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SCEDF Asks ‘What Can We Do Better?’

STARKE COUNTY – The Starke County Economic Development Foundation (SCEDF) Board met this fall to evaluate the past and present, and plan for the future. The strategic planning session was held at Lindenwood Retreat and Conference Center at Ancilla College, in Donaldson.

The facilitator for the event, Sherry Rose, is the director-outside sales, International Business Development, with the Indiana Economic Development Corp., in Indianapolis. Prior to joining the IEDC, she worked with the Wabash Valley Power Association, which provides wholesale electricity to a number of REMCs in Indiana, including Kankakee Valley REMC that serves Starke County.

The first step in the process was reviewing SCEDF’s goals over the past three to four years, and determining what was done right and what needed improvement. Next, the group addressed the roles and expectations of Board members. The Board includes 23 members from a variety of backgrounds, representing government groups, businesses and service providers throughout the County, as well as “At-Large” members with significant business and government experience.

One concern rose to the top of the list of areas needing improvement – getting information about the organization out to the public. Charles Weaver, executive director of SCEDF, summed it up saying, “There seems to be a perception that we are secretive about what we do. We need to provide more information to overcome that negative perception.”

As the base of economic development involves working with individual prospective businesses as well as with groups promoting new business, there will always be preliminary planning and ongoing negotiations that cannot be announced publicly until plans are finalized. However, the public needs to know what it takes to support the overall effort to bring a new business to Starke County.

A big part of that support involves education and developing the work force necessary to fill available jobs. In addition to offering classes through the SCILL Center, SCEDF reaches out to younger students through their Manufacturers’ Day with seventh graders throughout Starke County.

SCEDF also recently hosted the third Leadership Starke County class for a day of learning about the various aspects of economic development. Activities included: overall information about SCEDF, what it is, what’s going on and what’s in the future; a question and answer period with local business leaders; and group activities simulating how to start a new business and looking at Starke County geographically to determine site locations for various types of businesses.

As most funding for economic development in Starke County comes from the County Economic Development Tax (CEDIT), and must be authorized through the County Council, representatives of SCEDF also plan to meet regularly with the Council and Commission during their combined public meetings to provide reports on SCEDF activities and accomplishments. Other local governing bodies also are involved with the SCEDF on projects at the industrial parks in Knox, North Judson and Hamlet.

Additional topics that came to the forefront of discussion at the planning retreat were: regionalism, fiscal responsibility, benefits of the organization and the cooperative effort of Board and staff, most of which involve various types of marketing.

Regionalism is one of the bigger issues as prospective businesses don't care about political boundaries. "They're looking at breaking down areas," said Weaver, "starting with the U.S., to the Midwest, Chicago area, then to Northwest Indiana, which requires us to have the dollars to market regionally. We can improve our efforts by working on cooperative advertising with outside contacts, State and regional groups."

Weaver added, "The most positive outcome of the session was affirming our overall strategies of attraction, retention and expansion."

ABOUT SCEDF

The Starke County Development Foundation is a not-for-profit local economic development organization (LEDO) providing economic development opportunities on behalf of Starke County, Indiana, the City of Knox, and the Towns of North Judson and Hamlet through the development of industrial parks, rail spurs, greenfield sites, shovel-ready sites, infrastructure and workforce development. For more information regarding Starke County Development Foundation, visit www.starkecounty.com.

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