

BUILDING ON THE MOMENTUM

Vincennes Business Leaders Putting All Hands on Deck

By Rebecca Patrick

A downtown revitalization, employers moving in and a major hospital expansion. Those are among the efforts generating optimism for even greater days ahead in Knox County.

“The amount of economic growth seen in the last five years has been dramatically better than we’ve seen previously. A lot of people are working really hard to bring in new business, growing existing business and making sure we’re doing things in a partnership format,” relays Rob McLin, president and CEO of Good Samaritan Hospital in Vincennes.

He believes the community started coming together last decade when “people fought really hard to work with Duke to bring the power plant upgrade, the coal gasification, to Edwardsport (in Knox County).”

“It was the first of that magnitude and showed solidarity in the county. From there, momentum kind of kept rolling and it’s starting to spin faster and faster. We are turning that corner,” McLin insists.

Best assets

Helping the region take that next step are some inherent factors in its favor.

“When you’re bringing in new business and you’re bringing in families, they’re looking at two things: school systems and health care,” McLin asserts.

“We have a world-class facility like Good Samaritan and also Vincennes University, which has flexibility and opportunity there, but then also the larger school system – all the way from kindergarten to a bachelor’s degree. That makes a difference.”

Tony Burkhart, president of Burkhart Insurance Agency, concurs.

“Good Samaritan Hospital and Vincennes University – our two largest employers – really make us more of a regional hub to the communities and counties surrounding us.”

The broader business community plays a vital role too, Burkhart stresses.

“We have a strong manufacturing base. We have a really strong small business base that gets it. When I say they get it, they really support the attraction of new industry into our area, and they support our hospital and the university. They recognize that as they grow, it trickles down to their businesses as well.”

Burkhart also recognizes the impact of the Knox County Development Corporation (KCDC).

“The size of that board (51 members) allows us to reach into all areas of the community and to cross political borders; we all meet together for the good of the community,” he attests.

“And with that comes some accountability. When everybody else is moving forward, you are expected to move forward as well and support the positive actions that are taking place. The KCDC is a place where that all starts.



Good Samaritan Hospital CEO Rob McLin, pictured at the groundbreaking ceremony in 2012, said the age of the facility (40-plus years) and infrastructure coupled with a vision of “growth and focus on patients” led to the BEACON Project expansion. A rendering shows how the hospital will look upon completion in late 2016.





Farbest Foods President Ted Seger (left), Indiana Lt. Gov. Sue Ellspermann and Vincennes Mayor Joe Yochum made the grand opening of the Vincennes turkey processing plant official in December 2013. Another newcomer, Pioneer Oil Company, is engaged in downtown restoration. “Vincennes was very welcoming of Pioneer’s move, as was the state,” says CFO Steve Miller.

“The business community’s commitment and their support and push to the elected officials has really driven this as much as anything else,” Burkhart concludes.

‘Opportunity Knox’

It’s more than just a new slogan for KCDC. “Opportunity Knocks in Knox County” aptly sums up the current climate and what’s available to employers and individuals, according to Kent Utt, president/CEO of KCDC.

The county has seen a 51% increase in per capita income growth over the last 10 years, putting it at number 15 out of the state’s 92 counties. Utt reports that the total capital investment for Knox County in 2014 was \$269 million, with a payroll addition of \$35 million over a year and a half.

“That’s pretty remarkable. All of this has been driven by our industrial park, coal mines, hospital expansion and university efforts. Many things have contributed to our success,” Utt surmises.

He further underscores the importance of the 250-acre industrial park, owned by KCDC, located off U.S. Highway 41.

“Futaba FIA (producer of internal frame parts for Toyota’s Princeton plant) was the first to locate at the park in 2001; they started with 75 employees and they’re up to 800 employees in that particular location, with a \$36 million annual payroll. In 2013, Farbest Foods (a turkey processor), made an \$84 million investment in the park. They currently employ 360 with an annual payroll of \$12.5 million,” Utt lists.

“Over 9.1% of our workforce for Knox County is in the industrial park. That’s been a big part of the growth and jobs over the last five to 10 years.”

While Utt admits the skills gap is a challenge in Knox County – like much of the rest of the state – he says it helps tremendously to have

Vincennes University, which focuses 60% on career technical training.

“They are a terrific asset and very good about developing specific programs and have been one of the primary reasons our unemployment rate is one of the best in the state at 4.9%.”

Dick Helton, president of Vincennes University, offers, “We provide many business and industry friends of ours with students ready to go into the workplace, helping those businesses and industries function.”

Community BEACON

Over the last five years, the area’s other chief employer, Good Samaritan Hospital, has experienced a growth in employees (200 hires) and the addition of new service lines. And that’s the tip of the iceberg.

