

Summary / Steering Committee Meeting #3

LaGrange County Economic Development Plan

LaGrange County REMC, 1995 E US 20, LaGrange IN • Tuesday, May 31, 2011 • 2:00 P.M.

I. Attendees/Introductions

Steering Committee Members:

- Jeff Brill, LaGrange County Hwy Dept.
- Bill Connelly, LaGrange Publishing Co.
- Keith Gillenwater, LaGrange County EDC
- Chris Godlewski, LaGrange County Plan Commission
- Risa Herber, Lakeland School Corp.
- Mervin Lehman, Heartland Mattress
- Mark Leu, LaGrange County REMC
- Jac Price, LaGrange County Council
- Jed Oakley, Century Link Communications
- Joe Pierce, Farmer's State Bank
- Beth Thornburg, LaGrange County CVB
- Lora Tormanen, LaGrange County EDC

Consultants: Brian O'Neill (SDG), Catie Kosinski (SDG)

II. Distribute Materials

The planning consultants distributed the regional business cluster analysis and draft reports from the input phase activities. All the reports will be considered drafts until the plan is approved by OCRA.

III. Review Regional Business Cluster Analysis Report

Brian explained that the regional business cluster report – or location quotient (LQ) analysis – begins with the premise that every community is the center of its own region. Each community also participates in regional economies generally centered on larger MSAs. For instance, LaGrange County is an outlier in the Ft. Wayne MSA region, while at the same time it is the center of its own region that includes all of its contiguous counties.

The regional business cluster report examines the location quotient (LQ) of major industries. This analysis compares the regional economies in which LaGrange County participates to the national economy. The purpose of this type of analysis is to identify basic employers, those establishments that

are exporting goods out of the county or region and bringing new capital into the community. Brian noted that the Forest & Wood Products industry brings capital in to the region – largely due to the woodworking and furniture industries.

Business clusters have common needs in workforce, supplies, infrastructure, and other areas. There is a common linkage that puts businesses in clusters. Clusters tell us what kinds of opportunities there are for other similar industries. Brian noted that the Manufacturing supercluster, which includes several subclusters, is the LaGrange County Region’s largest employment sector. Although manufacturing jobs are somewhat cyclic, they are typically high-paying. Brian recommended that the county continue efforts to recruit more manufacturing businesses to the area to retain and expand existing manufacturers.

One of the challenges for the region is to diversify the economy, which is so heavily dependent on manufacturing jobs. Brian noted some opportunities in the regional industry clusters that recently had increasing employment and LQs. These clusters included Agribusiness, Food Processing & Technology, Biomedical/Biotechnical (Life Sciences), Education & Knowledge Creation, Transportation & Logistics, and Machinery Manufacturing.

The report examines the LQs from three nearby MSAs. There are several “star” industry clusters in nearby MSAs that have potential for LaGrange County’s economy. Keith noted that the EDC has already been focusing their efforts on several of the star industry clusters identified in the report.

IV. Review of Input Phase Findings

Brian directed people’s attention to the SWOT¹ Coded Table that is a compilation of all the key findings from the various public input activities during phase III of the planning process. Action items are coded by category and include the source of public input. The coded table also identifies the action items as strengths/opportunities or weaknesses/threats. All of the comments by key informants regarding strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are included in the table. Strong opinions and issues with consensus from the focus groups are listed.

Highlights from the SWOT Coded Table:

- The work ethic of the workforce - of the Amish community in particular – was considered a strength.
- There was a more positive view of government in the key informant interviews than in the small business focus group.
- The lack of a city is a limitation for the county; cities have greater access to grant funding and a certain amount of influence that towns lack.
- Local schools have initiated innovations in the curriculums to encourage post-secondary education.

¹ SWOT = Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

- The Amish community is very entrepreneurial in LaGrange County.
- The global economy is a threat in many ways but also provides a larger market for goods produced locally.
- There are housing supply and new development issues.
- There is not a lot of land available for new executive housing along the lakes; there is some resistance to funneling development around the lakes.
- There is a tradeoff between housing values and protecting the natural resources (i.e. lakes) in the county.
- The I-80/90 Toll Road is an asset for the community.
- The county only has two rail connections which is considered a weakness.
- There are issues with access to water and sewer infrastructure.
- The county has a fair amount of available industrial space but not enough with the preferred ceiling clearance.
- The county's certified greenfield site has been recognized by the state.
- There was some debate about the appropriate use of Major Moves money in the form of proactive economic investment.
- People had an ambivalent attitude about the relationship between government and business.
- The local economy has been greatly impacted by the recession due to the large percentage of manufacturing employment.
- There is a "lake culture" here; people value natural resources.
- The community lacks quality of life amenities.
- Shippshewana is a major asset for small business and tourism.
- The CVB was recognized as an asset for tourism.

V. Visioning

Brian asked the steering committee members to imagine the ideal LaGrange County and answer the question "what would you like LaGrange County to be?" assuming the county had unlimited resources at its disposal.

Comments from this visioning exercise included²:

- Create a walkway or bridge over SR 5 in Shippshewana
- Build upscale housing developments
- Develop planned industrial areas in the county
- Extend municipal water and wastewater service county-wide
- Revitalize all downtown areas to reveal a vibrant retail environment
- Encourage mixed-use development in downtown areas
- Maintain natural resources
- Expand and connect county parks

² Comments that are highlighted were mentioned by more than one steering committee member.

- Establish diversified industrial base
- Create new industrial parks that are not already existing (i.e. Howe, Topeka)
- Develop a mega-site in the Howe area, one large site that is at least 400-500 acres
- Develop a shell/spec building program
- Diversify the LaGrange County EDC's funding base
- Develop a revolving loan fund
- Bring a satellite campus to the community
- Improve the county's overall educational attainment level
- Run a branding campaign specific to the local Amish woodworking industry
- Grow current businesses with minimal government restrictions
- Reverse "brain drain" trend; develop incentives to attract recent college graduates from the area
- Use Major Moves funds to provide incentives to encourage workers to live in the county and to hire local contractors
- Expand and connect walking and biking trails throughout the county (i.e. Pumpkinvine Trail)
- Improve working relationship with Indiana DNR in places like Mongo with the Pigeon River State Fish and Wildlife Area
- Develop an indoor recreation amenity
- Have a county-wide branding campaign for the LaGrange County CVB
- Bring in higher paying jobs
- Make LaGrange County a "must see" tourism destination
- Attract an anchor store in the Town of LaGrange
- Market LaGrange County as a livable community where residents can live, work, and play