

Taking the Next Step

“Taking the next step,” the theme of this month’s issue, is as important to an economic development organization as it is for a business. For the DeKalb County EDC, “the next step” includes strategic planning to identify what the future DeKalb County economy should look like and focusing on the most productive activities to secure that future. To knowledgeably identify, deliberate and select “the next steps”, it is important to understand where we stand currently, in terms of business development and economic activity.

The DeKalb County EDC highlighted recent county business development activity at its March 18th Business Roundtable discussion. The panel featured an educator researching the attributes and performance the DeKalb County economy, a developer talking about what site selectors look for when choosing a location and a business operator who shared why his company chose DeKalb County.

Norm Walzer, of the NIU Center for Governmental Studies, reviewed location criteria for manufacturing, distribution, information technology, research and regional office businesses. He also reported on recent employment trends, opportunities and issues to watch in the future.

Key considerations for manufacturing and distribution include wages and benefits, electric utility rates, incentives, skilled labor availability, vocational education programs, highway accessibility, freight rail service, site availability and proximity to markets. Key factors for information technology, research and regional offices include occupancy costs, incentives, housing costs and availability, incentives, electric power reliability, professional and managerial labor availability, access to university with advanced degree programs, and telecommunications capabilities.

Walzer indicated that DeKalb County employment patterns from 2001 to 2006 indicate a 14.1 % increase in education and health care, 17.5% increase in trade transportation and utilities, a 38.2 % increase in construction and a 46% increase in information, publishing and communications. For the same period, manufacturing employment decreased 16.7 %.

Issues to watch in planning for the future include the following: major DeKalb County assets are transportation, access to markets and technology available through the NIU and the fiber optics network. In addition, construction has been a growth industry; manufacturing, while significant, is declining in importance; industrial exports have increased and new business start-up rates are increasing indicating opportunities exist for increased entrepreneurship.

Frank Griffin of Grubb & Ellis Real Estate talked about client considerations when selecting a site. These include the location of prospects, clients and competition, employee base, closest hubs and interchange access as well as the location of the business owner’s home. Griffin feels that a major asset of DeKalb County is the accessibility of decision-makers relative to commercial development and construction – it is easier to arrange meetings, make decisions and get things done.

Eric Jones of Transware Enterprises cited proximity to client base; affordability; access to O’Hare Airport; a smaller, more personal environment; Northern Illinois University, and local school districts as positives in leading his family-owned company to relocate to Sycamore from San Jose, California.

By collecting and consideration data and information on the commercial real estate market and local economy, the DeKalb County EDC is in a better position plan for the future, based on a solid foundation of recent experience and performance.