

Economy lends importance to regional collaboration

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It was June of 2008, months before the nation's economic picture changed dramatically, when seven central-Iowa counties launched a unique program to collaborate on a regional approach to economic development.

Ironically, the effort was launched by the region's reaction to an earlier adversity, the 2007 closing of the Maytag manufacturing plant in Newton.

The seven counties pooled resources, made an action plan and funded it with something that had never been done before. They obtained the first-ever \$250,000 regional economic development grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Kim Didier, who now coordinates the Regional Innovation Gateway project from the Des Moines offices of the Iowa Association of Business and Industry, said on its first anniversary, the project is active, progressing toward its goals and enjoying the active cooperation of member counties.

That includes Story County, which has two seats on the Gateway executive board: Mike Espeset, Story Construction president, and Mark Reinig, economic development program manager at Iowa State University.

"We have work going on this summer with respect to workforce development and job skills, and making sure that the education and training is available to do that," Didier said.

Espeset said he has been a willing participant in the leadership team.

"The real focus for me has been on producing a workforce with the skills needed by the industries in the region," he said. "That has obviously been affected by the changing economy. Because of downsizing, there's been growth in the number of people available to fill the jobs. But we're still concentrating on the needed skills, making sure the education system is producing those skills and marketing the lifestyle of central Iowa."

The Gateway project should not be regarded as a process with a "finish line," Espeset emphasized.

"This is more about changing and tweaking philosophies than it is a linear thing," he said. "It's about changing minds. It's a discipline, not a process."

To that end, the regional board recently hosted superintendents from community school districts serving central-Iowa.

"It helped to put what we're doing on the school districts' radar," Espeset said. "When you bring together the educators and employers, talk to the educators about a skilled workforce and have the employers explain what skills they need, it starts a whole number of smaller conversations. That's what we want."

And the conversations go both ways. As the leadership team worked its way through the first year, central-Iowa industrial leaders have brought a number of topics to the table, from concerns about product transportation the way downsizing has affected the labor supply.

As Story Construction prepares to host the regional board's Aug. 26 meeting, Espeset said he believed the effort had been worth his time.

"We're in the business of matching a skilled workforce to the needs of the companies in our region," he said. "That doesn't happen by itself. It needs a mechanism to succeed."

Iowa Innovation Gateway

- Counties involved: Story, Marshall, Polk, Jasper, Poweshiek, Marion and Mahaska.
 - Goal 1: Analyze skill needs in central-Iowa labor market.
 - Goal 2: Introduce advanced manufacturing skill curriculum to secondary schools.
- Goal 3: Encourage better infrastructure for passenger rail, intermodal (containerized) shipping.
 - Goal 4: Develop a "culture of entrepreneurship" in member counties.

Major themes:

The plan calls for leaders in Story and six other central-Iowa counties to:

- Think and act from a regional perspective.
- Find the key industries, such as sustainable energy, located in the region and develop ways to produce trained workers for them.
 - Build infrastructure to serve industries and workers.
 - Encourage and honor entrepreneurs.
 - Encourage schools to teach entrepreneurship.

Source: Iowa Association of Business and Industry

On the Web:

- A link to the original, 160-page study is available on The Tribune's Web site at www.inisites.com/business/pdfs/seven-county-implementation-plan-july2008.pdf.