Economic consultant meets with Dawson Co. stakeholders to successfully pave the way.

Dawson County is sitting pretty when it comes to economic opportunity.

Gothenburg, Cozad and Lexington are nestled along two major transportation corridors—Interstate 80 and Union Pacific Railroad—and the county abounds with corn and beef. There's also some research and manufacturing.

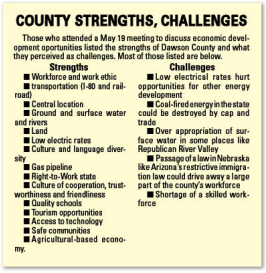
At least that's the picture that emerged last week at Chipper Hall in Cozad when about 40 people gathered on May 19 to talk about the strengths and challenges of economic development in the county.

They learned from John Rhodes, senior principal in MS&B economic development consultants, that those strengths have helped lure a Monsanto research facility, an ethanol plant and two major manufacturers—Baldwin Filters and Nebraska Plastics Inc.—into the county.

Low unemployment rates in the western Midwest—Nebraska's was 5% in April—bodes well for economic opportunity, Rhodes said.

At 5%, Nebraska has the third-lowest rate in the nation, trailing North Dakota at 3.8 % and South Dakota, 4.7%.

But still there are challenges.



COUNTY STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES

Those who attended a May 19 meeting to discuss economic development opportunities listed the strengths of Dawson County and what they perceived as challenges. Most of those listed are below.

Strengths

- Workforce and work ethic
- transportation (I-80 and railroad)
- Central location
- Ground and surface water and rivers
- Land
- Low electric rates
- Culture and language diversity
- Gas pipeline
- Right-to-Work state
- Culture of cooperation, trustworthiness and friendliness
- Quality schools
- Tourism opportunities
- Access to technology
- Safe communities
- Agricultural-based economy.

Challenges

- Low electrical rates hurt opportunities for other energy development
- Coal-fired energy in the state could be destroyed by cap and trade
- Over appropriation of surface water in some places like Republican River Valley
- Passage of a law in Nebraska like Arizona's restrictive immigration law could drive away a large part of the county's workforce
- Shortage of a skilled workforce

Rhodes pointed out that many communities are trying to attract new business and industry.

And Tenneco, one of Dawson County's largest employers, will close by the end of the year.

Although county residents could remain undecided about what to do or be shocked into action, he said he senses that they want quick, proactive repositioning.

In targeting industry opportunities, Rhodes said it's important to focus on industries with high market potential, insure that area resources meet the needs of specific industries and that any industry aligns with the desires of local stakeholders.

"You might not want at steel mill here," he said.

Leveraging current industry and agricultural with the targeted industry is also important, he added.

The development consultant also pointed out trends to consider such as the fact that people are living longer.

“A lot of older people are living here and wanting to stay,” he said, noting that management of finances, health care and facilities could be opportunities.

The county is also a repository of energy opportunities with competitive utility rates and the possibility of developing biofuels.

Increased use of smart materials such as polymers and metals create opportunities for product development, he said.

Smart materials are described as materials that can be significantly changed in a controlled fashion by external stimuli.

Rhodes said the county can take advantage of several things already here such as:

the Monsanto Water Utilization and Learning Center which is on the leading edge of technology in seed and food.

“Just because you’re not next to Lincoln doesn’t mean you can’t be involved in research,” he said.

Ample wind which may mean opportunities for the manufacture of wind energy products or components.

location in the “sweet spot” of the nation for rail and truck transportation. The rectangular spot is roughly in the middle section of the United States with a western border in the middle of Colorado to the East Coast.

The north-south border is above the center of Nebraska to the top fourth of Oklahoma.

Rhodes is working with economic development officials to match prospective companies with what stakeholders want in the county.

Jen Wolf, director of Dawson Area Development which sponsored the meeting, said he was hired with a Workforce Investment Board grant.

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