

# Q&A: Kelly Robertson-Slagle, Director of Development, Charles County, Maryland



*The \$1.1 billion build-up of the Naval Surface Warfare Center Indian Head Division (NSWC IHD) will affect not just the facility but also the surrounding community. Kelly Robertson-Slagle is the Director of Economic Development for Charles County, Maryland, home of NSWC IHD. She works closely with the NSWC IHD to coordinate county development and support its infrastructure improvements and personnel growth.*

**How will the Navy's planned investment at Indian Head affect Charles County's economy?**

**ROBERTSON-SLAGLE:** First and foremost, there will be new

business opportunities for our existing county businesses. By that, I mean the Navy's \$1.1 billion investment will be spread across 500 infrastructure projects over the next 10 years. This investment will open up opportunities for our local businesses to potentially bid on these projects. Having that type of investment here in Charles County will be extremely impactful.

Second, new commercial development and redevelopment opportunities translate into additional commercial tax revenue. Right now, there are about 2,700 people located behind the gate of the base, and manufacturing is on a nine-to-five schedule. Within the next five years, manufacturing on the base will occur 24/7, which means more foot traffic. We expect an increase in commercial enterprises setting up on the western side of Indian Head, attracted by the growing population. We hope to welcome various businesses, from retail stores and restaurants to service providers, to address the current scarcity in these sectors.

Equally important are the new job opportunities and workforce training opportunities that will be created. As the base's manufacturing facilities upgrade to meet modern "smart arsenal" standards, there will be a substantial need for a knowledgeable, 21st-century "smart workforce." We are collaborating with NSWC-IHD and various strategic partners, including the Charles County Public School System, the College of Southern Maryland, the Energetics Technology Center and other private energetics industry partners, to develop advanced workforce programs.

These initiatives will train individuals in the specialized skills necessary for operating energetics manufacturing effectively, and we want to ensure that we're developing the appropriate level of apprenticeships. Our aim is to provide residents with experience at NSWC IHD with full-time employment opportunities locally. We are actively seeking these opportunities and are also focused on sparking interest

in younger generations to sustain local workforce engagement. We must be able to expand our workforce pipeline in Charles County.

We're also engaging with our K-12 system to provide students with opportunities to interact with the base, experience the technology and gain an understanding of the energetics fields. Our goal is that whether they pursue vocational training, higher education or construction-related courses, their experiences will encourage them to return to Indian Head. We hope they know they will have a job to return to with excellent pay, a good quality of life, and a place where they will want to set up shop and raise their families.

**What is the estimate of Indian Head's annual contribution to the county's economy in terms of dollars?**

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: In FY 2022, the total payroll for Indian Head in Maryland was \$346 million, with an additional \$44.6 million generated through Maryland-based contracts. Of those dollars (between payroll and Maryland contracts), 68% went to employees or businesses in Charles County.

Beyond their annual tax contributions, the county benefits from NSWC IHD's presence. Charles County Public Schools and the College of Southern Maryland gain in-kind mentorship opportunities, such as sponsoring science fairs, providing internships, and funding robotics programs and research initiatives. They've been fantastic community partners to us for many years, and we don't see that slowing down at all. If anything, we see that ramping up a bit.

**What type of infrastructure do you have to consider with the expansion?**

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: The base borders the town of Indian Head, which is its own municipality (one of three in Charles County). From a county perspective, we continue to work hand-in-hand with the Town of Indian Head to help address

infrastructure improvements that must occur with the increase of employees and traffic. One of our monitoring priorities is Maryland Highway 210, from the county line all the way to the base gate. In collaboration with the Town of Indian Head, we are addressing traffic flow, safety, and walkability within the town.

Additionally, broadband infrastructure is always a top priority, not just for the western side and the base but across the entire county. We are particularly proud of a recent project, completed in partnership with the state and the town, which extended high-end fiber optics to the base. This project, which was one of the 500, has enabled the base to implement a closed-loop fiber infrastructure behind the gate.

The base recently signed an MOU [memorandum of understanding] with our local electric co-op, Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative, to take over management and upgrades of the electrical infrastructure behind the gate. The county is certainly committed to supporting those efforts as well.



