

Changing Trends in Economic Development Over the Life of *The Economic Forum*™

The special anniversary 50th sitting of *The Economic Forum*™, “Changing Trends in Economic Development Over the Life of *The Economic Forum*™” was held on Tuesday, October 11th, 2011 in the Radisson Hotel Ballroom with over 160 guests in attendance.

In many respects we have seen a sea change in thinking about the approach to economic development in the last 20-plus years. The five speaker panel addressed just a few of the dramatic changes that have occurred since *The Economic Forum*™ was launched in 1988.



Urban Development: **La Crosse County Administrator Steve O'Malley** shared his perspectives on the need to refocus our regional economic development to the urban core. O'Malley cited several alarming statistics including: the property tax rate disparities that exist among the City of La Crosse and the surrounding communities; the \$37 million in unmet road needs in La Crosse County; and the 44 year supply of vacant residential lots in the unincorporated areas of La Crosse County. While business and institutional development in the City of La Crosse is very healthy, residential development has suffered over the past several decades which has led to low housing values and increased poverty in the central city. Because a community is only as strong as its core, O'Malley challenged the community to continue to seek solutions to these challenging trends.



Economic Development Project Finance: **Brenda Hicks-Sorensen, Vice President of Economic & Community Development with the newly formed WI Economic Development Corporation**, gave an overview of the changes in economic development project financing that have taken place in the past two plus decades. The fact is that only one tool to assist business development existed well into the 80's. In the 90's attention shifted to training and retraining programs, especially as technology galloped forward and worker dislocations accelerated as our economy merged into a more fluid global marketplace. In the last decade tax credits against state income tax have become favored in that a credit is only enjoyed once a business has achieved success. Today, WEDC continues to focus on performance based incentives and looks for partnerships with business and the local community to move important projects forward.



Workforce Development: **Jerry Hanoski, recently retired CEO of Workforce Connections Inc.** has seen a great deal of change in Workforce Development focus during his distinguished 40 plus year career, having worked with five different US Department of Labor programs. Hanoski explained that the 1980s saw high unemployment rates because companies were not able to quickly employ the huge influx of baby boomers entering the labor market while the 1990s and 2000s saw a tightening labor market. Although it is hard to see now, Hanoski pointed to a demographic imperative that will begin to affect our labor supply by 2015 given the declining birth rates and the tremendous number of baby boomers that will be exiting the labor market. Because of this, even greater focus on the several facets of post-secondary training will be critical to closing the skills gap. Hanoski stressed the need for economic development to focus on cluster development which allows industries to work together in attracting, retaining, and training talent.



Environmental Focuses: **Local businessman and environmentalist David Skoloda** took this opportunity to explore the evolution in thinking as it relates to the role the environment plays in business today. While we have always associated the natural beauty of the La Crosse Area with the towering bluffs and Mighty Mississippi, in recent years we have become increasingly aware of the true importance of our environment. Many will remember conversations of yesteryear in which filling in La Crosse's marshland was seriously considered. Exploiting the bluffs propelled two important local industries. However, with three “500 year” flood events in the last 20 years we've come to recognize the importance of the La Crosse River Valley in protecting our communities and protecting the bluff range is accepted thinking today. Additionally, as energy prices have continued to rise and technology continues to advance, we've seen energy efficiency and sustainability go from “a good idea” to a fundamentally sound business practice that yields huge cost savings for many La Crosse Area businesses.



Silent Sports Destination: **Marvin Wanders of 360 Real Estate Solutions and Human Powered Trails** shared his vision on one aspect of economic development in the La Crosse Area in the future. The La Crosse Area is home to some of the most spectacular terrain and natural amenities anywhere in the country. Branding the La Crosse Area as a “silent sports” destination will allow the region to increase its tourism trade through all four seasons. Silent sports include hiking, biking, canoeing, kayaking and cross country skiing. It is an obvious opportunity given the natural gifts of hills and river valleys and man made access through the extensive farm to market rural road system. Finally over 15 million people live within five hours of La Crosse, which is often thought to be the outside amount of time people will travel for a weekend get-a-way. World class bike road racers such as Greg La Mond and Matt Bouche cut their teeth on road courses here and they see this as mecca even if we don't just yet. It is this kind of positioning and enhancement of the area as a “place of quality” that retains and attracts talent for companies here or considering a location.