

County economic growth 'partnership'

By Ryan Whisner Union regional editor | Posted: Tuesday, March 17, 2015 9:38 am

Jefferson County Economic Development executive director Genevieve Borich shared with business and city leaders recently economic data that underscores the need for communities to work together to promote the area's many assets.

Through a PowerPoint presentation during a Fort Atkinson Area Chamber of Commerce Lunch and Learn business seminar, Genevieve Borich compared economic statistics for Wisconsin, Jefferson County and Fort Atkinson.

The JCEDC consists of 10 voting members, including representatives from each city or village and three Jefferson County supervisors. The executive director serves to provide professional guidance to the organization's policies, create/promote partnerships throughout the region and administer grant and loan programs to promote new and expanding businesses.

For the JCEDC executive director, it is all about using data for decisionmaking, Borich said.

"It's about our cities thinking about how they can use data to make effective policy decisions," she said. "It's about our county and how we invest money in resources. It's about our local businesses and how different pieces of data can help be more strategic in how they're growing."

Borich noted that there is a lot of information out there. She noted that Jefferson County's poverty rate is 11.2 percent, compared to the state rate of 13 percent and City of Fort Atkinson at 13.4 percent.

"We have relatively low poverty rates compared to some communities, but overall, it is never good to have folks in poverty," Borich said.

"It is always something to think about when we are talking about the economy," Borich continued. "It is not just about how things are working overall with the gross domestic product or the wealth of the community; it is also about all the members of the community."



BUSINESS IS BUSINESS

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS — The Fort Atkinson Area Chamber of Commerce recently held a Lunch and Learn business seminar featuring Jefferson County Economic Development executive director Genevieve Borich. She offered a presentation on the scope of economic development in Jefferson County and the importance of telling the story of the data. Shown here are scenes from the event. Above, participants listen to Borich's presentation. From left, among them are Fort Atkinson City Council member and School District of Fort Atkinson Crossroads instructor Jude Hartwick, Fort Atkinson Community Foundation program administrator Sue Hartwick, Fort Atkinson City Manager Matt Trebatoski, United Way of Jefferson & North Walworth Counties executive director Megan Findlay and Badger Bank marketing/sales training coordinator Robyn Newcomb. For more photos click here. — Daily Union photo by Ryan Whisner.

As example, she pointed out the unemployment rates are 5.3 percent statewide, 5.1 percent in Jefferson County and approximately 3.4 percent in Fort Atkinson.

“When you start to get as low of an unemployment rate as we have in our area and some of the communities, it can become a challenge for our businesses in hiring the folks with the right skills,” Borich said. “It is something we keep in mind as we are developing programming at the JCEDC and with our local partners such the Fort Atkinson Area Chamber of Commerce, the city and the Fort Atkinson Industrial Development Corporation.”

She said the JCEDC and its partners must focus on the big picture and also help some of the dynamics going on within the local economy.

Borich said data shows there are approximately 39,264 county residents in the Jefferson County workforce. Of those, 23,764 residents work in the county and 15,500 work outside the county.

She said the county’s total workforce is approximately 35,034, with about 11,270 workers imported from outside the county.

American Community Survey data collected from the U.S. Census shows that the average travel time to work for Jefferson County residents is 22.8 minutes. Statewide, the average commute is 21.7 minutes.

“We are very much a commuter county,” she said.

“There are a lot of folks who have a two-income household where one person might be working in town and the other might be commuting somewhere,” Borich said. “More than anything, when we’re talking about the economy, it is not just about arbitrary borders of the city or the county; it’s about the laborshed and how people are moving goods, services and clients and their workforce.”

She also discussed how the JCEDC is working on reinventing local businesses and then marketing them.

Borich said the best role for the JCEDC is to serve as a conduit for existing businesses to programs, incentives and resources.

“Resources we have for some of our local businesses — whether they are large or small, starting out or larger existing businesses — (include) having the incentives available to us to help grease the wheel and help some of these companies grow; that is something really important that we really want to be working on into the future,” Borich said. “We’re kind of the backend support for a lot of the folks working on economic development.”

As a smaller region, Borich said, if area partners work together a little more, there will be a better result than everyone doing their own thing. She said programing in development involves connecting businesses to resources, conducting surveys and seminars, organizing an annual state of the county’s economy address.

During her first year in her position, Borich said, she has found that companies are facing a challenge in finding their workforce.

