

Ideas drive Rock County 5.0

By [JIM LEUTE](#) ([Contact](#)) Sunday, Feb. 7, 2010

JANESVILLE — A fresh slate of economic development ideas will help existing Rock County businesses as well as those considering a move to the area. That's according to leaders of Rock County 5.0, a public-private initiative launched last year to foster collaboration, communication and economic development connections that benefit county communities.

As it nears its fundraising goal of \$1 million, Rock County 5.0 has launched a new set of initiatives. "We realize that repositioning and revitalizing our economy will involve a multifaceted approach over a period of three to five years," said Mary Willmer-Sheedy, who co-chairs the group's advisory council with Diane Hendricks of ABC Supply Co.

Hendricks said the new initiatives were impossible before because they required funding that didn't exist. As the group approaches its funding goal, the four new strategies can proceed, she said.

Customer diversification assessments

Small- to medium-sized manufacturing companies will have access to limited funding to help them diversify. The Wisconsin Innovation Service Center will provide the assessments that evaluate existing or new products and services. "One of the typical challenges faced by small- and medium-sized manufacturers in Rock County is an over-dependence on a few customers," said James Otterstein, the county's economic development manager.

Willmer-Sheedy said an example was the companies that supplied the General Motors' plant in Janesville. Those companies were here for essentially one customer. "Then something bad happens, and it rolls right on down the line," she said. "We want to help local companies diversify and get ahead of the curve." Willmer-Sheedy and Otterstein said the assessments are significant in that they're targeted at existing companies. It's an indication, they said, that the group isn't channeling all of its resources to companies that don't exist locally. Otterstein said each assessment costs \$3,000. On a case-by-case basis, the Rock County Development Alliance will pay 75 percent while the applicant pays the remainder.

Shovel-ready certification

Administered by a third party that local officials say is well recognized in the real estate development industry, the first certification will target a 200-acre parcel on Janesville's south side and a 220-acre chunk of Beloit's Gateway industrial park.

The certification will ensure that the properties have been through the bureaucratic red tape associated with ownership, utilities and transportation, community and environmental issues.

"It certifies that the barriers that typically come up have been addressed and removed," Willmer-Sheedy said. "Often, a manufacturer will come in and look at a site. Everything looks good, and they go through the process. "Then one issue comes up that drags on and on and on, and they go elsewhere."

While several other states offer shovel-ready certification programs, but Wisconsin does not. Otterstein believes Rock County will be the first Wisconsin community to offer an official, third-party certification. "Considering the significant surplus of existing as well as vacant build-to-suit property that's currently on the market in the Twin Cities to Chicago corridor, we need a way to differentiate ourselves," he said.

Targeted communications

Willmer-Sheedy said the area needs to do a better job marketing itself, and that includes advertising the industry clusters already doing business here. The food processing industry is one example, she said.

"We need a collaborative marketing effort that promotes that niche industry and includes everything about it from the big—Kerry Ingredients—to the small—Stump's Hot Olives," she said. Internet marketing is fine to an extent, she said, but more materials need to be available for face-to-face presentations at trade shows and elsewhere. "It goes beyond that," she said. "We all have friends and family members around the country. "We, and I mean everyone, needs to market ourselves to these people and not just leave it to five or six people."

Workforce profiling

The alliance will provide detailed wage and benefits data that gives businesses the information needed to support capital investment decisions. "These workforce profiles prove the most value when they are current," Willmer-Sheedy said. "They will give businesses real-time data that can be used to make an informed decision."