVAC portion of our training was probably our most significant challenge, and has been identified as our weakest market share. With input from members, contractors, and end-users, we designed a new HVAC training space, which entailed going from 800 square feet of training space to 3,800 feet of space. We are determined to grow this market share.”

The city still has many challenges to meet as well. Mayor Berke stated, “I believe tech and manufacturing efforts are working in tandem to forge a path to the future. We need a mix of jobs, and we understand that in advanced manufacturing today, technology plays a role.” Business Manager Tolley is quick to point out they have an excellent rapport with not only Chattanooga’s Mayor Berke (D), but the Mayor of Hamilton County, Jim Coppinger (R), as well.

“An open-door policy exists with both offices,” Brother Tolley said. “Mayor Berke is a former U.S. Senator who did not seek re-election. Instead, he wanted to give back to the city he loved by running for mayor. Mayor Coppinger came from the Chattanooga firefighters, and his wife is involved in education. Both have promoted our organization for its training and highly skilled workforce. We have discovered that when we talk to anyone about our training, we are in the door—whether they are Democrat, Republican, or an Independent. The mayors have told us, when they meet with a potential client, and the question is asked, ‘Where do we get the workforce?’ their response is always, ‘the building trades.’”

Bechtel’s Charlie Duckworth agrees. “The completion of WB 2 is critical to the nuclear industry. TVA, the country’s largest public power supplier, is under a spotlight to see if the first new U.S. commercial reactor of the 21st century can be constructed safely, on
time, and on budget. TVA is currently doing an estimate to complete cost analysis on units at its Bellefonte site in north Alabama that have been sitting idle since 1988. With an aging coal fleet and tougher environmental standards, nuclear plants may be the way of the future once again, and we will need a highly trained workforce to build them.”

Brother Tolley attributes the Chattanooga workforce’s work ethic to the fact that, in the South, a lot of his members have grown up helping out on family farms, which has taught them the meaning of hard work. “I also think one of our biggest assets is our southern hospitality—we are just friendly people,” he said.

International Rep. Posey cited a quote that he believes adequately describes the mission of Local 43: “Courage is the strength to stand and persevere in the face of difficulty, fear, or hardship. Courageous leadership delivers bad news, confronts challenges head-on, and leads profound change.”

The leadership of Local 43 has done just that, and the members have embraced the strategic plan, resulting in a business model for other UA locals to emulate. Working together, the city of Chattanooga and Local 43 are succeeding, and both are becoming American success stories.