

Common Challenges – Unique Solutions: The City Of Kirksville Takes Action

by Scott Veatch

Challenges.

Every community faces them and Kirksville is no exception. For years the community's growth and economic development have been hindered by inaccessibility; the nearest four-lane highway is 30 miles south in Macon. More recently Standard Register, a manufacturer of business forms and supplies, closed its Kirksville factory, a decision that cost the community 260 jobs; and north-east Missouri's reputation for being a hotbed of illegal methamphetamine production continued to grow. "These are all serious challenges," said City Manager Mari Macomber, "but we believed that by pooling our strengths as a community we could address each of these issues and could continue to maintain Kirksville's reputation as an excellent place to do business, raise a family and get an education."

Kirksville, population 17,000, has numerous strengths. It is the home of Truman State University – designated as Missouri's Public Liberal Arts and Sciences University and the Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine – part of the A.T. Still University of Health Sciences System. Kirksville is the birthplace of osteopathy. Local residents take pride that theirs is one of the few communities with a population less than 20,000 where students can be educated from kindergarten through medical school

and never leave home. Kirksville also is blessed with a civilian labor force of more than 13,000 workers drawn from a seven county area of northeast Missouri. While the unemployment rate in Adair County has remained below 4 percent for more than a decade, a new employer will be able to attract em-

most spectacular natural beauty in the Midwest.

Highway Issues

Kirksville is however, facing some significant challenges. Its primary highway access is U.S. 63, a four-lane stretch from Macon to south of Jefferson City, but only two lanes wide from north of Macon through Kirksville into Iowa. For years, Kirksville residents have discussed seeing their community served by a four-lane highway and those discussions usually included the phrase "not in my lifetime." "There's no question that Kirksville has been hurt economically by not having direct access to a four-lane highway," said Macomber, who served as the city director of economic and community development prior to becoming city manager. "We have had numerous contacts with businesses and industries that have expressed interest in relocating here. They liked our community, our location, our workforce and our quality of life, but as soon as they learned that we're 30 miles from a four-lane highway they dropped us from consideration."

In 2001, a group of local citizens decided to take action and with the approval of the Missouri State Legislature, formed the Highway 63 Transportation Corporation, a group that included representatives of Adair, Macon and Schuyler Counties, and the



More than 600 persons participated in the Highway 63 expansion groundbreaking ceremony last May at the Kirksville Regional Airport. Among the dignitaries participating were (left to right): Congressman Kenny Hulshof, Governor Bob Holden, U.S. Senator Jim Talent, Mike Mills (Deputy State Director for U.S. Senator Kit Bond), MoDOT Director Henry Hungerbeeler, Kirksville Mayor Bill Murray.

ployees from an additional pool of about 4,500 underemployed workers, almost 40 percent of whom have some college experience and more than 25 percent of whom have earned a college degree. (From "Verification of the Adair County Area Workforce," The Pathfinders, Dallas, TX, August, 2000.) Kirksville also boasts a low crime rate and offers abundant outdoor recreational opportunities in some of the

cities of Kirksville, LaPlata, Macon and Atlanta. This group headed the drive to expand U.S. 63 to four lanes on a 23 mile stretch between Millard, located about five miles south of Kirksville at the edge of the proposed 63 bypass and the north end of the Macon bypass at Macon County Route DD. In April 2002, Kirksville voters approved, by a margin of 78 percent to 22 percent, a half-cent sales tax to fund the local share (about 30 percent) of the project. This local match was negotiated by the Missouri Highway and Transportation Commission and the Highway 63 Transportation Corporation with the sales tax expected to generate \$11 million over ten years. The Missouri Department of Transportation committed to pay the balance.

Last May, more than 600 persons participated in the groundbreaking ceremony including Governor Bob Holden, U.S. Senator Jim Talent, Congressman Kenny Hulshof and State Representative Bob Behnen. The project is currently ahead of schedule. The bridge at LaPlata is now finished

and the entire project is expected to be completed by the fall of 2005. Now that a four-lane highway has a completion date, Kirksville residents no longer use the phrase "not in my lifetime" when speaking about it.

Economic Development

The related challenge now is to use this four-lane highway to attract new businesses and industries to Kirksville particularly following the Standard Register announcement. "There's no question that this was an economic blow to the community," said Mayor Bill Murray. "The Standard Register payroll pumped about \$11 million into our local economy annually."

Kirksville approached the challenge of attracting new industries from two directions. First, the City purchased the Standard Register building for \$1.5 million using funds that had been set-aside for capital improvement projects. "We believe this was an important first step to bringing another industry to Kirksville," said Mayor Murray. "The city council believed it

was extremely important to take a proactive approach to economic development and creating new jobs, and this purchase was a way to begin the process. By owning the building, the City has a ready-made home for a new industry." The main Standard Register structure was opened in 1969. An addition was built in 1981 so the facility now totals 190,000-square-feet. The building will be marketed nationwide.

Second, the City joined forces with Kirksville Regional Economic Development, Inc., (K-REDI), a group that includes community leaders from the fields of business, education, finance, healthcare, and others, to help develop new businesses for Kirksville and to strengthen and expand existing businesses. In September, K-REDI hired a director of job creation whose duties will include marketing the Standard Register building. Phil Tate began his new duties in that capacity last October. Tate, a former state representative from Gallatin, was most recently the director of the Business Expansion and Attraction Group with the Missouri

Department of Economic Development. "We believe Phil will be very valuable to our community as we search to attract new businesses and industries to Kirksville," said Mayor Murray. "The City is pleased to be a partner in the creation of this new position and is pleased that so many parts of our community have an active interest in helping him succeed." Tate spends more than half of his time on the road contacting prospects and already has produced several leads.

Law Enforcement

Another new member of the Kirksville community is Police Chief Jim Hughes who took over the top law enforcement position in the community last March. Hughes came to Kirksville following 25 years of service with the Boulder, Colorado, Police Department, where he rose to the rank of deputy chief. One of his first goals in Kirksville was to attack the manufacture and use of methamphetamines, a problem that has grown in northeast Missouri for several years. "Believe it

or not," said Hughes, "Kirksville and Adair County are in the middle of the highest meth producing area in the United States. I felt that if we were going to be famous for something it shouldn't be for meth use."

Within a few months on the job, Chief Hughes organized the Adair County Methamphetamine Coalition to tackle the problem. Its members include the Kirksville Police Department, the Adair County Sheriff's Department, the Missouri Highway Patrol, the Truman State University

Department of Public Safety, and numerous community leaders from education, healthcare, service organizations and the local media. This group has mounted a major media campaign featuring a cockroach logo and a "Stop the Infestation" slogan. Numerous feature stories have appeared on local radio and television stations and in the local newspaper. These news outlets also have provided generous public service announcements.

Classes were organized to educate local merchants about the products required to produce meth and the types of customer purchases that should be considered suspicious. A telephone meth hotline and a meth e-mail address were established and publicized to encourage public participation. These have been utilized to gather numerous tips, some anonymous, that have already led to several investigations and arrests.

"Community cooperation has been such a vital part of our success in addressing these challenges," said City Manager Macomber. "We believe in our citizens. They have worked tirelessly to help solve Kirksville's transportation and economic development issues and to make our community safer. We have every reason to believe we will continue to benefit from their efforts." □

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