

CHAPTER 4. SWWRPC Mission, Initiatives and Priorities

SWWRPC MISSION

The mission of the Economic Development program is the same as the Commission's, which is:

To provide intergovernmental planning and coordination of community development planning, economic development, and transportation. In response to local and regional goals, the Commission and its Staff work to enhance fiscal and physical resources and to balance local and regional development, preservation, conservation, and social priorities.

REGION-WIDE INITIATIVES

1. Riverlands Economic Activity Partnership (REAP) Effort: Riverlands

The REAP effort is focused on researching and understanding regional competitiveness in rural regions. SWWRPC has several partners in this project including Blackhawk Hills RC + D (Northwest Illinois), ECIA (Eastern Iowa), and Alliant Energy. Dr. Mark Drabenstott from the Rural Policy Research Institute's Center for Regional Competitiveness and Dr. Samuel Cordes of Purdue received a generous grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration for analysis of four regions, including the three state (Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin) "Riverlands" region. The group continues to raise the remaining funds for the project. The approach integrates several economic analyses, including conducting regional roundtables, cluster analysis, benchmark analysis, trend analysis, and economic linkage analysis. Together these analyses have provided an understanding of the region's competitive advantage. We are currently at the end of the analysis portion of this project and are now in the futures summit phase to determine which direction the region should concentrate its efforts. The next six to twelve months will be critical in this process.

2. Regional Economic Development Council:

The Governor's Business Council is charged with the priorities of workforce development, aligning education priorities, streamlining regulations, sharing best practices, and improving access to and utilization of existing information and resources

for economic development. The mission of the Council is to "move towards solutions that promote innovation, attract and retain businesses, streamline regulation, provide affordable healthcare, enhance entrepreneurial spirit and make Wisconsin a national leader in workforce skills and efficient manufacturing" (WDC 2007). The Southwest Wisconsin Economic Development Council is the local regional response to the Business Council. This group has grown out of the Southwest Wisconsin Regional Economic Development Coalition which was formed in 2001 but is now more representative of many regional efforts besides economic development. The new council is the "action team" of the coalition and will be looking to become a formalized group by forming a corporation and seeking recognition as the official economic development group for Southwestern Wisconsin.

3. Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED):

WIRED is an initiative designed to support an integrated approach to workforce, economic development and education. The model stresses the role that talent development has in driving economic prosperity. The South Central-Southwest Wisconsin GROW Region (SCSW) has joined together to undertake the effort of building the talent, infrastructure and investment needed to develop a skilled workforce aligned with the region's emerging industries. Through sector development (industry-driven training), system development (infrastructure), and talent development (work skills), the initiative strives to expand employment opportunities for workers and stimulate the creation of high-skill and high-wage jobs. Several representatives from the region are serving on advisory committees set up to issue grants to move this initiative forward in 2009-2010.

4. Rail Restoration RR 15

As mentioned several places in this document, there is an initiative to restore several sections of the rail system in Southwestern Wisconsin for the purpose of hauling freight. The main market potential would be in commodities such as corn and fertilizers. For more details see the Transportation section of chapter 2 (page 31) or the priorities section on page 51.

REGION-WIDE PRIORITIES

1. Southwestern Wisconsin becomes a recognized region

SWWRPC is working closely with the Southwest Wisconsin Regional Economic Development Coalition (SWREDC) and the new Southwest Economic Development Council to pursue a regional initiative to identify one main group that can take a leadership position and represent the region at the state and Tri-State level. There have been several regional initiatives in Wisconsin over the past few years including the Community Progress Initiative, Seven Rivers Region, New North, Milwaukee Seven and Thrive.

The Greater Dubuque Economic Development Corporation of Dubuque Iowa West and Thrive (the Madison Region) to the Northeast are the organizations that tend to influence the area the most. Southwestern Regional Planning is working with both of these organizations to maintain communications and to make sure that we maintain our own identity. Local economic development groups will inevitably participate in one or both of these groups when it benefits them to do so. The attempt to identify a single group to represent the region comes out of the need to make sure we are not absorbed by either or both of these groups and that we maintain what we feel is the distinct nature of our region. We must work with these groups in order to take advantage of the opportunities for synergy of efforts when competing globally but also want to maintain a local identity.

2. High-speed broadband access throughout the region

A healthy local economy and a strong business climate is a goal of SWWRPC. Being in an area without access to reliable and high speed internet access is a deterrent to starting a new business. Many in our region cannot get anything better than dial-up which is just not adequate in today's economy. To stimulate economic growth, and the retention and expansion of existing businesses is vital to maintaining and growing a community and ultimately the state. In order to aid in strengthening economic development in Wisconsin, we must improve broadband service.

3. Upgrade transportation systems

Several significant multi-modal improvements are proposed or planned for Southwestern Wisconsin (for more detail, see the Projects List following this report). The most ambitious is the Rail Restoration 15 (RR15) proposal to restore rail from Monroe

(Green County), through Darlington and to Shullsburg (Lafayette County), and to the Town of Mineral Point (Iowa County). The railroad right-of-way is owned by the multi-county Pecatonica Rail Transit Commission (PRTC) and this corridor is preserved under the federal Rails-To-Trails Act. It connects to the PRTC's operating freight rail line, which goes through Green and Rock Counties and connects to Chicago. The restoration proposal is in response to current shippers interested in economic development potential, the PRTC, its member counties, and SWWRPC have encouraged the railroad operator (Wisconsin & Southern Railroad) to seek state funding, which would require a local match.

There are also a number of major highway improvements needed, particularly U.S. Highway 61 in Grant County and U.S. Highway 11 from Dubuque through Grant, Lafayette and Green Counties.

4. Work with businesses and producers to tap into value-added agriculture market

Value added agriculture is a process of increasing the economic value and consumer appeal of an agricultural commodity; it may also have a change from the input commodity to the output commodity. Value-added agriculture can include anything from agri-tourism, to energy production, to food production. Energy production and value added agriculture may include any of the following: bio-diesel, ethanol, or biomass.

5. Housing that is suitable and available for the workforce

“Workforce housing” has emerged in recent years as a concern not only of housing advocates but also policy makers and employers. Even the term itself—workforce housing—was rarely heard until recent years. With housing costs in many areas increasingly exceeding the financial reach of many low- to moderate-wage workers, people are taking notice. How can we improve the housing conditions for the workforce in Southwestern Wisconsin?

One resource to explore will be the Wisconsin Bureau of Housing (BOH) which helps expand local affordable housing and supports services to people without housing. The fifteen federal and state programs, managed by the Bureau, aid elderly persons, people with disabilities, low and moderate income residents and the homeless population. The Bureau works closely with local governments and non-profit housing organizations to deliver financial and technical housing assistance and to strengthen the capabilities of housing organizations. Another organization to work closely with will be the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA). WHEDA has some available resources that may benefit Southwest Wisconsin.

We can also work with communities to develop maintenance ordinances and revitalization programs to improve the increasing number of aging homes in the region.