

Let's get fired up about economic development!!!

By Gus Comstock, Director, Marion CANDO!

Is Marion ready to lead the region as a manufacturing hub, again? History buffs will tell you that several decades ago Marion commanded the region and state with some big-time manufacturing giants and a highly respected reputation for dedicated and highly skilled workers. However foreign competition and a changing economy ended that heyday prominence with what became a devastating 7,000 job loss. Unemployment reached sixteen percent (currently about six percent). Not only did that hurt, but it brought Marion to its knees. Now however, Marion's manufacturing community seems to be on the rebound. With new global trading partnerships and increases in domestic production, Marion's manufacturers sit at the epicenter of opportunity: with a railroad infrastructure that few communities have and nationally-known state-of-the-art training facilities such as RAMTEC. We are in a good place.

Everyone in Marion should share in this excitement... so let's get fired up about economic development. Let's prepare to welcome new manufacturers like ReConserve and retain existing ones because they are the reason new jobs are created and they are what adds greater wealth to the community. Please note that every manufacturing job supports two or three other jobs in the community. Community benefits are aplenty.

What draws manufacturers to Marion and keeps them here? A hearty community soul.

Who remembers Marion Power Shovel? You probably buy things that came through the Panama Canal. The Panama Canal was built with equipment made here. Massive NASA rockets are moved with two MPS built crawlers/transporters... they even have names: Hans and Franz, and they just turned 50 this year. We have the right stuff. For some intriguing and interesting history, reach out and talk to former MPS employees.

The Marion Steel Company was a bar steel mill. Many Ohio highway signs and signposts were made in Marion and still are. Nucor purchased Marion Steel in 2005 and continues production of highway products, as does Ohio Galvanizing and Highway Safety Corporation.

There are many more companies that called Marion home, such as National Can, Quaker Oats, Eaton, Tecumseh Products, Pollack Steel and Osgood. The list could go on.

Not to be overshadowed, retaining existing businesses is just as important, if not more important. Maintaining a high quality of life, supporting strong educational systems, and investing in public infrastructure improvements are three critical community pillars that companies evaluate as they decide to expand locally or leave town.

Here is some trivia on a few of Marion's current manufacturers:

Did you know that every day more dryers are produced in Marion than anyplace else on Earth? For North America, the same is true for dry bake mixes. Whirlpool and General Mills are two prominent companies and Whirlpool is the Columbus Region's second largest manufacturing employer. Do you like snack foods? Wyandot is one of the nation's leading snack food producers. They process six hundred

thousand bushels of food grade white and yellow corn each year. This contributes to Marion's strong agricultural economy. And did you know that despite the Great Recession, Wyandot's sales rose by fifty per cent .

POET Bio-refining supplies ethanol for transportation fuel. They process about 24 million bushels of locally grown corn to produce about 68 million gallons of ethanol. Co-products include corn oil, carbon dioxide, and feed stock.

Wilson Bohannon, padlock manufacturer, has been here for over one hundred years; they relocated from Brooklyn, NY; and they are still a family owned business.

The Marion Multi-Modal Facility unloads and loads three trains a day. On- and off-loaded are about two hundred ocean-going containers destined for central Ohio businesses. This facility is important and will become more-so as foreign trade increases and will cause greater expansion at the Marion Multi-Modal Facility.

An important initiative to streamline foreign trade for central Ohio companies is underway. Columbus2020, our regional economic development organization, through its Global Connection Initiative, identified the region as lagging in foreign trade compared to other similar sized regions. The Global Connection Initiative is aimed at increasing foreign trade and creating new jobs.

The Nucor Corporation is one of the most extensive producers of steel in the U.S. They are well known for being the largest owner of what are often referred to as mini mills, which take advantage of arc furnace technology to melt scrap metal instead of attempting to extract iron from raw ore. This is a form of recycling and a much more energy efficient method of producing steel. According to the company, a ton of steel is recycled by the company every two seconds.

Winning the best economic development projects and keeping existing companies requires regional cooperation and, very importantly, a community that is prepared, diligent, pays attention-to-detail, and can operate at the speed of business. Businesses make site selection and expansion decisions with community information. And they know that employees will come from within about a sixty mile radius, so regional cooperation is essential. Initially, businesses or their site selectors get a lot of information from internet searches. The internet drastically changed how site selectors, working with relocating or expanding companies, gather information. No longer do they only rely on local economic development organizations for community information, but they get it online. Today, local economic development officials have to be fast on their feet like front-line retail staff... they need to be ready at a moment's notice to answer questions on available water/sewer/gas/fiber capacity, workforce training programs, planned public infrastructure improvements, and current and future expansions of existing businesses. If this information is not quickly provided, site selectors and businesses go to the next community to see if they are better prepared.

Marion CAN DO! (www.marioncando.com)... or the Greater Marion Community Area New Development Organization, Inc... is a non-profit organization created in 1993 to attract and retain Marion businesses. Investment comes from the city, county and businesses. CAN DO! works in partnership with the

Marion/Marion County Regional Planning, Marion Area Chamber, the Marion Area Convention & Visitors Bureau and Downtown Marion, and with critical input and support from citizens and other groups, to coordinate rapid responses to questions from businesses and site selectors.

Economic development and the attraction and retention of existing businesses also requires regional support, as well as local cooperation and partnerships. Regionally, Marion County is part of the eleven county, central Ohio, Columbus2020 (www.columbusregion.com) Region. When the Kasich Administration reorganized the Ohio Department of Development into JobsOhio and the Ohio Development Services Agency, the state was divided into six regions. Central Ohio includes Marion and ten other counties. JobsOhio contracts with regional organizations to administer business retention/attraction and incentive programs. Columbus2020 administers the central Ohio contract. Marion CAN DO!, a member of Columbus2020, works closely with them on business development projects.

So how do we compete at the highest levels for the best projects? We need to engage in regional planning and activities, and we need a plan. The central area regional plan can be found at: <http://columbusregion.com/Columbus2020/About-us/Comprehensive-Economic-Development-Strategy.aspx>.

One of the first documents reviewed by site selectors is the region's economic development strategy; next is the community's strategy. Without a comprehensive economic development strategy, site selectors usually eliminate communities from the search because they do not appear to be prepared.

So what is an economic development strategy? Basically, it is the community's resume and provides some history, demographic information, workforce information, current community and business makeup, and finally, information on where the community is going. Site selectors use this information when they evaluate the community and sites as they prepare presentations to give to company executives.

Currently, Marion CAN DO! is working on a strategy. We are in the early stages and I hope to provide you with more information on this in the near future. You need to know because it is your community.

In the meantime, let's get excited about a revitalized Marion economy where everyone benefits!