

SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from March 29, 2002

WCEDC continues transition to info-provider organization

BY STEVEN SCHUSTER, *SBT Reporter*

Picture Bill Mitchell as a navigator rather than a driver. The driver has control of where the car goes. But without good information from the navigator, the route the car takes might not be the best.

Mitchell, executive director of Waukesha County Economic Development Corp., is continuing his efforts to position the organization as a navigator. It's a change from the past when economic development corporations were positioned to drive new development and lure new businesses.

Not that new business isn't welcome; it is. But Mitchell is hearing that established firms are looking to WCEDC for more information on how to make their own operations stronger.

WCEDC's new business model thus focuses more on helping other business organizations serve their clients. According to Mitchell, there is a shortage of current information. "We think telling companies what they need is backwards. We want to listen," he said.

The new model involves chambers, economic development organizations, industry clusters, workforce development boards, educational institutions, business and other southeastern Wisconsin organizations.

In the past, Mitchell has participated in a number of grand openings of new business relocations, and expansions in Waukesha County, such as last November's opening of an 89,400-square-foot U.S. Cellular call center in Pewaukee. U.S. Cellular, the nation's eighth largest cellular phone service provider, currently employs 300 people in Pewaukee with the potential to expand up to another 250 more people.

"We considered several locations for our new communications facility, but Pewaukee was a natural choice," said Linda Baker, vice president of customer service for U.S. Cellular in Chicago. "The city is central to our business operations and will enable U.S. Cellular to consolidate many elements of our service and operations, previously managed at three separate Milwaukee-area locations, under one roof."

"We enjoyed the Pewaukee and Waukesha area. We enjoyed the quality of associates and the support of the community. We studied work force availability in many areas ... [people in this area are] well-educated folks," Baker said.

Overall, WCEDC's past mission has been successful. However, Mitchell hopes that his new mission will help local area businesses even more so. "A lot of good things for Waukesha-area businesses were done, but not all of the right things," Mitchell said.

One obstacle that Mitchell hopes to overcome is the shortage of workers, so that firms like U.S. Cellular can continue to expand in the county. But demographic trends pose a challenge. "Research suggests

that we need to help the retired community to comeback to the workforce," Mitchell said. "My organization will be called upon to get the right resources. I'm an optimist at heart. (If we) find the right people, and the right resources to start addressing the problems we can certainly tackle issues facing the county," Mitchell said.

According to the 1990 census, Waukesha County's population was 304,767. However, only a decade later the population has grown to 360,767, according to the 2000 census.

Waukesha County has been an attractive place to move to, according to Bryce Styza, president of Harmony Homes. "It's beautiful country out here, where the glacier went through; the I-94 corridor is the Nile of Waukesha County. If you look at history, settlements have been along the waterways, then railroads, now the interstate system. It's convenient between Milwaukee and Madison," Styza said.



Mitchell