Kelly Robertson-Slagle, left, speaking during the Charles County Economic Development Department's 2023 fall meeting. *Charles County government*

**Does Charles County have the workforce it needs, or do you expect a large influx of new residents?**

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: It's a combination. Historically, Southern Maryland has largely been a bedroom community for federal government employees. Currently, we have slightly more than 5,000 Department of Defense [DoD] civilian employees residing in Charles County. To us, that's a serious selling point! We already have a very strong DoD civilian workforce here. Regionally, up to 500,000 professionals could potentially be part of this hiring pool. We are robust in this regard. Valid DoD or contractor opportunities at the base could attract federal employees who currently commute outside of Charles County to consider employment closer to home so that they can work and live within the same community.

The base has also been working on what they call "CITE" agreements – public-private partnership agreements where

private defense businesses specializing in the development of energetics can partner with the base, bringing a portion of their workforce to enhance the manufacturing capabilities on site.

With these CITE agreements, we also expect to attract an additional workforce. There's potential for individuals to move to Charles County or the broader Southern Maryland area in pursuit of these job opportunities.

**That reminds me of when Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) moved from Arlington, Virginia, to Patuxent River, Maryland, and defense contractors sprang up like mushrooms along Highway 235.**

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: Yes, NAVAIR transformed that whole corridor; they're still doing fantastic things down there. We expect a similar turnout along [Highway] 210, in what we call our "Western Charles County Technology Corridor." We are already receiving phone calls from contractors and interested parties who are aware of the business opportunities at the site. They are exploring real estate and potential redevelopment opportunities, preparing for when those contracts are awarded. It's an extremely exciting time for us.

**Why is Charles County such a prime location for defense installations?**

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: Charles County is within a 40-minute drive of several key federal labs and military installations. We also offer easy access to major cities like Baltimore, Richmond, and Washington D.C., which includes proximity to government agencies, customers, and suppliers, and keeps defense and federal contracting firms on the cutting edge. We're sitting in what I call a "sweet spot." We developed a map that shows Charles County's proximity to Joint Base Andrews, Naval Air Systems Command in Pax River, Navy Support Facility Dahlgren [Virginia], and Indian Head, as well as

Washington, D.C. Charles County also maintains one of the highest percentages of engineers and doctoral scientists in Maryland and one of the highest percentages of engineers and doctoral scientists in the country.

Upskilling is essential for local companies to stay ahead of the marketplace. Our partnership with the College of Southern Maryland and its cutting-edge upskilling capabilities is invaluable. If a company needs to upskill its workforce to implement new technologies, it can tap into a resource pool like never before to develop custom curricula focused on skill enhancement. Every industry faces challenges with an aging workforce, and upskilling is crucial. With the pace of technology, we can't be competitive without it.

The College of Southern Maryland, a two-year community college, was formed almost 20 years ago by three individual colleges in Charles, Calvert and St. Mary's counties. This merger, aided by the three boards of county commissioners in Southern Maryland, was an extremely smart move, creating cutting-edge opportunities, better use of budget and opportunities to grow.

The college's Velocity Center, located just outside the base gate, partners with NSWC IHD. It provides a space where base officials can conduct training and host various events outside the gate, including machine shops, training classes, STEM events and diverse community activities in collaboration with the base. This setup allows personnel from Indian Head access to share industry best practices without jumping through a thousand hoops [the security protocols] to enter the base. That facility has turned out to be a fantastic asset for us, not just in Charles County but definitely for the base itself.

We also have great partnerships with the University of Maryland College Park, The Higher Education Center and many more. When it comes to the College of Southern Maryland, however, located right here in Charles County, you can't beat

the flexibility and the caliber of programs we can implement together.

On average, lease rates in Charles County offer companies about a 34% savings compared to other areas in the D.C. Metro area. We have affordable utilities, clean energy options and incentives to provide to industries considering Charles County. When we are approached by businesses interested in our county, our team can show them turnkey properties, although they must still navigate the regulatory review process for new construction. We are committed to keeping this inventory active and available for commercial businesses and industries looking to establish themselves here.