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Q & A with DCEDC Executive Director Paul Borek

1. What are the most immediate issues facing the county right now?

Our county is grappling with the condition of the national economy. At the same time, we are expanding our economic development program activities to embrace globalization, innovation, technology development, and entrepreneurship.

2. What is unique about the county business environment?

The DCEDC has worked to diversify the county's economy to include manufacturing and distribution in multiple business sectors. These industries balance our traditional strengths - agriculture and education. County agriculture has been successful because of superior soils and also the investment in seed and production technology. Our central Midwest, Metro Chicago location and our proximity to the Union Pacific Intermodal Center has allowed us to establish an efficient warehousing and distribution industry. In addition, Northern Illinois University is a great educational and research resource for area business technology development.

3. How has the county traditionally fared during economic downturns?

Because of our industrial diversification and strong concentration in agriculture and education, the effects of economic downturns are usually less severe than in other areas. Part of the reason is that the agricultural economy and Northern Illinois University provide stability and our broad manufacturing and distribution base is spread over many industries.

4. Which county business sectors are doing well and which are not?

Agriculture is performing extremely well, in part because the demand for biofuels is strong - although profit has been somewhat diluted by increased inputs. Manufacturing throughout the county has been expanding because of increased demand for exports and improved international buying power due to the weaker dollar. Like everyone else, we have been hurt by the credit crisis - especially in residential development, construction, and retail sales.

5. What kinds of businesses do you want to attract and why?

We are very interested in attracting research and technology development. Because of the education and research capabilities of NIU and NIU's relationship with Argonne and Fermi National labs, we are actively promoting our diverse educational and research resources and superior technology infrastructure. At the same time, we would like to continue to attract distribution centers.

6. Is there a "green" component to the DCEDC's strategy?

In addition to considering the development of two wind farms, DeKalb County government has adopted a "Go Green" initiative with energy and green business conferences and workshops to promote opportunities in those areas. We also have many companies that have adopted their own cutting-edge eco-friendly programs.

7. How does DeKalb County compare to Silicon Valley?

Like California, we have a rapidly developing wine industry. We now have four wineries.¹ More to the point, like Silicon Valley, we have an outstanding university that has established relationships with innovative businesses and government laboratories. NIU is very committed to promoting research. I think the fact that we are a hotbed of research and technology development is one of the best-kept secrets in the Midwest.

8. What is the advantage of having a university in the county?

It creates the talent pool that attracts businesses - successful economic development depends on creating and keeping a talented workforce.

9. What is not attractive about the county business climate right now?

We need speculative warehouse and distribution buildings that are available to accommodate the requirements of expanding industries as they need them. We also need to develop business and technology incubators to support new business start-ups in the county. We are working on both of these - however economic conditions will constrain speculative development.

10. What does the county have to offer as far as quality of life?

We offer a safe, affordable, family-friendly lifestyle in some of the most attractive cities and small towns in the U.S. We have the shopping and cultural amenities of a growing suburb, the educational resources of a great university and local school districts, and uncongested access to Chicago, which is 75 minutes away.

11. What has the DCEDC accomplished so far?

I have been at the helm for less than a year, but since it was established in 1987, DCEDC has attracted over \$1 billion in commercial and industrial development and \$354 million in new commercial and industrial assessed valuation. These developments helped increase resident employment in DeKalb County by over 20,000.

12. What are your goals for 2009?

In 2008 we completed a new strategic economic development plan to guide our future efforts. We reached out to all of our industrial sectors and communities to incorporate their needs and visions. The result was a five-year plan for international business development, innovation, technology development, and entrepreneurship. In 2009, we will conduct comprehensive retention interviews with existing industries. In addition, we will focus our business attraction efforts on research, technology, manufacturing, and logistics.

13. What are your goals for the next five years?

Five years from now, we hope to have a successful technology park that takes advantage of the engineering and technology capabilities of NIU and the unique research capabilities of Fermilab and Argonne National Laboratory. We look forward to thriving manufacturing and distribution centers that support foreign trade. We also plan to play up the rich cultural, entertainment and retail amenities of our communities' downtown areas and shopping districts. In short, we look forward to capitalizing on our advantages.

¹ Fox Valley Winery, Prairie State Winery, Sycamore Winery, and Waterman Winery and Vineyards

14. Why are you the best person to head the DCEDC?

I have over 20 years of experience in large city and small town economic development - and private business experience in banking and consulting. I've worked with both Fortune 500 companies and small businesses. For any economic development enterprise to be successful, you need to have an experienced rainmaker at the helm who knows business, knows the area and delivers bottom line results – that's what I think I bring to the table.