

Staking out a claim on the future

By **TODD WOLFRUM**

Van Wert County Commissioner

Someone asked me recently, “What is economic development anyway?” Well, it involves pretty much everything from a grocery store to a factory to anything that can provide people a service, a product, or a reason to spend or receive money. Stan Owens and I both ran for a commissioner spot last year promising to do our best to improve the counties’ economic situation. Thad Lichtensteiger did the same two years before that. With high unemployment and our population declining by 1,000 people in each of the last two decades, many of them promising young people, voters were interested in what could change. So were we.

From the start of the year, a belief developed in our office that we should be reaching out to successful businesses in neighboring counties, not to steal business from those counties, but for possible expansions. Four percent unemployment is considered full employment – what’s left at that level are mostly the unemployable. Mercer County hovers around that mark, as do the western halves of Auglaize and Putnam counties. Companies there need workers, our workers need them.

A few of the companies that came here or expanded from neighboring counties: Braun, Cooper’s, Unverferth, Miller Precision, Wannemacher. Where would we be without these jobs? Yet we were told from the outset by those in control of our local development that it’s all regional planning now and one can’t go into neighboring counties to court companies. We disagreed then and disagree now.

Another concern particular to the Commissioners’ Office has been our small towns. Currently, the economic director’s office is located in the Municipal Building. Although the City of Van Wert has much to offer, we believe there is opportunity in our villages as well. Currently, the Mayor of Van Wert is the only elected official allowed meaningful involvement in the county’s economic development efforts. Guess what that means for Ohio City, Convoy, Middle Point, Willshire, Wren, Elgin, Venedocia, and our townships?

After being informed that these concerns would not receive attention, we hired a person to engage the successful businesses in neighboring counties and to help our villages. We since have been criticized by the status quo for duplicating efforts. I think the people of Van Wert County appreciate every available resource being spent to find possible jobs and business and they don’t care who finds them.

A more general concern is that Ohio State University Extension controls the position of economic development director in the county. Many people are aware that Ohio State fired the prior director last year without consulting any local



entities. Since then, many elected officials have raised concerns about an outside party being able to control such a critical position and have called for more local control. Also, if the director is not under the supervision of local elected officials, it's easy for the position to become controlled by unaccountable parties, some with economic interests in promoting one county location over others.

We've stepped on some toes in the process of navigating the alphabet soup of organizations claiming a stake in economic development, inadvertently in most instances. We've tried to keep any disagreements with other agencies under wraps because open conflict hurts prospects. But we will keep our promise to change what needs changed, because we were elected, not appointed, to do so.