

A couple of weeks ago, in late February, I attended the 2012 Rock County Day in Madison. Rock County Day is an effort to speak with one voice in presenting legislative priorities to support economic development for the entire county. About 75 business and community leaders from throughout the county participated this year.

Also attending from Evansville were: John Morning, developer and president of the Chamber of Commerce; Lori Allen of Allen Realty and Chamber board member; Mike Halvensleben, logistics manager for Landmark Services Cooperative; and Terri Roessler, Evansville resident and CEO/CFO of United Alloy in Janesville.

This was the third event in four years organized and hosted by Forward Janesville. The first year was limited to Janesville and played a large role in legislation creating the development opportunity zone there. In 2010 it was expanded to all of Rock County; it was successful in legislation forwarding Interstate 39/90 to the state Transportation Projects Commission. In 2011, Rock County Day was cancelled recognizing that the protests and crowds at the capitol would have made logistical chaos of having Rock County Day delegates trying to meet with every senator and assemblyperson.

This year's Rock County Day was a bit scaled back in that it did not emphasize a single huge piece of legislation. Instead it presented several broad statements to support infrastructure and economic development. For infrastructure, we supported investment in Wisconsin's technology and transportation infrastructure to ensure that rural and urban communities remain connected.

The first priority for infrastructure was support for roads, specifically the expansion of Interstate 39/90 to six lanes from the stateline to Madison. This is a significant economic corridor for the state and our region; it carries some \$600 to \$800 million in commerce daily. Although it became eligible for Major Projects funding following the last Rock County Day, it still needs funding for construction to proceed.

The second priority for infrastructure was support for freight rail as a key cog in Wisconsin's economic development engine. Several existing freight rail lines need repair or upgrade. To keep Wisconsin connected and to ensure that our companies have cost-competitive access to domestic and international markets, we urged support for financial mechanisms to preserve and enhance key freight rail corridors.

Landmark has a 100-car shuttle loading facility in Evansville. This is a great advantage to the agricultural economy of our area. It serves an area including Rock, Dane, Green, Jefferson, and a portion of Walworth Counties, and Landmark expects to ship 18 million bushels of grain through it this year. Reliable freight rail is vital to our region.

The third priority for infrastructure was support for telecommunications connectivity. All communities, both urban and rural, must be connected to broadband internet access if Wisconsin is to compete in the global economy.

The second broad issue for Rock County Day was economic development and state competitiveness. We supported the advancement of economic development incentive programs

that are demand-driven, flexible and well capitalized. We believed Wisconsin's business climate could be improved by enacting policy changes that create a strong economic environment to facilitate private sector investment and employment opportunities.

This included a recommendation to support Assembly Bill 376, which would permit tax credit portability among eligible Wisconsin taxpayers. At the state level, tax credits are the primary economic development tool. Unfortunately, tax credits are of limited use for start-up companies. Allowing the transfer of tax credits would make them more attractive to more companies, increase their value and utilization, and create more jobs.

The second priority for economic development was to support tax increment financing (TIF) reform to allow the Wisconsin Department of Revenue the authority to lower the base value of an existing TIF district when property is demolished. TIF is the primary economic development tool at the city level. It can be particularly difficult in districts to redevelop areas that are already built (such as downtowns). Being able to lower the base value would enhance the value of TIF in some of the more expensive and difficult redevelopment projects.

The third priority for economic development and state competitiveness was for workforce development. We supported a forward thinking k-16 system that encourages innovative and collaborative workforce development solutions. We were particularly interested in on-the-job training initiatives to bridge the skills gaps between employers and employees.

Carpooling up to Madison with Terri Roessler of United Alloy, she commented on the difficulties when job applicants lack necessary math skills or experience with specific welding methods and equipment. I've heard similar workforce alignment concerns from Baker Manufacturing and Stoughton Trailers here in Evansville.

Rock County day started with a dialogue with our area legislators. Senator Cullen and Assemblypersons Ringhand, Loudonbeck, Wynn, and Knilans were present. Each community had a couple minutes to present their own local activities.

I emphasized the rail and telecommunications priorities of the Rock County Day agenda, noting these were of particular interest for Landmark. I noted our recent work at getting our ducks in a row to be more accommodating of business: streamlining local regulations, strategic planning and visioning for the retail market, and assembling a commercial property inventory.

I also noted a couple additions to Evansville's economic development toolbox. Last summer we were authorized by the US Department of Agriculture to utilize its Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program, which besides helping business expansion could serve to capitalize a revolving loan fund. The day after Rock County Day, WPPI Energy was going to meet with two businesses about its Shared Savings Program, which would provide a \$50,000 loan for lighting improvements with the gained energy efficiency covering the loan payments within five years. And we were looking into feasibility of revenue bonds to provide lower interest rate financing for a business expansion this year.

After meeting with our local legislators, the 75-80 business and community leaders were split into assigned teams to each meet with legislators from across the entire state. Teams represented a mix of backgrounds – the team I was on had private business, local government, school board, Evansville, and Janesville among its delegates. And we were briefed on the priorities so we could speak to the issues.

In close to half the cases, we had scheduled appointments, in the other cases we simply dropped in. It was great to actually meet with a legislator to pitch the Rock County Day priorities. But in many cases we instead met with staff. The staffers my team met with were informed, helpful, and professional. We discussed the issues and provided them with a Roadmap to Rock County's Future to pass on to their legislator. The map was an actual fold-out, which included an overview of the Rock County Day priorities.

This year Rock County Day in Madison emphasized generalities rather than some single piece of legislation. But it is good to keep a regional approach, to maintain a presence with a single voice, and to be recognized by legislators from across the state.