“Figuring out what our current skill sets are among folks that are employed or unemployed and how to match the needs of those folks with the companies looking to hire a workforce is a big focus over the next year,” she said.

From a technological standpoint, Borich noted that being able to access information online is becoming more and

more important, not only for residents, but employers, as well. She stressed the importance of communication with those providers.

“I think one of the biggest things we have to talk about in terms of the economy here in Fort Atkinson, and also at the county level, is promoting how wonderful a place this is to live, work and visit,” Borich said. “Looking at that and how we can help elevate that story.”

The county economic development director said there is data on retail market potential that is being underutilized by Jefferson County communities.

“We can now, on a pretty affordable basis, determine what our buying power in different retail sectors is for an area and then go after those folks,” Borich said.

Another area is targeted industry clusters and figuring out what the area’s strengths are and how the JCEDC and its partners can help the businesses that are here grow while also seeking emerging clusters and going after them to locate here.

Borich said areas include healthcare, food processing and different types of manufacturing.

“Really understanding what our story is and telling that to folks in those industries and figuring out how we can be attractive to companies that fit that kind of profile, I think, will be helpful to us,” she said, suggesting that approach as the “going-after-everybody” concept.

Moving forward, Borich said, the JCEDC is looking to become more proactive in marketing Jefferson County communities and assets.

She highlighted a statistic that shows that nearly 13 percent of the U.S. population live within a 300-mile radius.

“That is pretty powerful in terms of the number of customers that our businesses can be tapping into, in terms of supply chains and how we can be bringing in different raw materials and different parts for our companies locally, and also from a tourism perspective and how we can be pulling folks in from other areas to come visit what we have here going on in Fort Atkinson and Jefferson County,” Borich said.

As an example, she noted that Jefferson County has a great corporate presence, with companies known around the country and beyond, such as Jones Dairy Farm, Nasco and Trek Bicycle.

“We have a diversified economy,” she said. “I think one of the things that was unusual for Jefferson County in the downturn was that, in terms of some of the communities around the country, we weren’t hit quite as hard.”

Borich acknowledged a decline in manufacturing employment in the area, but said it was not as magnified as in other areas of the country. She suggested that the diversity of the employment option likely will continue to help the area’s economy into the future.

Using Fort Atkinson as an example, Borich cited its well-established industries, the Rock River riverwalk, the downtown district, the Hoard Historical Museum, the Glacial River Trail, a lower cost of living and its proximity to big cities.

“Thinking about how we are telling that story is something we haven’t really thought about,” she said. “Sometimes

it's not just about telling Fort Atkinson's story, but telling the area stories, as well. I think it depends on who we are trying to communicate that message to.”

Borich noted that in many cases, companies thinking about relocation or expansion don't immediately consider cities the size of Fort Atkinson. It is up to the area to market itself.

“They are going to think about the area and what that means to them and what that area has in terms of resources and why it is a great place to live and work,” she said.

Among the priorities at the JCEDC is branding Jefferson County in order to tell its story from both an economic development and tourism point of view.

“We have wonderful amenities for outdoor recreation, which is becoming more important to folks choosing a place to live, but it is also a wonderful quality of life we have here,” Borich said.

Over the next couple of years, she said, it will be important for area businesses and municipalities to work together to be more proactive in telling that story.

To do so, the JCEDC has developed an updated website with numerous resources in promoting property, incentives, workforce, succession planning and downtown revitalization.

“We are looking at developing a series of marketing materials telling the story of why our economy is growing and why we're a great place to bring your employees and put your companies here,” Borich said.

Borich noted that one of the most interesting statistics she's seen in the past year came from a study done at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which identified that less than 1 percent of businesses in Wisconsin move annually.

“More than anything, it is harder to attract an entirely new company to establish,” she said. “We really want to be focusing on helping our existing businesses grow and helping new businesses start.”

Borich said it is important to look at the realistic nature of economic development, focusing locally while also relying on the regional, state and federal agencies to help with some of the bigger concepts.

She said the JCEDC will be establishing working groups related to housing, transportation/infrastructure, primary employment, small business/entrepreneurship/downtown, workforce and marketing and branding.

“We want to bring together all the chamber executives in the area and also the service providers in the area for small business growth to help them figure out these are some of the things we are working on,” she said.

More than anything, she emphasized, any effort to grow the economy should be a group effort.

“It's not one institution, one program, one committee working on it. It's a lot of folks working on a lot of different angles working on helping the economy,” Borich concluded.