

Local leaders pushing for collaborative regional approach to rural economic development

Posted on Tuesday, Jun 13, 2023

Local leaders are pushing for a collaborative regional approach to economic development that supports rural communities across central Wisconsin.

“The more that we can be informed of what other communities are doing, what other counties are doing, the more we can regionally benefit from those efforts and aligning those returns on investment,” said Jenny Resch, executive director of economic engagement and strategic partnerships at UW-Stevens Point.

Resch spoke yesterday at an “action accelerator” event in Wausau hosted by Competitive Wisconsin and other partners at Northcentral Technical College. The gathering featured remarks from more than a dozen speakers representing local governments, chambers of commerce, trade associations and various businesses.

Angel Whitehead, president and CEO of the economic development group Centergy, underlined the importance of harnessing the “regional voice” to coordinate efforts. The group represents Lincoln, Marathon, Wood, Portage and Adams counties.

While Whitehead and others pointed to regional strengths such as high-quality education, outdoor recreation assets and a strong private sector, Wausau Chamber of Commerce President and CEO David Eckmann noted central Wisconsin is “in a talent desert” with no large metropolitan areas nearby.

For the entire area to thrive, he said cities including Wausau, Merrill, Stevens Point and Wisconsin Rapids need to unify to tackle workforce issues and other challenges. Aspirus Chief Strategy Officer James Matheson called for the creation of “core ambitious goals,” around which communities can focus their efforts.

Meanwhile, Competitive Wisconsin Strategic Counsel Jim Wood and Church Mutual Insurance Company executive Scott Steele agreed communities should focus talent attraction on areas outside of the region, to avoid stealing talent from one another.

While local areas all have specific labor force needs, Steele argued for working together rather than competing for the already limited pool of talent.

“We’re just cannibalizing our communities. We’re just moving pawns from one to the other ... We have to look at what our communities need, and what they can contribute to the greater whole,” he said.

Yesterday’s wide-ranging discussion touched on a number of key economic development resources such as broadband and transportation infrastructure, education, housing and child care.

Miron Construction Vice President of Business Development Paul LaPree talked about regional branding to emphasize innovative companies like Eastbay, as well as opportunities for skiing and kayaking in the area and for remaking Wausau’s downtown now that a mall has been razed and connecting it to the Wisconsin River. LaPree is also chairman of the board for the Greater Wausau Chamber of Commerce.

At the same time, he noted Wausau needs to create a lot more downtown housing to support talent attraction efforts and workforce development. Plus, he spotlighted the statewide child care shortage as an “enormous problem,” predicting more organizations will be offering child care as an employment benefit, much like health care.

Looking ahead, Whitehead noted Centergy is developing a regional brand for the five-county area called Central to Success.

“Stay tuned in the next four months, we’ll have a full marketing campaign that our investors will utilize, that we will be looking at recruitment and attraction of talent specifically to the central Wisconsin region,” she said.

Maysee Herr, CEO of the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce, provided insight on young professionals in the state’s Hmong community.

She said the people and families in Wisconsin are a major factor for those that stay, noting they’re invested in the communities where they live. But she added many often get passed over for positions in the state despite being qualified.

“If they choose to stay, they’re starting their own businesses, going into entrepreneurship ... So then they create something that could potentially be in

competition with people they could have worked for,” she said. “Or they’re choosing to move up to the Twin Cities, right, they’re moving somewhere bigger for more opportunities.”

See more on the downtown Wausau effort:

<https://www.greaterwausau.org/downtown-wausau/>