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'So much stronger together'



Diane Hendricks

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Rock County 5.0 launched with cooperative effort

Officials from Beloit, Janesville and points across the county are launching Rock County 5.0, a new five-year public and private economic development initiative to revitalize the local economy.

"It will change the culture within Rock County, long-term," said M&I Bank Community President Mary Willmer-Sheedy, who is co-chairing the effort with Diane Hendricks, owner of ABC Supply Co. and a number of other businesses in the region.

Beloit Economic Development Director Andrew Janke, Janesville Economic Development Director Vic Grassman, Forward Janesville President John Beckord, Rock County Economic Development Director James Otterstein, Hendricks and Willmer-Sheedy met with the press on Wednesday afternoon at ABC Supply's national headquarters to discuss their unique private partnership and its goals.

A fifth member of the partnership is represented by Bruce Kepner, development specialist for Alliant Energy, who was unable to attend.

The partnership is intended to foster collaboration, communication and connections in Rock County and beyond. The cities of Janesville, Evansville, Beloit, Edgerton and Milton are all Rock County 5.0 members. The initiative is designed to help communicate the community's vision through one voice, improve the county's image, and foster business-to-business relationships. The group will also identify business and investment connections, and make marketplace data available for businesses.

'We share and draw upon the same assets as well as opportunities that are out there,'

Otterstein said.

The Rock County 5.0 initiative will address the following five strategies: business and expansion, business and investment attraction, small business and entrepreneurship, real estate positioning and workforce profiling.

"Business retention and expansion is a primary focus. We need to find out what's going on not only in the business sectors, but facilitate and open up dialogue with the sole intent of address opportunities in the supply chain and bringing business here locally," Otterstein said.

Otterstein added it was critical to get the word out about opportunities in the county and how challenges have been dealt with.

Hendricks said Rock County has many assets, such as a large amount of available warehouse space, and a hard-working and retrained workforce.

"These are positive things we can use to build up," Hendricks said.

Advanced manufacturing, food processing, plastics, logistics, health care and value added agriculture are some of the targeted industries.

Although the entire county will be responsible for advancing the initiative, the day-to-day duties for implementing it rests upon the shoulders of the Rock County Develop Alliance, with ancillary assistance provided by various contracted third parties. The Alliance is a network for five experienced economic development professionals that represent Beloit, Janesville, Rock County and Alliant Energy. Leadership and oversight will be provided by a diverse cross section of the county's business community known as the Rock County 5.0 Advisory Committee.

"We've put together a team of CEOs and private industry leaders to be engaged in economic development. It's important to have diversity, keep the advisory council small enough to have very meaningful meetings, set initiatives and move forward. The goal of the council is to give advice and ideas," Willmer-Sheedy said.

Funding will be derived from various individual, business, foundational and government sources. Otterstein stressed that the money will not come from the taxpayers, but will be raised privately. The group has no overhead expenses so will be able to operate more efficiently.

Hendricks said the group's goal is to raise \$1 million by the end of the year, adding that more than \$400,000 has been pledged already.

The advisory council will meet again in the second week of November to set specific, measurable goals.

"This is the first time in my life I have seen these communities come together and I want to be part of it," Hendricks said. "This is a dream we all need to put together. We can be so much stronger than working individually. It always has made sense."

Advisory Council members include: David Cullen, J.P. Cullen and Sons; Diane Hendricks, ABC Supply Co.; Diane Ramsey, Alliant Energy; Gerry Behan, Kerry Americas; Henry Knueppel, Regal-Beloit Corporation; Jane Blain-Gilbertson, Blain Supply, Inc.; Jim Fisher, JBF Group; Jim Fitzgerald, The Fitzgerald Group; Joe Pregont, Prent Corporation; Mary Willmer-Sheedy, M&I Bank; Paul Palmby, Seneca Foods Corporation; Richard Gruber, Mercy Health System; Rob Gerbitz, Hendricks Development Group; Ron Ochs, Janesville Foundation; Steve Eldred, First National Bank & Trust Co.; Tim McKeveatt, Beloit Memorial Hospital; , Tom Ptacin of Klobucar Construction; and Tobin Ryan.