

JCEDC, WEDO merge to expand county's economic development focus

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WATERTOWN — The Jefferson County Economic Development Consortium and Watertown Economic Development Organization have announced their intention to pursue a merger under the auspices of the JCEDC.

The announcement comes at the same time that the JCEDC is embarking on the area's first capital campaign to engage the region's private sector in collaborative economic development work. In conjunction, the local leadership is developing a five-year economic development strategic plan.

Together, this effort aims to increase economic development responsiveness; improve visibility of the area statewide, regionally, and globally; and align area communities, businesses, and economic development partners with the impactful work of the five-year work program.

JCEDC Executive Director Genevieve Coady noted that the intention is to have a newly-developed partner nonprofit organization led jointly by area public and private-sector leaders and JCEDC staff. They will oversee implementation of the plan's programming.

"With the economy recovery gaining momentum, each community in the area has a different economic focus," Coady said. "This new model aims to provide more extensive specialized support to area public and private leaders with expanded staff, programming, and resources."

The broadened capabilities to area communities will include a range of new initiatives under the five-year work program, including an areawide manufacturing council, an entrepreneurship council, an extensive branding/marketing campaign, increased workforce assistance and programming, a renewed focus on logistics development, and targeted industrial and retail sector growth.

The JCEDC consists of 10 voting members, including representatives from each city or village and three Jefferson County supervisors. Its overall goals are to foster and encourage responsible, sustainable economic development activities that result in job creation, job retention, increase the tax base and improve the quality of life for the citizens of Jefferson County.

The Watertown Economic Development Organization or WEDO, was founded in 2012 with a mission to promote and enhance the economic vitality of the community through the retention and expansion of existing businesses and the attraction of new business to the Watertown area. WEDO services include site location, marketing assistance and acting as a resource for a host of business-related topics.

Leadership from both organizations have been in discussions since late 2015 about how to better work together on economic development initiatives in Watertown and the greater Jefferson County area.

“The development of this new model and the merger hold much promise for the City of Watertown, as well as the greater area,” Watertown Mayor John David said. “Having WEDO merge with the JCEDC is a smart move that helps both organizations toward long-term sustainability while providing better value for our businesses.”

In addition to serving as mayor in Watertown, David is the current JCEDC chairman.

“When companies look at expansion or relocation, they look at an entire customer base, laborshed and supply chain of an area,” he said. “The steps the area economic development leadership is set to take in 2016 positions Watertown and our area to be more relevant in the economic development arena.”

The newly merged organization, which has yet to be named, will eliminate duplication of efforts and align resources to effectively manage and implement the work program of a proposed five-year strategic plan, Coady said. Since both organizations currently are operating with minimal staff and budgets, it is difficult for each to work on the breadth of economic development projects.

The merger will allow for a broader scope of work and cover more sectors of economic development in the area. For Watertown, it also will increase efficiencies as most of the businesses currently served by the organization operate areawide.

“Economic development is an increasingly competitive field,” Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier said. “Our area alone is experiencing a significant number of layoffs, but is set to grow our workforce by nearly 1,000 jobs. Our economy is evolving and our organizational model needs to evolve with it. Alignment is critical for local economic partners to be as effective as possible.”

Coady noted that businesses don't stop functioning at the municipal or county boundaries.

“This new model for economic development is a model for business, not for government,” Coady said. “Our job is to best support businesses with their challenges and opportunities, and I believe this newly merged organization and the strategic plan will empower us to do just that.”

Her counterpart, WEDO Executive Director Kim Erdmann, noted that ultimately, the area operates as one economy sandwiched in between major metropolitan areas.

“There is a unique opportunity at hand to reinvent how we support our area's economy,” she said. “This merger will enable us to take economic development to the next level, not only for

Watertown and its businesses, but for all of the businesses in the area. Our plan is to provide more strategic assistance to a greater number of companies in the area.”

WEDO Board President Matthew Mauthe agreed.

“Watertown businesses aren’t confined to jurisdictional boundaries,” he said. “As businesses expand beyond Watertown, whether it’s through their supply chain, workforce, customer base, or additional facilities such as Marquardt Village, the new organization will be able to assist them more effectively and efficiently. More resources and staff will be directly available and on-call to our companies under this new model; the work program of the five-year plan will cover more of the spectrum of economic development work we need to focus on in Watertown.”

The organization will be funded by both the public and private sectors through the capital campaign. Currently, JCEDC member communities in Jefferson County pay a per-resident fee. Member communities include Cambridge, Fort Atkinson, Jefferson, Johnson Creek, Lake Mills, Waterloo, Watertown, and Whitewater.

“Jefferson County has one of the only publicly funded areawide economic development organizations in the Midwest,” Jefferson County Board of Supervisors chairman James Schroeder said. “The creation of a true public-private economic partnership and supporting strategic plan for our area will not only emulate best practices but, more importantly, give the private sector a leadership role in the health of our area’s economy.”

Boards for both organizations are expected to vote on the merger in the near future.

A feasibility study for the capital campaign is expected to begin next month. The campaign, to be executed in the second half of the year, will focus on raising funds for economic development programming.

Programming will include job fairs, workshops and seminars, and a host of other economic development activities designed to promote business retention and attraction.