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Economic development has grown in five years

By **KEN BLACK**

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Quantifying economic development can often be a challenge.

How does one really attribute a decision by a company to stay here as one that is directly attributable to the actions of local officials?

What counts as a “retained” job? Could it not be argued that every job in the area that is still here from one year to the next is a job that has been retained?

While there may be an endless debate over these and other questions, there is something that Joel Akason, president of the Marshall Economic Development Impact Committee, sees very clearly.

“We’re on the up trend, not on the other trend,” he said.

MEDIC reported \$44.8 million was invested in projects around the county from five new businesses, 10 expansions and one retention.

In 2007, though it does not count as part of the Marshalltown Community Vision and Five-Year Strategic Plan that ended in 2006, there was already another major announcement — Alliant Energy is building a new coal-fired plant.

Investments such as these only build on themselves, according to Akason, who predicts even more good news in the future.

Such announcements, the MEDIC president said, “are the best marketing tool — bar none.”

What has caused this renaissance in economic development around the community?

Part of it may be attributed to what was called for in the five year plan. Among other things, the financial growth part of the plan called for creating an entrepreneurial environment, a local venture capital network, a focused marketing effort aimed at attracting new employers, an aggressive recruitment program, the industrial spec building and an ag-tech park.

Jobs

Grade: a

Marshalltown has had a phenomenal couple of years. Employment levels at major Marshalltown companies has held steady or increased. In addition, a number of announcements in 2006 mean the trend of bringing companies into town and expanding those already here will be continuing. There have been some variations in the plan, but as local leaders have seen what works and what does not work, it is vital to make changes.

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To one degree or another, all those have been accomplished.

But MEDIC Chair Leon Lamer sees more to the story.

“It seems there is a more positive attitude in Marshalltown now than there has been,” he said.

He pointed to things like the community’s willingness to invest in new schools, a new library, new recreational facilities and other such things. Lamer believes those things are noticed by those outside the community, and believes that is why the county has received so much from the state’s Vision Iowa/Community Attractions and Tourism grant program.

Though not completely what may have been in mind when the planned was developed, the Marshalltown Gateway Project, spearheaded by Consumers Energy, serves as an ag/tech park.

Brian Heithoff, CEO of Consumers Energy, said the company is marketing lots to specialized businesses in advanced manufacturing, information services, life sciences and alternative energy companies.

“It’s about creating an environment here in Marshall County — a positive environment for economic growth,” Heithoff said.

Creating that environment can happen in a number of different ways. Marshalltown has worked hard over the past several years to go from a community that was one of the largest in the state not to have high-speed Internet providers, to a city on the leading edge of the technology, with free wireless hotspots downtown, at the community college and at the Marshall Town Center.

“It [technology] plays an important role,” said Mike Miller, former MEDIC chair and one of the drivers of the downtown wireless Internet project. “We spent a lot of time focusing on downtown wireless but that’s one small piece of a technologically-friendly environment that’s been created.”

Miller also noted the advent of a more techno-friendly community can be a good thing, especially for downtown businesses who are struggling. As an example, he pointed to Lillie Mae, which takes a great majority of its orders over the Internet.

The technology aspect can especially be important for younger professionals moving to town. Lamer said there are more of those coming to Marshalltown than many people may realize, accepting jobs with companies like Fakespace and Fisher Controls.

“We have a group of young executives that are bringing other young executives and they are bringing their own workforce. We also have a number of young attorneys in town,” Lamer said. “They all have fresh ideas and a different perspective of what the community needs.”

Despite this influx of young professionals and new jobs now is not the time to rest, Akason urged.

“Companies are looking for reasons to say no to us,” he said. “Our job is to find ways to make them say yes.”

In 2006, that job was accomplished time and time again.

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