Currently underway is the \$140 million BEACON Project, an expansion on Good Samaritan’s current campus.

“We are finishing up phase three, which includes moving into the new 200,000-square-foot, five-story inpatient tower named Gibault Memorial,” McLin states.

“We will move all our inpatients over beginning in late July. Then phase four will be the renovation of the old tower, Columbia Towers.” The first two phases changed out the emergency room and ambulance garage.

The entire project, including demolition and addition of 230 new parking spaces, is on track for completion by the end of 2016.

McLin emphasizes that the expansion showcases the hospital’s five centers of excellence – cancer, cardiology, obstetrics, orthopedics and surgery. To go along with the effort, 55 to 60 new physicians have been recruited.

“The focus is on providing world class care and world class people with the best technology available.”

Retail reboot

A priority for Vincennes officials has been removing blighted or abandoned buildings. Old commercial structures idle for years and years – but occupying prime real estate – have started to come down. The Executive Inn was the first to be demolished last summer; up next is the Kmart Plaza.

Andrews Oil Company, out of Franklin County, bought the Executive Inn property. At the very end of 2014, it opened a convenience store, the first new business on the site.

Lifelong Knox County resident Heath Klein, owner of Klein Realty & Auction, stepped up to the plate regarding the Kmart facility and surrounding area.

“We have 20 acres off Highway 41 (across from the Walmart and Kohl’s stores), which will have a connector road for Hart Street and Main Street with a roundabout. We then plan to build and develop Vincennes’ first open-air streetscape environment called Kimmel Pointe,” Klein explains. “It will showcase a diverse mix of shops, restaurants and office space.”

The new road is slated for the first part of 2016, with construction on the building to begin thereafter.

Klein foresees housing “15 to 20 structures and upwards of 40 or 50 businesses. We’re looking at trying to do a shopping community like Clay Terrace or Hamilton Town Center (in Hamilton County) but on a smaller scale.

“Much will be determined by the businesses we are able to attract. We have several prospects, larger and smaller box stores and retail restaurants. But that’s our goal,” he shares. “The city and community have really been a part of this. They see the vision and the community as a whole wants this.”

He anticipated tearing down part of the Kmart property by late spring or early summer.

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"I believe Kimmel Pointe will really give people a local option as far as shopping and restaurants, and just a quality of life we don't have right now. We are on the verge."

Downtown designs

The same can be said for the downtown Vincennes area, which is undergoing a resurgence.

Pioneer Oil Company, which had been located just west in Illinois, officially completed its move this spring. Pioneer renovated the old three-story Hills Department Store, purchased adjoining real estate and paved a lot for employee parking.

The refurbished landmark houses some 35 administrative positions; approximately 200 Indiana-hired Pioneer employees will work in Knox County, other Indiana counties and Illinois.

"As the company continued to grow and develop, it really needed to have a headquarters for its employees that was very much a part of a community. Quality of life for our employees will be much greater, being a part of a community where our employees can get involved as well as benefit from the offerings that Vincennes has," describes Steve Miller, CFO at Pioneer Oil.

Miller, who has been living in Indianapolis for some time but attended high school in Vincennes, declares, "The city's growth has been at the periphery. It's such a historical city (Indiana's first state

capital) that it really needs to have the focus on the downtown area."

And Miller is doing more than talking about it. He formed INVin in 2014, an art and business innovation initiative aimed at getting entrepreneurs to locate in historical structures in downtown Vincennes. The organization acquired and is currently marketing the former New Moon Theater and Pantheon Theater buildings located on Main Street.

"We know there needs to be several additional buildings repurposed, plus finding additional parking. Then we need to get businesses downtown that will attract people downtown," Miller offers. "The goal is a thriving downtown where people are enjoying commerce, where people are enjoying the core of the city and not just the outskirts."

Affordable residential living has not been forgotten in the makeover of buildings. Clark's Crossing, which had its grand opening in March, features unique affordable apartments in an adaptive reuse of two historic buildings, the Adams Coliseum and the old Clark Middle School.

Burkhart notes there is still more to be done downtown. "There are a few buildings that need attention, making certain that we get those property owners on board with the improvements we are trying to make. Most everybody gets it, but there are a few (left).

"The number one challenge is going to be keeping all the momentum going forward as we have it right now. We have a lot of great things going and just making certain that we don't become satisfied where we are at."

RESOURCES: Tony Burkhart at www.burkhartinsurance.com | Dick Helton at www.vinu.edu | Heath Klein at www.vincennesrealty.com | Rob McLin at www.gshvin.org | Steve Miller at pioneeroil.net and invin.org | Kent Utt at www.kcdc.com



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