

Citizen volunteers on task for our economic future

We've all watched it happen. Many of us have lived in cities and towns where we've experienced it firsthand.

"It" is urban sprawl. One morning we wake up, and the nice little town we grew up in is surrounded by boxy shopping malls or "strip malls," a once-thriving downtown is a zone of vacant buildings and dead or dying businesses, and the city's outskirts are a hodgepodge of businesses and housing developments whose locations lack sense or system.

But that can't happen in Sheridan — or in Rochester or Dayton or Clearmont.

Can it?

Look at what's happening in Sheridan County right now. Coal-bed natural gas development is here.

The technology sector is growing rapidly, with several Sheridan-grown companies competing — successfully — for hundreds of thousands of dollars to pursue ideas and develop products for federal agencies such as NASA and the Department of Defense.

Wages are up, and unemployment is down — so much so that many Sheridan businesses are struggling to find workers for the jobs they have.

Sheridan County is changing. It's growing. And there are two ways a community can grow: under control ... or out of control.

Controlled growth requires taking a

thoughtful look at what we have here now, making decisions on how we want our community to grow in the future, and determining how best to accommodate the inevitability of change while maintaining the kind of community we want for ourselves, our children, and their children.

Every community will have its own answers to those questions, but in Sheridan County, quality of life has always been a primary consideration.

Since last fall, groups of Sheridan County residents and businesses have been meeting to discuss how best to address those questions and others.

Initiated by Forward Sheridan, the economic development organization for Sheridan County, those meetings have now involved over 100 people representing a variety of backgrounds and interests.

The citizens/business groups have identified the county's strengths and considered the challenges it faces in the years ahead.

Needs have been identified — for better airline service, for more child-care

A Community Affair

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Planning for Sheridan's economic development



facilities to supplement those already here, for housing that working people can afford to buy or rent, for ways to attract more workers so that businesses may continue to grow.

A dedicated task force is now working to quantify those strengths and

challenges, identifying areas where our assets need to be protected and where specific initiatives need to be undertaken to turn even our challenges into strengths.

The individuals who have dedicated their time to this process have been careful to incorporate past economic development and community-assessment efforts in order to build a more stable foundation for future initiatives.

Task forces, made up of other citizens and businesses — all serving on a voluntary basis — are already helping find solutions for some of these issues:

- A task force of individuals dedicated to improving air service in Sheridan County is working to bring improved fares, larger planes, and extended schedules to the Sheridan County Airport.

In May, Great Lakes Airlines will

begin operating at the Sheridan County Airport. With Big Sky already in place, this will provide two air services for those flying into and out of Sheridan.

- Work of another task force led to the city of Sheridan's recent application for a \$3 million grant from the state to help build an extended-hours child-care facility here.

- A third task force is working to give employers the resources and incentives they need to implement strong drug policies and drug-testing programs in order to create a drug-free culture in the Sheridan County workplace.

All of these efforts are in step with Forward Sheridan, with the eventual goal of developing a plan of action that will be used to guide the county's economic growth, so that none of us will ever wake up one morning and wonder what happened to the community we loved.

Melissa Butcher is co-chair of the Economic Development Strategic Planning Task Force.

"A Community Affair" is a weekly column from citizens who support Forward Sheridan, a professional business organization of invested partners whose purpose is to develop and maintain a sound economy in Sheridan County.

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