

‘We need to pull together’

Public-private economic development initiative is a first for Rock County

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Since the death of her husband in late 2007, Diane Hendricks has been a busy lady. Hendricks has taken on the role of chairman of ABC Supply, the \$3 billion company she and her late husband, Ken, founded in 1982. She’s also picked up added responsibilities for dozens of companies she and Ken have started and watched prosper over the years. But she’s not too busy to throw her support behind a countywide economic development initiative that organizers say is a first for Rock County.

Rock County 5.0 is a public-private initiative designed to foster collaboration, communication and economic development connections for the benefit of all county communities. That includes Janesville and Beloit, two cities with a storied history of competition that at times has been downright hostile.

“This is the first time in my life that I have seen these communities come together, and I want to be a part of it,” Hendricks said Wednesday. “This is a vision that Ken always had.” “I’m trying to make a statement that this is a dream that we all need to pull together on. We can be so much stronger working together than individually.”

Rock County 5.0 will focus on business retention and expansion, new business attraction, small business and entrepreneurship, real estate positioning and workforce profiling. None of those are new strategies to the Rock County Development Alliance, which has been working on them since its formation in 2001. The association is an economic development partnership between the cities of Janesville and Beloit, Forward Janesville, Rock County and Alliant Energy.

The new initiative will bolster the alliance, which comprises five specialists who represent each of the partners. For the last nine years, they’ve been trying to market and promote Rock County on a budget that’s averaged about \$10,000 a year.

“That’s not economic development,” said Mary Willmer-Sheedy, who along with Hendricks is co-chairing Rock County 5.0’s advisory council of 18 private industry leaders from Janesville and Beloit. “We need a pool of money available for them so that they can connect with potential businesses.”

The group’s goal is to raise \$1 million to fund the Rock County 5.0 initiative, so-named because it includes five partners, five strategies and will run for five years. The public sector will not be tapped for anything more than it already provides: marginal funding and the time of staff members, organizers said.

The group already has raised about \$400,000 from the private sector, Hendricks said. "And we really haven't even asked for \$1 yet," she said, adding that the group should hit its fundraising goal by the end of the year. The money will be budgeted over five years and will be used to develop software specific to Rock County's economic development efforts.

It also will offset travel and marketing materials for the alliance partners, who have spent a significant number of days on the road, selling Rock County, said James Otterstein, the county's economic development manager.

The group is marketing the county as a growth area in the advanced manufacturing, food processing, plastics, logistics, health care and value-added agriculture sectors. Otterstein said the group has several goals. They include help for existing businesses by recruiting suppliers to the county, the model for which has been established by ABC Supply and other Hendricks' holdings.

Positioning for new growth opportunities, accelerating the formation of new businesses, shortening the time needed for new businesses to become operational and strengthening the local workforce are also on the list.

Willmer-Sheedy said the advisory council will have its first meeting in November. Specific goals and benchmarks will be established, and the group plans quarterly updates to be as transparent as possible.

"We have so many of the same talents, so many of the same needs that to pull it together economically makes sense," Hendricks said. "Maybe the loss of General Motors was the catalyst that's finally going to bring these communities together. "But this is not based around the loss of GM; it's based about the needs of Rock County."



Otterstein



Kepner



Grassman



Janke



Beckord



Willmer-Sheedy



Hendricks