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Gallatin EDA tackles uncertain economy

GEAR program helps industries drive ahead

BY JOSH NELSON/For The News Examiner

With a sagging economy still slow to recover, Gallatin city leaders say it is more important than ever to be able to provide services to businesses and industries that already exist in the city.

"What's tough about a recession, and this economy in particular, is that there are so many things you can't control at the local level, and so you look at what you can control, and you work on it," said Clay Walker, Gallatin Economic Development executive director, earlier this week.

One example is the Gallatin Expansion and Retention program.

The GEAR program is an EDA initiative that brings local industrial leaders together quarterly to share information, network and work toward solving problems.

At one meeting, an industry manager said he had trouble getting his new equipment to interface with his old equipment, and he needed a conveyor belt. He was loaned the conveyor belt by another industry leader that he had met by attending the GEAR meetings.

"Not every industry participates, and we don't 'hard sell' this thing," Walker said of the GEAR program. "We don't push ourselves on them, but the numbers (in attendance at the meetings) are growing.

"(Starting the GEAR program) helped us become a go-to point of contact to help them out. We put more emphasis on existing industry than most economic development agencies, and we do it purposefully and strategically, and we think it pays off, and we view it as a top priority."

Another way the Gallatin EDA is helping current industries is with Knowledge Nets an Outstanding Workforce.

"It's a summary on our Web site of what Workforce Essentials does, what COMPASS does, what Vol State has to offer, and things like that," Walker said. "If an industry has a workforce or an education issue, they can read about all the services offered in Sumner County."

At the end of each description is a contact person for that agency, a telephone number and an e-mail address.

"If an industry doesn't find what it needs, at the bottom of the page is an area where they can type in their issue, hit 'send,' and it comes to our office," Walker said. "If we have an answer, we'll tell them. If we don't know the answer, we find out and see that it gets to the right people and that the issue is taken care of. It's part of making their lives easier and solving problems."

Trash to Treasure

The Gallatin EDA also launched a program it calls Trash to Treasure, in which companies can e-mail the EDA about waste disposal issues. The EDA then sends a summary to all industries in hopes that another industry can share information about how to handle the issue or that another company can actually benefit from the waste materials.

"Within the first day, the program paid dividends," Walker told the city council at its work session last week. "There was a company locally that was throwing away crates and pallets. Well, we sent out the

e-mail, and we found that there was another local company just a quarter-mile down the road that could use the crates and pallets ... so both companies benefitted economically by this program.”

Coming soon: wage and benefits summary

The EDA is also about to launch its second annual wage and benefits summary.

“It lets companies know if they’re paying the right amount,” Walker explained. “If a business is having trouble keeping qualified workers or attracting qualified workers, it might be because they are not competitive in pay scale. This will let them know where they stand in comparison to similar companies.

“This year, we’re working with other cities and the county to have their employers fill out their wages and benefits, so companies will know not only what the average wage is in Gallatin, but in Sumner County. It also helps us in recruiting, because we can show what the labor costs would be to a company that might be looking to move here.”

The EDA also does a “featured industry” story on its Web site if a company gets an award or expands, for example.

Meanwhile, Walker said there are signs locally of the economy turning around.

“At the GEAR meeting prior to the last one, everybody had a whole bunch of layoffs and there was not a lot of good news, but at our last meeting (in August), most who were going through layoffs before are now slowly putting people back to work, and that’s encouraging,” Walker said. “While they are not all up to full capacity, and not all are putting people back to work, but many were reporting they were putting people back to work.”

Regardless, Walker said, he plans on continuing to spend just as much time on existing industries as he does recruiting new ones.

“Paying attention is more important than ever,” he said. “We want them to call us for issues – big and small – it’s what we want. It makes them feel connected to the city. And they are the backbone of our community and our way of life.”
