

Ike Brannon: A new approach for economic development in Wisconsin

Posted on Tuesday, Jun 18, 2019

The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.

The Wisconsin community with the most compelling economic narrative is not Madison or Greater Milwaukee Area, but Fort Atkinson.

Fort Atkinson (or Fort, as the natives call it) is a town of 12,500 situated halfway between Milwaukee and Madison. Because of its location many households with a spouse working in each city choose to live there.

But for dual-city couples, the choice of Fort Atkinson is not an obvious one. Fort is a dozen miles south of Interstate 94, and a house near the interchange would shorten the long commute in either direction. But people gladly make the longer drive because Fort Atkinson is a great community, because its residents and government have worked hard to make it so.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

The most welcoming part of Fort is the walkway along the Rock River. Exploiting a source of natural beauty may seem like a no-brainer, but I've lived in other communities with a similar resource that never figured it out.

The town also has a first class high school (which my wife attended, incidentally), along with interesting shops, excellent restaurants (I highly recommend Cafe Carpe), and a surprisingly robust live music scene for a town its size. A level of civic engagement that is remarkable in this day and age helps to make this all possible.

Fort's dedication to making the town a vibrant, livable community—and investing its resources to do so—does more than just keep its residents content. In the long run,

these sort of investments are the only economic development plan that pays off.

In the last few decades most small towns and rural areas across the state (and U.S. as well) have lost jobs, which have migrated towards larger communities across the country at an ever-increasing pace, which has left many wondering if small communities have a viable economic future.

A main reason that companies locate in large cities is that they worry about attracting skilled, talented workers in small towns. And new college graduates who hail from small towns are hesitant to return home because of the perceived lack of opportunity, which exacerbates the problem.

Wisconsin has devoted a lot of resources to stem this trend, mainly by giving businesses billions of dollars to move to the state or to deter businesses already here from moving elsewhere. However, most of these programs have proven to be expensive, short-term salves that accomplish little. Foxconn is the latest manifestation of this failed strategy.

Fort Atkinson suggests an altogether different approach. It has made its town more livable, which has led to more people moving there—and these people happen to predominantly be educated, affluent, and more likely to start businesses than the average Wisconsin resident. And some of them have done precisely that.

While the town's location and natural beauty give it an advantage not all communities have, it nonetheless offers a model for an altogether different economic development strategy for the state that is worth exploring—one that focuses on attracting people and not businesses.

Madison has benefited from this strategy. Its biggest employer of skilled workers, the health care IT concern Epic, was established in the town because its founder wanted to live there, and remaining in Madison has made sense for Epic because it's easy to sell UW grads—and lots of other talented people—on the idea of living in Madison. That most of Epic's employees choose to remain in the city after attriting from Epic is more relevant to the state's economic future than anything Foxconn could ever do.

There are myriad lessons to be learned from the Foxconn debacle, but the one I hope resonates with our politicians is that to preserve Wisconsin's economic future, we would be better served by investing in making our communities welcoming,

inclusive, and hospitable places in which to live and raise a family first and foremost. If we combine such efforts with the rest of our state's resources—which includes its remarkable physical beauty—people will flock to the state. And the jobs will follow.

— *Brannon is a senior fellow with the Jack Kemp Foundation and a former professor at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh*