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Weaver, Collins Participate in Workforce Summit

STARKE COUNTY – Charles Weaver, executive director of the Starke County Economic Development Foundation (SCEDF), and Adam Collins, vice president of operations with Kruz Inc., recently played key roles in the 2014 Workforce Summit, in Merrillville. The event was hosted by the Northwest Indiana Workforce Board, and included representatives of business, education and economic development organizations.

Collins participated in the welcome and collaboration message at the beginning of the activities. Lt. Gov. Sue Ellspermann, who is responsible for the State’s Office of Small Business and Entrepreneurship and Office of Community and Rural Affairs, was the keynote speaker.

Following the opening presentations, participants could choose between four breakout sessions, including one on aligning economic development and workforce development, during which Weaver served as one of the panelists leading the discussion. Other sessions were: the return on investment with work and learn opportunities; the “Big Goal” to achieve 60 percent post-secondary education by 2025; and equal consideration for attending college versus vocational training.

Others on the panel with Weaver were representatives of the Gary and Michigan City economic development organizations. Each gave a presentation on what their respective groups were doing to make workforce development a key part of economic development. A question-and-answer period followed the presentations.

Weaver’s presentation focused on the historical perspective in areas such as unskilled labor, per capita income, percent of unemployment and low high school graduation rates, which have all seen improvement in the past few years.

One category of particular note is the unemployment rate. In September, Starke County’s unemployment rate dropped to 5.9 percent, the first time in history that the County was as low as the rate for all of the United States. In March 2009, the rate was 15.1 percent, and the most recent statistics from October showed 6.1 percent unemployment.

Weaver then asked the question, “How did we get out of there?” The answer was training the workforce with industry-driven training. That was accomplished through establishing Starke County Initiative for Lifelong Learning (SCILL) and creating a team of industry, labor, economic development and education to determine needed skills and develop short-course training programs for the existing workforce.,

The training programs in automobile technology and welding are now offered throughout the Indiana North Central Regional Vocational Cooperative. Other programs being piloted or planned in the near future include robotics and automation, equipment maintenance and a four-year apprenticeship following graduation from high school.

Starke County is recognized as a leader in workforce development. Jennifer Mason, a Chicago-based regional representative of the U.S. Secretary of Labor, congratulated Starke County on their efforts, based upon the acknowledgement of its leadership role by all seven counties in northwest Indiana.

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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