

WPJ'S CLOSING COMMENTS COMMUNITY MEETING 11-6-02

We heard today that we must develop a vision. We must remember that it must be developed around:

- What is probable
- What is possible
- What is preferred

We must also remember that we cannot deal with our prejudices, or our preconceived notions of our problems and solutions. We must deal with the facts; the facts developed through our demographic studies, and those generated by interviews at community, and focus group meetings.

We have heard that our vision cannot be generic; it must be unique to Elkhart County. Our economic development cannot be centered on “anywhere” USA.

I have developed some thoughts on a vision for the economic development of Elkhart County that I would like to share with you.

I start with the thought that the vision be based on the concept of Elkhart County being one of the best start up and growth economies in the Midwest, focusing on the creation of high skilled and high wage jobs, while creating outstanding productivity (which demands the use of high technology and high capital investment), with social responsibility.

Elkhart County must build on its strengths and improve on it's weaknesses to create a dynamic business environment, one that benefits companies, communities, and families.

To do so we must excel in five areas:

1. Education and workforce development
2. Business costs
3. Government and regulatory environment
4. Infrastructure
5. Dynamism/entrepreneurism

For all of these we have heard that Indiana and more specifically, Elkhart County are doing only a mediocre job.

We have heard that we lack labor market strengths that will attract companies that rely on knowledge and creative workers.

We have heard that our business costs, based on many of our state taxes, and other problems, are high. Dollars flow out of our county, not into it, because of the lack of corporate headquarters, banking money centers and the development of big box retailers in our county.

We have talked about the lack of government and regulatory cooperation in cost sharing and revenue sharing, and the desire of our constituents to see that happen.

We have heard about land use problems in Elkhart County, and how we must join forces to discover better ways to develop our land.

We have heard about the strong business dynamics and entrepreneurial spirit of Elkhart County and have been asked the question; how we can capitalize on that and make it a greater strength in the future?

For each of these five points we must develop specific objectives to improve them, and action plans to make it happen, and metrics to make sure we are on track.

What should our development opportunities focus on?

To do an effective job of economic development we must focus on:

- Start-up companies
- Growth companies (middle-market companies)
- Companies who need skilled workers
- Companies who pay high wages
- Companies who will promote outstanding productivity through use of technology and capital investment

Elkhart County must measure itself against the best counties of Indiana, the best of our neighboring industrial states, and more importantly, the best of the states in our country, not just the industrial states who tend, on many different measures, to be average at best.

We must develop the metrics to keep track of our improvement, and we must consistently measure against those metrics.

One of the key metrics we should look at is wages per hour or wages per capita. We have gone from 10% above average to almost 20% below average when measured against the rest of our country and even our own state.

Elkhart County cannot walk away from who it is and its strengths. In Elkhart County we have always been strong in:

- Agricultural
- Manufacturing clusters
- Tourism

While we still have vibrant manufacturing clusters, we have lost many that help build our county.

- Musical instruments
- Drug manufacturers
- Rubber industry

We have heard that manufacturing is not dead in the United States, but that it must change, with more reliance on capital investment and the use of technology, if it is to survive in a global economy.

Knowledge Economy

A major problem in Elkhart County is our lack of “knowledge” workers. We have heard statistics on our high school graduates, college graduates, and the percentage of our population that have a college education. The brain drain is real in Elkhart County.

A knowledge economy has been described as one with the capacity and capability to create and innovate new ideas, thoughts, processes and products. To translate those into economic values and wealth, we must have knowledge workers.

Prospering countries, states, and counties seem to have a surplus of knowledge workers and find ways to use them.

Can we attract this creative class? As we have heard, it is not just the physical aspects of a community; it is also about mind and spirit. How does the quality of life in our community influence our ability to attract the creative class? How can we develop our community so it is a place where creative people want to live? More importantly, if creative people are here we must provide opportunities for them. How can we create meaningful job opportunities for creative and talented people?

Some people state that it should be done through the use of incentives. Indiana ranks below many comparable industrial states in the use of incentives. There is a lot of controversy around the use of incentives. Some people feel strongly that the money spent on tax abatements and other types of incentives, could be put to better use by developing information for the companies in our county, training of governmental and educational employees, developing strategic information, benchmarking, and sharing state of the art techniques in both manufacturing and education. Others state that, the monies could be better spent by putting them back into the infrastructures of our decaying communities, revitalizing our cities, and redeveloping our older industrial areas.

You have heard me state that our “goal” should be “growth with stability”. We heard today from the people of Elkhart County that value matters. Businesses and industry value sales and profits. Our communities and people value jobs, income and taxes. If we are to can grow, and grow with stability, we must maintain a high quality of life, a quality of life that has:

- Good schools
- Affordable housing
- Recreational opportunities
- Adequate infrastructure
- Effective government services
- Clean environment
- Open spaces

It also means that we must find a foundation for sustainable growth, which means:

- Not dependent upon any one industry
- Is adaptive to new technology
- Promotes capital investment
- Promotes tourism
- Protects our rural economy
- Allows for new business formation and attracts a “white collar” component
- Nurtures new existing businesses

- Stops our brain drain/provides opportunities

Today we talked about the development of action plans to make our vision a reality. To do so we must:

- Have a living, breathing, evolving plan
- Create a non-political document
- Have realistic goals, unique to Elkhart County
- Develop report cards with appropriate metrics
- Develop strong implementation teams

We have heard today that we want to create a vision for our future, a vision of what our county should look like in ten to 15 years. But remember:

- The future is something you do
- The future is not something that just happens to you.
- If you want to be on the team and make things happen in a progressive way, sign on now. If you simply want to complain and carp from the sidelines, please get out of the way.