

LaGrange County Economic Development Plan
Public Meeting
Lakeland High School
Wednesday, April 20, 2011
6:00 P.M.

Meeting Summary

Twenty-seven members of the public attended a meeting to review research collected as part of an effort to create a strategic economic development plan for LaGrange County. A sign-in sheet from the meeting is appended at the end of this summary.

Keith Gillenwater, Executive Director of the LaGrange County Economic Development Corporation (EDC), thanked everyone for attending. He explained that this is the first economic development strategy initiative for the county since 2003. The county received a planning grant through the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA). Gillenwater noted that OCRA funded a recent downtown revitalization plan in Howe and some infrastructure projects in Mongo and Wolcottville. Gillenwater explained that the planning consultants, Strategic Development Group, Inc. (SDG), were selected through a qualifications-based process. Gillenwater introduced the consultants and thanked the planning executive committee for their work in inviting members of the public to the meeting and focus groups to be held the following day.

Brian O'Neill, Senior Project Manager at SDG, began his presentation by saying that the four keys of a successful plan are simplicity, community buy-in, implementation, and review. O'Neill said the planning process includes five phases: set-up, research, input, plan creation, and plan implementation. After the project set-up, SDG conducts research on the economy and available sites for business development. The input phase includes many opportunities for participation that include public meetings, focus groups, and a public questionnaire. There is also a half-day economic summit to create a SWOT profile of the county. The steering committee in coordination with the consultant and EDC will create goals, objectives, and action plans for the county. The public will have an opportunity to comment on the draft plan prior to its approval.

O'Neill reviewed research findings from the demographic and peer community analysis which examines the county relative to the following indicators: changes in population, changes in educational attainment, changes in wealth, and changes in employment. LaGrange County's profile includes mixed indicators. An influencing demographic is the high concentration of Amish residents. O'Neill said that characterizing LaGrange County to the rest of the world will be important in efforts to attract new businesses to the area. O'Neill emphasized that the Amish are a tremendous asset for the community, but LaGrange County is competing in the global economy. Education attainment levels and per capita income need to be explained to people looking at the county from outside. O'Neill noted the cyclic

unemployment rate spikes since 1990. He attributed the quick declines in unemployment to Amish entrepreneurship, which is emerging in the county. The RV industry contributed to the growth of the manufacturing sector in the county. LaGrange County is second in the state for cattle and calves production.

Economies do not follow incorporated lines. The regional business cluster analysis examines the LaGrange County region that includes the contiguous counties and then compares it with other nearby MSAs. Location quotients examine basic employers that create wealth for the local economy. Several industry clusters with high LQs experienced significant job losses between 2003 and 2009. A few industry clusters with low LQs experienced growth in employment during that time. O’Neill said that one of the strategies for the economic development plan may be to attract businesses based on regional assets.

The economic development plan includes a site review component that will be an assessment of the undeveloped greenfields in the county. Allen Jacobsen, Senior P.E. at Hannum, Wagle & Cline Engineering (HWC) is conducting the research for the site review.

In summary, O’Neill reviewed the activities of the public input phase and the final outcomes of the planning process. The final plan will include:

- a long-term vision of the community’s economic future;
- a set of prioritized goals and objectives and a projected budget – income and expenses;
- a plan with written text and appendices fully documenting the planning process, various sources and types of input, and expected actions and results;
- action plans showing process flows, responsibilities, time schedules, benchmarks, and costs;
- individuals task and organizational work plans for groups responsible for specific steps in action plans; and
- a schedule and process for plan revision and updating.

Questions and Answers

Unless otherwise noted, Brian O’Neill answered the questions asked at the conclusion of the public meeting.

Q1: *We have a scenic overlay in the county’s land use plan. Is this a problem for other communities?*

A1: One of the assets you have is the natural resources and lovely natural features. It would be prudent to protect those. Anything that attracts people will attract employers. Quality of life is something people look for when they look at potential places to live. Plan commissions have to constantly refine tools and ordinances over time. Ordinances can be amended.

Q2: *What do you do first? Do you bring in business first or employees?*

- A2: You have to do both at the same time. That's a real struggle for many communities. The community needs to promote lifelong learning as a way of life.
- Q3: *Where does agriculture figure in to the focus groups?*
- A3: We intend to invite representatives from agriculture to the economic summit. There are also agriculture representative on the steering committee.
- Q4: *One of things employers look for in communities is a GED or diploma. How can LaGrange County compete?*
- A4: You should highlight the Amish entrepreneurship in the community on the EDC website. You need to communicate what they bring to the county despite the low educational attainment level.
- Q5: *The county's supply of housing has been an issue for executives.*
- A5a: We are inviting realtors and local builders and developers to the economic summit.
- A5b: Keith Gillenwater mentioned that invitations to the economic summit will be going out early next week.
- Q6: *We just went through a site selection process at Fawn River. Can you explain what that entails?*
- Q7: Gillenwater said that county faces a number of criteria. There was a large distribution center that ended up going elsewhere in Indiana. There were some things that needed to be fixed at Fawn River. There are so many factors that go into this process. There was a site consultant. Then there were 8-9 executives who toured the community and discussed infrastructure service and incentives. The EDC responded to a Request for Information that covered a wide range of issues including schools, recent plant closings, etc.
- Q7: *The county has high electric rates.*
- A7a: Economic development is really community development. It's schools, recreation, shopping, amenities, housing, and a diverse economy. The emphasis on these factors changes from company to company. The EDC can take some initiatives, but most efforts need to be some kind of public private partnership. Other investments need to be made by utilities, local governments, etc. It's a multi-agency effort.
- A7b: Keith Gillenwater explained that he's the chief salesman of the community that we've developed here. But the EDC is a two-person organization with a volunteer board. We can't build roads or water towers. We need to get people to buy-in to a vision. That's what we're trying to do.
- Q8: *LaGrange County's EDC participates in a number of regional initiatives as part of the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership and Northeast Indiana Fund. There are new strategic initiatives through those groups. LaGrange is sort of an outlier in that region. Should our community development initiatives be aligned with our primary MSA?*

A8: We're working with the regional groups at the summit and input phase. SDG has participated in studies on regional development along with Indiana Business Research Center (IBRC) and Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD). Communities do not belong to only one region. Your region is the LaGrange County Region, but you're also part of the Fort Wayne MSA. You want to be represented in that region, and you want to take advantage of the assets – primarily educational – there.

Q9: *Is there a long listing of the amenities in the area? How does a region get excited about promoting what is in LaGrange County?*

A9a: You need to raise your profile in other communities. SDG has recently assisted clients develop regional tourism strategies. Your county's assets can be characterized regionally. Promote your own assets which are significant. There's a tremendous arts and craft community and lake culture. Then partner with people in the region. A great place to visit is a great place to live.

A9b: Gillenwater encouraged people to check out the EDC website. The tourism page includes information from a recent CERTEC study. Tourism has a huge impact on the county already. The county's tourism numbers speak to that impact.

Contact Information

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Sign In Sheet: LAGRANGE COUNTY ECON. DEV.
(Meeting)
PUBLIC MTG

4/20/2011
(Date)

Please print clearly.

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Sign In Sheet:

LAGRANGE COUNTY PUBLIC MTC
(Meeting)

4/20/2011
(Date)

Please print clearly.

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