

We're Building a Brighter Future

[Editorial](#) (June 20, 2010)

Don't expect some company needing 500 workers to suddenly land in Rock County's lap.

Our county faces long odds of celebrating such a move because it only happens about 30 times each year nationwide.

Don't think for a minute, however, that Rock County 5.0 isn't doing a remarkable behind-the-scenes job of positioning our county for a brighter future.

The Gazette Editorial Board met with the organization's leaders Tuesday. The five-year, five-point initiative was unveiled last September, and the movers and shakers expressed more confidence than ever that their efforts will lead to success. Our editorial board came away from the meeting with confidence that their optimism has merit.

Rock County 5.0 is a public-private organization designed to build economic development collaboration, communication and connections to benefit all county communities. It is working with the Rock County Development Alliance, which partners with the cities of Janesville and Beloit, Rock County, Forward Janesville and Alliant Energy.

Why could 5.0 serve us better than an alliance that has been at work since 2001?

Start with money. The alliance has been marketing Rock County with about \$10,000 annually. The 5.0 group set a goal of raising \$1 million and already has pledges of \$1.2 million.

That money is being used to contract with consultants to analyze our county's strengths and weaknesses, help open doors to companies that might be interested in Rock County and build a one-stop database of comprehensive information. Instead of simply passing out brochures at trade shows, the group has invested in computer thumb drives to introduce our county's attributes and industrial clusters. The money helped launch an entrepreneurial contest that will award \$25,000 in cash and services this October.

The money is also creating opportunities here that are unique to Wisconsin. Here are two examples.

First, a nationally known company will soon certify business parks in Janesville and Beloit as "shovel-ready." This will ensure that the two parks are clear of environmental and archeological concerns, soil is tested, risks mitigated and utilities readily available. It means saving six or eight months when time is crucial for a company. These will be the only two industrial parks statewide with certification putting them on par with any in the nation.

Second, 5.0 is partnering with a state agency, the Wisconsin Innovations Service Center, to analyze markets and growth potential for small businesses. A company pays just \$750, with 5.0 paying another \$2,250, for services that in the private sector might cost \$50,000. If the company expands, it can later use the higher profits to pay back Rock County 5.0's investment so other companies could tap that money. One company is using the services, and several other analyses are pending.

Our county has suffered a downturn like none since the Great Depression. Rock County 5.0 was born out of necessity. It has the right brain power, savvy and expertise. Its 18 advisory council members represent a broad spectrum of stakeholders and business interests. They unite our communities to work as one.

Mary Willmer-Sheedy of M&I Bank is the advisory council's co-chairwoman. Though she realizes it's hard to convince the unemployed, she senses that our county's economy has stabilized. She believes preparation creates "luck" that brings economic development and that 5.0 is laying that groundwork.

James Otterstein, Rock County economic development specialist and a 5.0 partner, counts 30 companies that, in the past two years, have completed or announced plans projected to add 700 jobs here. That's not bad in this economy. It shows how small expansions can bolster our economy.

Says Willmer-Sheedy: "I think we're not only digging ourselves out but building something that will last a long, long time here."

Based on what we heard Tuesday, we share that optimism.