

Economic development priority for county

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JEFFERSON — Government leaders say they believe Jefferson County is in a good position economic development-wise.

But there always is room for improvement.

“In a fundamental way, Jefferson County is unique in the United States,” Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Chairman Jim Schroeder said. “The nationwide trend in rural counties in the United States is that they are losing population, and we’re not.”

Schroeder suggested that statistic is reflective of Jefferson County evolving out of that rural county category.

“We’re a bridge between what is going on economically in Dane County and what’s going on in Milwaukee County,” he said. “We’ve talked about this ‘knowledge corridor,’ and I believe we are in a position to play in that trend.”

Schroeder pointed out that such trends are not incompatible with growth and improvement in quality of life for Jefferson County residents.

“We just want to do it in a strategic way,” he said. “All of the economic and demographic indicators point to quality of life being what is going to drive economic development in south-central Wisconsin.”

Schroeder noted that during the past few years, the county has been looking at making additional investments in economic development through both increasing per-capita contributions both by the county and municipal partners.

“County government realizes we should be investing more in economic development,” Schroeder said.

In addition, the chairman said, the county is looking at engaging more with the private sector to invest in the county’s economic development efforts.

He pointed out that economic development policy questions for the county board are going to determine the delicate balance between preservation and growth.

“We have an ideologically diverse board; on one end, we have people who say farmland should remain farmland with no exceptions, and on the other end, we have some folks who say all development is good and we should be encouraging it,” Schroeder said.

He acknowledged that there remains a strong feeling among the board members to not allow Jefferson County to be developed in a similar fashion to Waukesha County.

“I certainly don’t (want that),” he said. “It is painful for me to see that beautiful topography basically ruined by unregulated development. But we also don’t want to sit in our barns and smoke a pipe all day long, either.”

Jefferson County Economic Development Consortium Executive Director Genevieve Coady suggested that to achieve one or the other — rural agricultural preservation or strategic growth — both actions will have to be taken in Jefferson County.

“Having strategic growth where you are respecting the rural nature of the smaller communities, the ag tourism, that is our schtick here,” she said.

Among the challenges in Jefferson County in economic development, the JCEDC is the only government-funded economic development organization in the area.

“The JCEDC is currently formed through an intergovernmental agreement through which we have the municipalities and the county serving on our board, but there is no seat at the table for private businesses,” Coady said. “We’re at a crossroads, and to play the game of economic development and do it in a healthy way, you’ve got to have both — public and private — at the table.”

Coady acknowledged that historically, that has not been the approach.

“What that says is we’re kind of leaving some things to the table,” she said. “Right now, we don’t have a vehicle to have the private sector sit administratively and be engaged in economic development work.”

The private sector traditionally does not stop at municipal or county boundaries, she pointed out.

“They have folks that live all over the place and their customer base and suppliers are all over the area,” Coady said.

The executive director said the theme being heard from area communities is that the JCEDC can serve as the conduit between what the local partners do and also connect the regional and economic development and planning partners, as well.

“More than anything, I think, we have a commonality in all the communities in the Jefferson County area. We have great quality of life, we have a great story to tell and we have some great companies in our communities,” Coady said. “I think being a little bit more strategic about how we grow and looking at the type of wages that we’re looking to recruit and grow with that kind of completes the picture. We must have the framework to execute that.”

To address forming that framework, the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors authorized hiring Power 10 of Atlanta, Ga., as a consulting firm specializing in economic development capital

campaigns, to complete a feasibility study as the JCEDC develops a transition plan into a new organizational model to engage the private sector.

Results of the study are expected to be presented to the county board at its Tuesday, May 10, meeting.

The reorganization of the JCEDC will lead into development of a \$4.1 million, five-year strategic initiative slated to start in 2017. The goals are to focus on the workforce by attracting, developing and aligning talent; to focus on growing businesses via jobs and capital investment; and to focus on marketing to drive communications and tourism in the region.

Through the various programs, the initiative will encompass all of Jefferson County and potentially portions of Dodge County, pending approval by its board of supervisors.

In preparation for implementing the initiative, Coady noted, the JCEDC board recently unanimously approved a merger with Watertown Economic Development Organization (WEDO).

To date, the WEDO board has not taken formal action on the merger; however, Coady noted that communications with WEDO leaders have indicated support of the concept.

Should the merger occur, the intention would be to grow the current JCEDC staff by bringing the current WEDO staff on board, along with possibly one or two other positions.

At its May 10 meeting, the county board will consider creating a business and marketing manager position, contingent on WEDO'S approval of the merger.

“That is part of the feasibility process: to ensure we are scaling up the programming, the budget and the staffing needs to make sure we can execute what we’re committing to,” Coady said. “It is a little bit in flux still, but we recognize we are going to have to grow the JCEDC staff to make sure we can accomplish and expand its work program.”

In addition to the merger, the JCEDC board also moved forward with applying for a 501(c)(3) designation in stepping toward creating the Glacial Heritage Development Partnership.

“Some of the impacts we are looking to have is to increase the economic development programming we have in the area,” Coady said.

Future concepts in programming include regional job fairs, an area-wide business alliance, a countywide manufacturing council, an entrepreneurship group and more.

Establishing a 501(c)(3) to become tax exempt would allow private businesses to mainly fund the programing.

Coady said the move also would qualify the JCEDC for grants that it currently can not seek as a governmental unit.

“In terms of the organizational model, it will be part private, part public sector,” she said of the Glacial Heritage Development Partnership. “It allows us to bring everyone onto the same page and oversee implementation of the five-year strategic plan. It allows us to cover more of the spectrum of economic development and it allows the area to have a true public-private partnership.”

As proposed under the new model, the JCEDC board and staff would remain in place.

“The public funds will stay public,” she said. “The administration will remain public and keep public accountability and transparency.”

Comparatively, the Glacial Heritage Development Partnership — the 501(c)(3) organization — will have members from the JCEDC board, as well as a majority of private sector leaders, on its 41-person board. The name was selected to represent the area, building on an existing name, rather than come up with a competing name that represents the area as a whole.

“It is a partner organization,” she said. “Funds raised in the private sector will go to the 501(c)(3) and the board will oversee the five-year strategic plan and the programs that come from that.”

Since taking her position two years ago, Coady has taken the approach that the entire area operates as one economy.

“I think, more than anything, there is more work than I can handle,” she said.

By growing the staff, she said, it will not just be about addressing the big topics.

“Overall, it is going to make us more relevant and more competitive,” Coady said.

Currently, the feasibility study is under way in relation to the capital campaign to raise funds through the private sector and to invite private sector leadership to sit on the new nonprofit organization.

“Part of what we’re doing with the feasibility study this spring is to get feedback from the public sector and private sector leadership to make sure the plan is on the right track and everyone feels we’re focused on the right thing,” Coady said.

The goal is to figure out how to tell the story of the area’s brand.

“A good portion of economic development work is branding and marketing and promoting the area,” Coady said. “Figuring out how we can engage the private sector in that process in a coordinated way is a real opportunity that we have. Our operating mantra for the next year has to be ‘how do we best serve the businesses in the area?’”