

Mayor's Column for December 15, 2010 Review

As I am writing this column we are in the midst of a blizzard warning. Our Christmas tree is in the stand awaiting new energy-efficient LED tree lights. I have already enjoyed several recent holiday events, including the AWARE Love Light tree lighting ceremony, the middle school Craft Fair, and the wonderful concert by the Evansville Ecumenical Christmas Choir. Winter is upon us.

Just two weeks ago I was planting tulip bulbs, racing to finish prior to the impending snow forecasted as part of the first winter storm watch of the season. I had impulsively purchased the bulbs earlier in the week at Jung's Garden Center in Sun Prairie following a meeting at WPPI Energy.

I had stopped in search of long evergreen swags to decorate the front doors of our home and was intrigued by the Pride Blue (Blue Devil Blue) tulips. Those of you who know me know that my blood runs Blue, and Evansville's third graders know that blue is my favorite color. (I may, however, be a mayor of a different color on January 1, as I am also a Wisconsin Badger alum.) To add to the task, I also purchased two dozen cranberry-colored National Velvet tulips.

I had a real workout getting those tulips into the ground. I was surprised that the frost was about two inches deep already. The one good thing was that within 12 hours, my efforts were covered with snow, hopefully foiling the ever industrious neighborhood squirrels. In past years I have lost many bulbs to the mischievous animals. As the fruits of my labor, several months from now I hope to enjoy stunning bright blue flowers that will inspire me to add new plant varieties to our garden.

Planting seeds for future success leads into the focus of my column. In mid-October I attended the opening session of the annual conference of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities held in Middleton. The speaker was Dave Ivan of Michigan State University Extension. His presentation was entitled "Community Success in the New Economy."

Ivan began his program by reporting that the U.S. share of world economic growth fell from 19% to 12% in just the last ten years, according to Business Week 2007. He argues that a new approach is critical, a "new economy." Old economic strategies are no longer effective. Traditional economic development efforts were described as emphasizing business attraction, focusing on competitive advantage in some resource or skill, being little concerned with the quality of the physical environment, and being government-led.

In contrast, the "new economy" has an emphasis on attracting educated workers, focus on innovation and adaptability in workers/organizations, recognition that community physical and

cultural amenities are key to attracting knowledge workers, and economic development efforts led by partnerships of government, business, schools, and non-profit organizations.

Ivan listed several qualities of small cities sought by “new economy” workers. They are: scenic beauty, safe streets, affordability, family-friendly, good schools, sense of community, and low traffic.

Most of the presentation was spent discussing five “pillars” of “new economy” communities. The pillars are: environment that supports innovation and entrepreneurship; capital investments that drive new economy growth; quality of place; strong social capital; and regional assets that are leveraged.

Ivan argues that “the path to prosperity lies in creating an environment that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship.” Economically progressive communities identify and support entrepreneurs and foster an entrepreneurial culture. He identifies key success factors in effective communities: local champion, building on local talent, strong social networks, specific actions to support entrepreneurs, and a community that welcomes diversity and is open to creativity and innovation. Networking events, mentoring programs, on-line business resources, and new business incubators were examples of activities used in communities.

Important community assets identified as needing capital investment are vibrant downtowns, renewable energy, affordable housing, strong education systems, and good transportation connectivity.

In discussing quality of place, Ivan states that “Successful communities recognize that creating distinctive downtowns and attractive neighborhoods are a prerequisite to attracting talent in the New Economy.” To enhance place making, communities should “increase social interaction and build on a unique history, identity, and assets to foster community pride.”

Human investments in the “new economy” include efforts to strengthen social bonds of new residents, focus on education, increase youth engagement, and retaining community talent. Young professionals value gathering places and should be encouraged to provide community input, including involvement in community decision-making. Community focus on creating positive memories and activities that are attractive to youth and young families improve youth retention.

The final “new economy” pillar, leveraging regional assets, includes identification of regional business clusters that provide opportunities for cooperative marketing and pooling of other assets for maximum effect. Ivan points out that “stealing growth from your neighbor is zero sum growth” and is counterproductive in “new economy” communities focused on regional collaboration. He further states: “Communities clinging to the old economy mindset of ‘winner take all’ in economic development will fall further behind in a quick changing world.”

Ivan concluded his presentation with a description of a successful “new economy” community. The characteristics he listed were: create quality places to live; retain and attract people of talent; welcome entrepreneurs; welcome and celebrate diversity; support education; promote community engagement and involve youth; and promote regional cooperation and planning for efficiency and success.

What “new economy” ideas are at work in Evansville? Evansville has a long tradition of entrepreneurial activity. Today the Evansville Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club is in its third year of monthly gatherings.

Recent capital investments in the community are numerous. We have made road and infrastructure improvements to Main Street and Madison Street. Ongoing downtown revitalization continues to enhance the center of our city. Lake Leota was restored. A state of the art wastewater treatment plant upgrade was completed this year and includes energy-efficiency and renewable energy components. We installed a wind turbine at the treatment plant site. We obtained a grant to upgrade our street lights to LED technology. Tax incremental financing was provided for the Heights at Evansville Manor, an assisted living facility that provides additional housing options for our senior population.

Evansville values quality of place. The community strongly supported the restoration of Lake Leota. In challenging economic times, citizens have provided generous financial backing for the construction of Creekside Place, providing a new gathering place for celebrations, socializing and educational opportunities. The volunteer-driven Baker Office Building renovation project was completed and now houses a local history museum and visitors center.

The mission of Evansville Community Partnership includes strengthening social bonds for new residents. The many events that occur in Evansville provide opportunities for building community. The Evansville Youth Center and a variety of other organizations, from Scouts to 4-H to the History Hunters, provide youth engagement. Our community values a strong local education system.

Evansville recently joined THRIVE, an eight county economic development organization that includes Rock County, with its focus on regional economic development. Our community is also involved with Rock County 5.0 activities. Evansville has established CEED, the Council for Evansville Economic Development, with representation from the four stakeholders Ivan identified for collaboration: city, Chamber, schools, and ECP.

We can certainly improve our “new economy” efforts in the future. However, much of our current community work encompasses “new economy” concepts. The seeds we have already sown should provide a solid base for future economic activities.

Energy Saving Tips

I ran across several “green” cooking and food suggestions. Here are some of them: putting covers on pots and pans will heat food more quickly; use the smallest appliance when cooking smaller amounts of food--microwaves and toaster ovens use less energy than stoves; use a timer and check foods through the oven window because opening the oven lowers the cooking temperature; bake multiple items at once; skip preheating your oven if not necessary for your recipe; store leftovers in reusable containers; reuse paper grocery bags and/or shop with cloth bags; and avoid buying single-serve portions of food and drink.

Community Announcements

Property tax bills were mailed last week. A reminder: payment must be made to the Rock County Treasurer in Janesville.

Because of the holidays, city offices will be closed December 24, December 27, and December 31.

Community Thanks

On behalf of our community, I extend thanks to the many citizens and businesses who have supported the charitable activities of AWARE and the Care Closet this year. Support for Koats for Kids, Love Lights program, school supplies drive, food collections, and general financial and in-kind contributions are greatly appreciated by our neighbors and families in need.

I thank citizens making “buy local” purchases during the holidays. You support the livelihoods of friends and neighbors and strengthen our local business community.

Evansville thanks John and Jackie Sornson for volunteering their time to assist in preparing property tax bills for mailing. The Sornsons have served our community in this way for the past several years.

Whatever your religious tradition, please enjoy the spirit of the season. Merry Christmas!