

Process to spur economic development in Sheridan County is working

The process is working.

That has two meanings for those of us who are part of the citizen task force making plans to accommodate the growth that is happening in Sheridan County.

One is that the process is bearing results. Meetings of Sheridan residents with Forward Sheridan last fall identified two areas for future work: Sheridan County's strengths — those elements of the community that help attract and keep employers and their employees here — and the weaknesses or challenges which make it hard for employers and employees to live here.

As one example, Sheridan's aesthetic qualities were identified as one of its strengths, providing an attractive setting with recreational activities for those who, after a week of work, want to escape to the outdoors.

And a challenge? Sheridan County is an expensive place to live, as housing prices and rents continue to climb out of the salary range of the average working person.

From the meetings last fall came the formation of the Economic Development Strategic Planning Task Force — and this leads to the second meaning of "the process is working."

The process involves work. Since February, the task force has been meeting every Tuesday to tackle the issues identified in those 2006 meetings. We have examined the elements identified as strengths and weaknesses.

As a group, with attendance at our meetings ranging from just over a dozen to more than 20, we have analyzed why each strength is an asset to economic development and why each challenge is a barrier to attracting and keeping businesses and workers in Sheridan County.

Then, and this is a departure from past planning efforts, we have taken the next step. We have considered solutions to the challenges and identified the entities which need to be "players" in implementing those solutions.

Work was already under way on some of these challenges before our task force came into existence. The city, county and the Sheridan Housing Action Committee, for example, were already at work addressing the community's housing needs.

But the task force did identify other entities which should be involved, from the obvious, such as Habitat for Humanity of the Eastern Big Horns, to the Big Horn Homebuilders Association.

The challenge of a lack of child care is being worked on by the Sheridan Child Care Coalition. The Sheridan Airline Task Force is working on strategies to improve air service.

Another task force will start looking at work force shortage, including cooperation among the three school districts, Sheridan College and the business community for career and technical training programs.

Other challenges have yet to be addressed — such as the effect of substance abuse on the economy. Is that an economic development issue? Yes — in terms of lost work force, lost job production, losses to theft by employees and a host of other costs to the community.

A Community Affair

Linda
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Planning for Sheridan's economic development

The Economic Development Strategic Planning Task Force has developed a list of possible solutions ranging from stricter adherence to drug-testing in the workplace to more help for substance abusers.

These are just a few examples of what the task force has been doing. We will continue meeting, and looking at challenges, through the end of June.

At the same time, we're making a plea for help from one of the

most vital group of players in Sheridan County — the volunteers who serve on various county, city, town, and school district boards and commissions such as planning and zoning commissions, the hospital board, fair board and joint powers boards.

Last week we asked those individuals — who are, like us, volunteers who do what they do out of their love and concern for their community — to a first meeting so we could hear their thoughts and advice.

We're still an open organization. Anyone who wants to participate is welcome to join us. If you are interested and haven't yet attended a meeting, call Philippe Chino, CEO of Forward Sheridan, at 673-8004 to find out when and where we're meeting.

The goal in all of this work is to have an Economic Development Plan for the whole Sheridan County by July.

In order to know what we all need to be working on for the next three to five years, we need to have an Economic Development Plan with specific strategies and timelines.

The plan will not be a "wish list," not a "vision" of what we want our county to look like in 20 years. It will be a true work plan.

What it will say is, "This is what we want our county to be — and this is what needs to be done, and these are the entities that need to be involved to get us there."

Editor's note — "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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Crawford also is acting chair for the North Central Wyoming Workforce Partnership, a member of the Career and Technical Education Task Force, graduate and past chair of Leadership Sheridan, co-chair of Sheridan County Economic Strategic Planning Task Force, member of the Sheridan Chamber Workforce and Education Committee, and a Rotarian.