

Jefferson business, community leaders hear of economic trends

By Amy Smith Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, May 7, 2015 9:41 am

JEFFERSON — Area business owners and leaders gathered Tuesday to hear about the state of Jefferson County's economy and trends and network with other attendees.

The event, "Hello Jefferson," was presented by the Jefferson County Economic Development Consortium (JECDC) and the Jefferson Chamber of Commerce at St. Coletta of Wisconsin.

JCEDC Executive Director Genevieve Borich was the guest speaker. Borich spoke on several topics, including economic trends throughout Jefferson County, and how businesses and the community can help in its growth.

The unemployment rate in Jefferson County is slightly lower than the state average of 7.8 percent at 7.2 percent, and though the economy is on the rise, Borich said the county has not quite yet pulled out from the economic downfall.

A key factor in revitalizing Jefferson and the county's economy, she said, is up to relationships between the community and the different resources at their disposal.

"Aiding primary employers and small business is the future of Jefferson," Borich added.

Several upcoming economically beneficial possibilities for the city of Jefferson, she said, include the medical college, redevelopment of the former county highway site and downtown revitalization, and the implementation of a new tax incremental financing district which could become home to new businesses.

Completing those projects takes a slew of partners, she said, noting that those partners include the chamber of commerce, the JECDC, two regional economic development organizations based out of Madison and Milwaukee, and a state organization.

The economic executive director also shared several lessons she has learned in her first year with the county.

The first challenge for Borich was thinking about ecosystems for business start-ups and expansions. She said there are a lot of local resources out there to encourage and help small business owners, but sometimes they are not easily accessible.

She and her staff created a system of concepts available on the JECDC website to help the smaller communities of Jefferson County. The concepts include recognizing one's mission statement and value, having a business and financial model, being able to articulate one's business goal, creating strategic partnerships and targeting clientele.

Another challenge Borich tackled was thinking of ways the county can serve as a conduit for existing businesses and programs, to incentives and other resources. In doing that, she engaged in conversations with County Administrator Ben Wehmeier and the surrounding communities to learn what areas they need assistance and want the county to focus on.

“One of the main things we are hearing from communities in Jefferson County is there is an interest in serving as a lead in their economic development,” Borich said. “After all, chambers, in particular, and our community leaders know the business best, so really supporting them with the resources they need and keeping those open lines of communication is really important.”

In addition, she touched on property development throughout the county. “Several of our communities in Jefferson County are either running kind of low on new land to develop for commercial-industrial, or they are looking at infrastructure that is needed to activate some of the land that is available,” Borich said.

The general feeling for economic development, she said, is “if they build it they will come, but it takes a lot of investment to make some of those upgrades.” Incentives also are important for the economic development of Jefferson County, she stated.

The executive director said she continues to work with each community to figure if there are additional incentive programs out there that have a good model nationwide and would be a good fit for the communities. JCEDC also is working toward creating a recognizable brand for the county, she noted.

“We really want to make sure we’re highlighting the story of each of our communities,” Borich said. “Something that Jefferson County has that a lot of areas in this nation don’t have are a lot of wonderful communities.”

Lastly, downtown revitalization is another important strategy many Jefferson County municipalities are focused on.

“Figuring out how we can help our local companies figure out what resources are best suited for them is going to be really important,” Borich added.

The director hopes to engage community leaders and business owners in the coming year with JCEDC workshops to better gauge how the county can help the local economy thrive. 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 more information or additional resources on the economy, the public is encouraged to visit the JCEDC at its new website: JCEDC.net.