



Alabama's ties to Germany are strong, says new consul

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By **Michael Tomberlin -- The Birmingham News**



Michael Johnson, left, the new Alabama honorary consul general of Germany, shares a toast with Lutz Gorgens, the German consul general for the Southeast U.S.

An informal ceremony in a law firm's Homewood offices Wednesday night had ramifications for Alabama that stretched all the way across the Atlantic Ocean to what has become the state's go-to country for trade and foreign investment: Germany.

During the ceremony, Michael Johnson, a lawyer with Johnston Barton Proctor & Rose, was named Alabama's new honorary consul of Germany. Johnson takes over from Bruce Jones, a former Alabama Power Co. executive who served in the

post for 10 years.

"The German government sees Alabama as important enough to continue to have this position in Alabama," Johnson said. "I'm proud to be part of a collective in this state that recognizes the strong ties that exist between Alabama and Germany and want to see those ties made stronger."

Those ties are substantial. Germany already is Alabama's largest international trade partner, and it's hard to imagine a country whose companies have more foreign investment in Alabama.

Mercedes-Benz has announced plans for an additional \$2 billion investment at its plant in Vance, bringing its total there to more than \$4 billion. Meanwhile, ThyssenKrupp is spending \$5 billion on a steelmaking complex near Mobile.

Johnson noted that the Germany-Alabama connection has brought a number of firsts. Mercedes started automotive production in the state, ThyssenKrupp delivered the largest foreign investment project in the history of the U.S., and Wernher Von Braun and other German scientists brought rocket production to

Huntsville.

"I'm honored to be in this position to continue this relationship," Johnson said.

Lutz Gorgens, Germany's consul general for the Southeast U.S., swore in Johnson for the position at the reception, which featured German beer and wine and included officials from German companies in the state and abroad.

"The number of German companies in Alabama and the level of trade between Germany and Alabama continue to grow," Gorgens said.

But how well is Alabama known in Germany? Gorgens recounted a visit he once made to a German town on the Baltic Sea with a group of business leaders from the Southeast, including Alabama. Out of the blue appeared a bar named "Alabama" complete with all types of U.S. and Alabama decor.

"We had a great time there that night," he said.

Greg Canfield, director of the Alabama Development Office, said the relationship that exists between the Heart of Dixie and Deutschland go deeper than business.

"You've got to have the commercial aspects of building industry and trade," Canfield said. "But when you are able to go beyond that with something of the significance of having an honorary consul in the state, it represents a much more deeper relationship and partnership that will mean great things for the state well into the future."

Organizations such as the Alabama Germany Partnership will work with Johnson and on issues of commerce, culture, trade and serving German citizens living and studying here and Alabamians who may be living or studying in Germany.

Jones' tenure as honorary consul included the growth of Mercedes and ThyssenKrupp choosing the state for its project. Gorgens said Jones played an important role in the growth of trade and foreign investment in the state, as well as expanding the number of Germans living here.

"You have been a successful steward for all German citizens living in Alabama," Gorgens told Jones.