

Collaborating among counties, across industries

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MISHICOT — Partway through the session kicking off the Lakeshore Industry Cluster Initiative, speaker Mark Madsen asked that half of the people at each table stand up. He then asked those standing to move to a different table.

Participants had started out sitting with others from their industry, and by switching tables and meeting people from other industries, they were taking a step toward transforming the regional economy, according to Madsen, chief economist with ViTAL Economy Inc., an economic development consulting firm hired to assist the Lakeshore Industry Cluster Initiative.

More than 100 people from five counties – Manitowoc, Calumet, Sheboygan, Kewaunee and Door – attended the kickoff event at Fox Hills Resort on Tuesday morning. They represented businesses in one of four industries targeted for the initiative – manufacturing, food processing/agriculture, energy and tourism – as well as businesses that support or serve those industries, such as financial and educational institutions. Economic development personnel from the participating counties also attended.

The Lakeshore Industry Cluster Initiative is an effort to bring together people from each of the four industries “to analyze and leverage assets and opportunities for additional business growth and development,” according to a news release. The Economic Development Corp. of Manitowoc County is leading the effort along with the EDC offices in the other participating counties, the New North Regional Economic Development Organization, Northeast Wisconsin Technical College and Lakeshore Technical College.

Objectives and outcomes

“One of the important things ... in an initiative like this is really creating some momentum,” Connie Loden, executive director of the Manitowoc County EDC, said in describing the objectives. “And that it’s an industry-led and industry-involved initiative.”

Other objectives are to discover and capitalize on the area’s unique assets, better understand value and supply chains, come up with solutions to address issues identified by industry leaders, develop strategies to leverage assets, and build a long-term framework that provides networks and relationships.

The bottom line is to help businesses “to be able to identify and act on new markets, customers and business opportunities,” Loden said.

“Expected outcomes” include developing a five-year, regional economic vision, establishing regional goals for each of the four industry clusters and linking them to the regional vision, mapping of the area’s assets, and mapping of value chains for each cluster to identify such things as gaps in supply chains or potential new customers, according to Loden.

In addition, the hope is that at least 10 new partnerships will be developed, revenues will increase by 5 percent to 10 percent, at least

jobs will be created or retained, and progress will be made on two “solution strategies” for issues identified by the  industries, she said.

Loden said the leadership team planned to meet that same day to set regional goals, which will be refined throughout the next couple of months.

Non-traditional definition

A traditional definition of an industry cluster focuses on companies within a particular industry and associated institutions, whereas ViTAL Economy emphasizes collaboration among the industries, according to Jim Haguewood,

another representative of ViTAL Economy who spoke at the kickoff.

“This traditional approach really doesn’t fit rural America,” Haguewood said.

ViTAL Economy only works in rural areas and only when multi-county regions are willing to work together.

“That’s how we believe successful economic development is done in the 21st century,” Haguewood said.

Through the Lakeshore Industry Cluster Initiative, “we’re going to collaborate across these regional sectors, and we’ve got the organizational structure ... put in place now,” he said. “We’re going to get those cluster teams up and running, so the organization is ... put in place for that to happen. Now it’s our job, and your job, to help facilitate and achieve that ... approach.”

It may seem like common sense, he said, “but there’s not a lot of regions in this country that are really doing this effectively, and we think that this ... region can do that.”

The process also focuses on setting “SMART” goals – those that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based – rather than “aspirational” goals that come with no time frames and no measuring of success.

Madsen led the group through looking at population trends, job growth and wage information for each of the participating counties, and he asked participants to identify trends they’ve seen in their industries. They mentioned outsourcing, difficulty for small businesses to obtain financing, restaurants buying local ingredients, more people buying online, the use of social media to advertise, and rising energy costs.

Participant comments

Kristin Kracaw, branch manager for ABR Employment Services in Manitowoc, said she thinks the Industry Cluster Initiative will be a “positive contribution to the economy.”

Kracaw said she thinks the initiative could benefit her company and that, at the same time, her involvement could benefit the initiative.

“I’m really just wanting to learn more about what’s all involved and how I can contribute to the economic situation in our local economy,” she said.

“I’m here today to see how our initiative being a part of this industry cluster could benefit from participation,” said Laurie Schetter, representing a new Manitowoc County initiative called the Wisconsin Agricultural Education Center.

Schetter said she thinks the potential is strong “for mutual benefit” from participation.

Mark Longmier, director of environmental health and safety for the Manitowoc Company, is new to the area.

“I’m looking to kind of get to know industry leaders from this area and the counties around us and better understand some of the manufacturing facilities around here,” Longmier said.

In addition, he thinks his background may allow him to contribute by offering suggestions regarding sustainability issues, such as a company paying to dispose of a particular waste product that actually is needed by another company.

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