

Community promotion key to growth, Economic Development Corp. says

Most residents, businesses uncomfortable with lack of job security, survey shows

By Charlie Mathews

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MANITOWOC — Dean Halverson's Leede Research recently performed surveys of Manitowoc County residents and the business community and came away with several key take-home messages.

The principal theme Halverson told a Thursday audience at an awards program sponsored by the Economic Development Corp. of Manitowoc County: "It's jobs, stupid."

"What our community is saying to us is that we are very uncomfortable with our employment situation right now," Halverson said.

The finding is not surprising considering Manitowoc County has not been exempt from the global recession of the past several years and local unemployment rates have consistently been above state average.

Halverson said the study showed a "big discrepancy" between what citizens believe should be job security and opportunities and what they want.

"But their expectations may not be realistic," he said.

Halverson said a key reason his Manitowoc firm did the survey was to help the EDC develop strategies and programs to further its vision: "To lead the delivery of economic development services in Manitowoc County in collaboration with the public and private sectors to facilitate the creation of quality jobs, diversify the local economy, and improve the overall quality of life."

Among the EDC's services are helping existing and new businesses locate financing and incentive options; track down available sites and buildings; offer guidance in work force solutions, productivity and environmental issues; and research project feasibility.

Promote positives

The two surveys opened with a softball question that prompted similar responses, "What is the best thing about living in Manitowoc County?"

Living on the lakeshore was No. 1, Halverson said during the early program at The Club with large windows facing Lake Michigan and a bright sun rising over the water.

Other positives mentioned by respondents included a low crime rate, friendly people, everything close by, family values and good schools.

What would citizens change? More job opportunities, better shopping variety despite Harbor Town development, and cheaper taxes were mentioned.

That last response is problematic, Halverson said, as neither the citizenry nor business owners and managers "are willing to step up to the table" and express a clear willingness to reduce labor-intensive municipal services in exchange for a lower tax bill.

Halverson's principal call to action was for those residing or doing business in Manitowoc County to become promoters of the community.

"Our young people who leave are not coming back," he warned, noting the historical trend of young adults returning to Manitowoc County to raise their families has fallen off, contributing to the area's declining population.

Halverson believes it is crucial for the EDC and the community-at-large to get positive messages out about job and career opportunities for young adults who might consider returning to their hometown.

Award winners

As part of the "2012 Excellence in Economic Development" program, five businesses received awards.

» Rising Star Award, sponsored by First Bank Financial Centre, was presented to Heavy Pedal Bicycles, a downtown Manitowoc store owned by Dan and Ann Holsen and established in 2009.

It has executed a detailed business plan with mentoring from Mainly Manitowoc and the EDC.

» Neighborhood Development Award, sponsored by A.C.E. Building Service, was presented to Dermatology Associates of Wisconsin.

The medical practice has 131 employees in Manitowoc between central services and the local clinic, one of 21 statewide.

» Two businesses captured the inaugural Corporate Investment Award, sponsored by Bank First National — Miller St. Nazianz and Holy Family Memorial.

A farm equipment manufacturer, Miller St. Nazianz's 2011 sales increased 58 percent over 2010, which resulted in the addition of 51 employees.

Holy Family Memorial's health network experienced a 10 percent growth with development of newer programs related to sports medicine, cancer care and nursing home primary care.

» Dan Pawlitzke, longtime economic development supervisor for the city of Two Rivers, was given the Economic Accelerator of the Year Award, sponsored by Diane Lupke & Associates.

The EDC's executive director, Connie Loden, said that in the past six months on her many business visits she has seen a "substantial trend towards job growth."