

Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Program Building a regional economy in Northeast Wisconsin

Situation

Over a thirty month period beginning in late 2000, Wisconsin's Fox Valley lost over 10,000 good paying jobs, many of them manufacturing jobs, as companies cut back, closed, or outsourced to Mexico and China. The Fox Cities area, along the Fox River and Lake Winnebago, is one of the fastest growing urban centers in Wisconsin. With a population of more than 200,000, it is made up of 18 communities, the largest of which is Appleton. Manufacturing continues to be a strong part of the area's economy, accounting for 29.2 percent of total employment. Paper products and paper machinery dominate local manufacturing.

In implementing part of a previous UW-Extension study, the Fox Cities Economic Development Partnership (FCEDP) held a conference in April 2003, the purpose of which was to raise awareness of the need for Northeast Wisconsin to become more diversified in its economy; to encourage residents to think more regionally; and to encourage more entrepreneurship.

Response

UW-Extension CNRED educators began their involvement by leading a "Plan for the Plan" session with the Fox Valley Workforce Development Board's Economic Development Committee. The group outlined the basis for an economic development study, which would ultimately involve three parts: Phase 1 - Demographics, led by East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission; Phase 2 - Economic Analysis, led by UW-Extension; and Phase 3 - Develop an economic development strategy. A 17-county project, called Northeastern Wisconsin Economic Opportunity Study (NEW EOS) was launched. The project was designed to study and raise awareness about the present economy and to develop a strategy to create a vibrant regional economy.

From early on, UW-Extension CNRED educators played important roles in the project. In addition to three CNRED educators serving on the Fox Valley Workforce Development Board (FVWDB) Economic Development Committee from the beginning, UW-Extension colleagues serve on the large NEW EOS Partnership Committee, along with their Northeastern Wisconsin Regional Economic Partners Group (NEWREP), part of the State-identified Tech Zone for this area.

Through it all, the relationship between NEWREP and the UW-Extension CNRED educators has grown to be a close one. In January, Dave Muench began working with Steve Deller of UW-Madison/Extension to establish guidelines for the information and develop ways to "report out" the information (Phase 2). They determined what would be included in the study and how it was to be analyzed in order to be useful for Phase 3 and easily understood by the public. Between February and June, Deller provided IMPLAN and Woods and Poole Data on each of the two Workforce Development Areas and on each of the smaller, 2-4 county subregions. Muench analyzed and synthesized the data, and was the principle author of six subregional reports and the two area reports. These reports were shared with colleagues in the subregions who, in turn, presented them to their constituents. A web site (www.neweconomyproject.org) was developed by FVWDB to house all reports and other information, including articles and related studies. Once the reports were finished and available for use in Phase 3, NorthStar Economics created the Strategic Plan. During this time, Muench worked with the FVWDB

Economic Development Committee to implement the study. A CORE Committee (Coalition on the Regional Economy) was formed to develop priorities and methods to proceed. The CORE Committee continues to be active.

Outcomes

Overall interest in improving the economy by moving to a fast growing, high wage economy is at an all-time high. The suggestion of these terms as applied to the economy of Northeast Wisconsin would not have been possible before this project. Nor would the idea of regionalism. But both are happening. Economic development professionals and public officials in the northeast part of the state know they need to shift gears in order to deal with current problems, namely the loss of college educated residents and lower-than-average wages and incomes. In addition, due to the project, most of the area's players in economic development now know each other and UW-Extension has been recognized as an important resource in economic development.

UW-Extension helped bring the counties and chambers to the same table, and they continue to work together. As a sign that regionalism is beginning to work in Northeast Wisconsin, the four major chambers of commerce in the area conducted a joint 2004 wage and benefit survey. The Governor has provided a \$369,000 grant to a marketing group made up of industry leaders that has formed to develop a plan for the region. UW-Extension CNRED Educators throughout Northeast Wisconsin continue to use the study's information to educate and assist their local economic development groups to develop strategies for improving their economies and encourage them to work together for the benefit of all.

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