



Crucial economic plan under way

Sixteen months of research was just the beginning.

Kansas Inc., charged with charting the state's economic development, last week kicked off its first comprehensive strategic planning session.

And, unlike so many statewide policies in the past, there is little doubt that northwest Kansas will make its mark on the final plan.

Hays resident Gene Argo, retired president and CEO of Midwest Energy and partner in Mid-America Rodeo Co., is serving as co-chair of the Kansas Inc. board of directors.

While it's good to have friends in high places, input will be gathered statewide by design, said Kansas Inc. president Stan Ahlerich.

"Western Kansas and eastern Kansas, that whole idea," Ahlerich said, "our board just believes we've got to get past that. The whole state has to not only buy into it, but help build it."

The strategic planning session officially began this month, but Kansas Inc. staffers and researchers have been poring over material for well over a year.

That research includes a status update by Charles Krider, the University of Kansas business guru whose report two decades ago served as the foundation for Kansas Inc.'s original mission.

In his latest work, Krider identifies key trends and sets the stage, but the path has yet to be chosen.

What the steering committee discussed at its initial meeting should come as no surprise to those with the vaguest sense of what America — especially rural America — is facing in this time of shifting demographics and globalization.

The three pillars of the state's economy — agriculture, aviation and oil — are all susceptible to market forces, Ahlerich said, and the state needs to diversify its portfolio when it comes to jobs. The bust of the mid- to late-1980s shows how bad times can get, and how ruthlessly fast disaster strikes, when all three of those pillars crumble at once.

Diversification has been a buzzword on the lips of economic developers for years. It's great to be a small town with a huge manufacturer that employs 2,000. But what happens when that plant closes? Calamity.

A community can breathe easier with 20 companies employing 100 each. Achieving true business diversity, however, is easier said than done.

Technology, innovation, incentives, workforce education, entrepreneurship: All were hot topics at the steering committee meeting in Topeka — a meeting that included business leaders from throughout the state.

But these are just "ideas thrown up on the wall," Ahlerich said.

Before anything is set in stone, those ideas — and more importantly, the dedication of public funds to pursue those goals — will be taken hither and yon.

A series of 18 "cell" meetings have been loosely scheduled around Kansas, and includes groups in Hays, Goodland and Great Bend.

Nex-Tech's Jeff Wick will lead the Hays cell, which is expected to consist initially of five to seven community leaders, largely — and fittingly — from the private sector.

Whether there are formal public input sessions remains up to the individual cells, but if Ellis and the surrounding counties are to have a true buy-in and offer their support to Kansas Inc.'s final plan, that seems a no-brainer.

The findings of the cells will culminate with a second steering committee meeting in May, a reappraisal of the plan, then back to the cells for another evaluation.

The target for the plan's completion is November, when it will be offered to the Kansas Inc. board of directors. From there, it will be shipped to Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and the Legislature and become the official state strategy in early 2008.

Argo summed up the plan's ultimate goal in simple Midwest-speak.

"It's about economic development — just a big word for jobs," he said. "Good jobs, career jobs."

The Hays area, with unemployment hovering around 3 percent, finds itself in an uncomfortable chicken-and-egg scenario. How do you attract more good-paying jobs without a skilled and ample workforce, and how do you attract those skilled workers without those same good-paying jobs?

For this part of the state, that may be the \$64,000 question.

Part of the answer, Argo said, might come down to simple marketing.

"We've got a lot here," he said. "Image: You have to dedicate the resources to get that word out."

Much of America's middle mirrors an image that was built a century ago.

Look at a map of the Midwest.

Trace your finger along rivers and railroads and you'll find most of the population of the region we call home — and the coasts never call at all.

In the birthing of this nation, industry staked its claims on these arteries and millions swarmed.

Ahlerich said Kansas Inc.'s strategic plan will be to discover "new rivers and new railroads."

"That's a real opportunity, particularly for a flyover state ... if we can get focused," he said. "We have to position ourselves so we attract workers. If we cannot attract the workers, these businesses will go where they can."

Ahlerich and his group are correct to be taking this straight to the private sector. Grand plans regularly are thrust upon businesses and rural America from political power centers, usually doing more harm than good.

"To remain growing, (businesses) see and sense the need for Kansas to get focused," he said. "They see what happens in Topeka matters to their bottom line, maybe more than ever before."

It's a bureaucratic process that can cause a natural glazing over, but nothing the Legislature undertakes will affect Kansans personally and financially as this will — for better or worse.

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