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Rock County 5.0 bolsters hopes for our economy

Gazette Editorial
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“When is someone going to bring some jobs here?” “We’re going to have to move to find work.”

“Who will lead Rock County back to sound economic footing?” Diane Hendricks and Mary Willmer-Sheedy have grown tired of such sentiments. They read and hear them in the media.

They listen to them in coffee shops. They even overhear kids repeat the comments heard at home. Hendricks, chairwoman of Beloit’s ABC Supply, and Willmer-Sheedy, president of Janesville’s M&I Bank, have stepped forward in a big way. They will lead a new initiative, Rock County 5.0. It will support the Rock County Development Alliance and its five partners with five key strategies for the next five years.

The alliance involves Rock County, Forward Janesville, Alliant Energy and the cities of Janesville and Beloit. Each has its own economic development leader. With little money, they’ve quietly done their best since 2001 to help our economy.

That will change under Rock County 5.0. Hendricks and Willmer-Sheedy expect to raise at least \$1 million to support alliance efforts.

They’re off to an impressive start—pledges of \$400,000 without a fundraiser. During a recent meeting with business leaders, Hendricks and Willmer-Sheedy each pledged \$50,000 from their companies. Those assembled started standing up and saying, “If you’re in, I’m in.”

The money is needed for many things. It will pay for analyses that will more accurately gauge skills of workers here and certify real estate space as ready for various types of companies. It will computerize this and other data so the partners can hand over thumb drives with information to potential employers at trade shows. When a prospective company wants face time with a local leader, it will buy the plane ticket.

Willmer-Sheedy explained that one goal is to track supply chains of companies doing business in Rock County or the Midwest. If businesses share information about and provide access to suppliers, more supply companies might be enticed to relocate here.

An advisory council will oversee the initiative and set goals. Advisor names, listed in Thursday's Gazette, are among our movers and shakers.

We're delighted that the initiative is countywide. There is strength in numbers and teamwork. What's good for Edgerton, Beloit or Janesville is good for the whole county.

We also appreciate the pledge of transparency. Leaders will keep residents and businesses updated on the effort and use benchmarks to show progress. Willmer-Sheedy says too few residents are getting the message that positive things are happening here, such as Data Dimensions' recently announced plans to expand in Janesville. Companies have been making inquiries but waiting for the economy to improve. The initiative will position Rock County to respond when pentup demand turns to action.

Willmer-Sheedy and Hendricks are passionate and committed to the initiative.

"We both say this will not fail," Willmer-Sheedy said Thursday. "We're going to make these things happen. ... We want everybody to be a part of this."

She added: "I have young kids yet. ... I want them to make Rock County and southern Wisconsin their home, but to do that we need to step it up. We're going to do that."

No one should be disillusioned. It will take hard work. It will take all of us doing whatever we can to let others know that this is a good place to live, work, get educated and do business. It will take our collective patience.

We believe this initiative can and will do good things to return Rock County to prosperity.