

EDITORIAL: Keep open mind when considering economic study

Staff Reports

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Southwestern Indiana economic planners now have in their hands a major league blueprint for how to reestablish business and industrial development in the four-county region. This is no overnight strategy dreamed up by a political campaign. This is a study conducted by experts in the field, and it tells us in unbiased terms of our weaknesses and strengths, of the possibilities for Vanderburgh, Warrick, Gibson and Posey counties, and of the way to achieve success.

If we fail to learn from it, if we fail to be motivated by the opportunities it presents, if we toss it on a shelf and forget it, then we truly are satisfied to live in a sea of mediocrity. And if so, shame on us.

The study was sponsored by the Economic Development Coalition of Southwest Indiana, and was conducted by Atlanta-based Garner Economics, with support from Newmark Knight Frank of Chicago and Applied Marketing of Carmel, Ind. It was paid for with a \$231,482 federal grant, secured in the aftermath of Whirlpool pulling its production jobs out of Evansville last year.

What Jay Garner and his group make clear is that we have assets here, far more than most of us realize. Indeed, Garner and coalition President Greg Wathen told the Courier & Press editorial board that when meeting with focus groups, they found that local participants sell Evansville short — that they believe the region has less to offer companies than what we really have.

Wathen's coalition will focus on job creation in four targeted areas that build on the region's strengths. They are advanced manufacturing, health and life sciences, logistics/distribution, and plastics, for which Garner said we are already a dominant area. Also, and this one came as no surprise, our workers are good at making things.

But there are shortcomings, among them: Our broadband Internet links are too weak — a potential deal killer, said Garner.

The lack of Jetways at the Dress terminal at Evansville Regional Airport is a turn off for business visitors.

We don't "show" well — our community's appearance and center-city neighborhoods are wanting.

We have no 'mega sites.' Mega sites (think Alcoa Warrick Operations and Toyota Motor Manufacturing Indiana in Gibson County) run from 500 to 1,500 acres and they are ready, with water and utilities, before a potential company comes calling. They can be expensive, but they can pay off big. Chattanooga landed a \$1 billion Volkswagen plant by having a mega site ready to go.

There are many more ideas than we can touch on here today, including a sales tax for economic development, a "branding" for the entire region and a Downtown university footprint.

What's most important for today is that people of the area to keep an open mind. Read the plan and listen to what the experts have to say. Whether it goes any further than that will depend in great part on whether those in the community who are calling on leaders to create more jobs buy into "A Blueprint for Success" as the way to do it.



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