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Leaders look beyond local interests

By: Bob Zientara/The Tribune

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Central Iowa Regional Innovation Grant funds study of Mid-Iowa economy

It takes vision, dedication and more than a little selflessness for a local leader to dedicate time to a larger objective.

For people from the Ames and Story County business, government and Iowa State University communities, that's the kind of leadership required to make the Central Iowa Regional Innovation Grant program work.

Funded by a \$250,000 grant, it is a study of the Mid-Iowa economy in the counties of Story, Marshall, Tama, Jasper, Poweshiek, Marion and Mahaska.

The regional effort began after one of the costliest economic events ever to occur in the region, the 2006 closure of Newton's huge Maytag appliance manufacturing facility.

In its aftermath, the Central Iowa Regional Innovation Grant was approved to grow and improve "advanced manufacturers," using a state Department of Development definition that identifies them according to what they produce and where they're located.

The list was developed after a 1999 study that targeted Iowa manufacturing by type and head-of-household wages. In 2002, the wage "threshold" was \$35,000.

Directing the effort

Lending his time and experience to the regional effort is Story Construction President Mike Espeset, whose company is also a financial supporter of the Ames Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Commission.

Located in the Ames Community Development Park, Story Construction's corporate offices occupy 11,000 square feet of space between Interstate 35 and Dayton Avenue.

The company's activities are mainly in commercial construction, wastewater and water treatment plants, but it has also built a number of other large area projects, including churches and Hilton Coliseum.

The company provides construction design, project management, administration, estimating, marketing and sales.

In his work with the Regional Innovation Grant program, Espeset serves on an executive committee that will lead and coordinate the three-year program.

"To date, we've been involved in building structure, getting staff in place and making sure this is a sustainable effort," he said.

"We want to focus on the region's brand and identify issues that all (seven counties) can relate to. The idea is to (show) what regional efforts look like and elevate the conversation.

"We want to see that industries and economic development organizations connect in ways that they didn't before, in a regional way and as a team."

Although recent economic changes will play into what the group does, the main goal is a long-term effort, Espeset said.

"The workforce is one of the issues that are different now," he said. "For example, a year ago, a lot of industries were wondering where they could find workers. Now, the workers are available, but there's still a question about training and skills."

Tapping into information

Mark Reinig, a professor with the Iowa State University College of Engineering, has been involved in the regional initiative from the beginning.

"We have an executive director, and we're ramping up the process because of the economic downturn," he said. "This group is a key to the workforce issue."

Site visits have been one of the major tasks for the regional group. Leaders in each of the seven counties have contacted some 200 manufacturers to gather information on the relative health of each company, its future plans and its workforce needs.

The goal is to finish the site visits by the end of January 2009, he said.

The changing economy means the site visits have become even more important, Reinig added.

"We're going back to the industries we've already visited," he said. "The fresher the information, the better."

The goal is to "find the information that will let us leverage (government) funds to the places where it can do the most good."

Reinig said that what happens here is being watched by other regional innovation grant recipients across the country.

Working with Iowa business

The executive committee's next meeting is set for Jan. 16 in Des Moines, according to Kim Didier, of the Newton Development Corporation. She will become executive director for the regional program in January.

In her new duties, Didier will serve as an employee of the Iowa Association of Business and Industry, a statewide group whose 1,300 members employ more than 300,000 Iowans.

For more, visit: <http://www.iowaabi.org>.

As the survey process winds up, Didier said that the effort will focus on attracting and advanced manufacturing jobs to Mid-Iowa, and train workers to fill them.

The Iowa Department of Development generated a list of these jobs after a 1999 study that targeted Iowa manufacturing by type and high wage rates. In 2002, the wage "threshold" was \$35,000.

For more, see www.iowaworkforce.org/trends.

"We want to find the industries that qualify as advanced manufacturers according to that definition, including manufacturers in Story County," Didier said.

Two of the state's largest utilities have donated money to support the effort, including MidAmerican Energy and Alliant Energy, she said.

In Story County, the Ames Economic Development Commission will gather information for the study, she said.

All the data will be put into a computer program that describes the local economy, its problems and opportunities.

"It's the first time we've ever gathered information this way, in a coordinated fashion," she said.

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