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Will County CED President lays out five-year plan

The main goal is to become Midwest leader in new job creation

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JOLIET – A video viewed Thursday morning in the Nevada Room in Harrah's Joliet Casino showed a secret spy entering a Will County office and sneaking out a top secret file, all while the "Mission: Impossible" theme song played.

The "spy," Will County Center of Economic Development President John Greuling, made his way into Harrah's, and entered the room full of current and prospective CED investors after the video ended.

He presented his mission to improve Will County's economic growth through a five-year plan called "CED Vision 2020: Quality Jobs, Quality Future."

"Welcome to Mission Possible: Strike Force," Greuling said.

Greuling laid out the CED's goals and mission for the next five years to about 250 leaders of businesses, organizations and governments in Will County during the CED Economic Eye Opener event Thursday morning.

The goal is to turn Will County into the Midwest leader of new job creation for the next five years. The presentation was a call for investors to commit to a mission of bringing economic prosperity to the county.

Mission Possible

Greuling said the goal includes improving the quality of life for all Will County residents by recruiting new companies that offer high-quality jobs to build a solid tax base, while assisting existing businesses to retain and add jobs.

Under the five-year plan, the CED is going to talk with at least 500 existing businesses through retention calls. It plans to help at least 250 of those businesses grow by assisting them in anything from fixing potholes to securing federal grants.

The CED also aims to assist 2,000 new businesses, recruiting at least 300 and creating 30,000 new jobs in the process.

The campaign's revenue goal for 2020 is \$6.5 million for the next five years, which Greuling said is an additional \$100,000 to \$150,000 average per year than the CED is currently operating with.

The CED also is re-aligning some of its programs to fit its new focus points.

At the end of the presentation, Greuling's "agents" passed out mission cards to each attendee that contained information, a short survey and pledge to accept the mission. As a way to show the CED's commitment, each mission card came with \$5, and five came with a \$100.

When asked how much that cost, Greuling said it was "top secret," and a sign that the CED is serious about its goals.

"It's a big order, a big mission. But we're going to need all of your help," he said.

County vs. state

Before he came in as the "economy spy," Greuling presented data that shows Will County's positive economic growth.

"I think it's time for us as a county, both with the public and private sector leadership, to start beating our chest a little bit to the rest of the metro area," Greuling said.

Will County experienced a 2 percent population growth since 2013 and an unemployment rate drop to 6.1 percent. It is sixth in the state for household income at \$74,669 and had accelerating job growth of 9,569 jobs between March of 2014 and 2015.

Will County also experienced the largest growth, 19.9 percent, in retail sales over the past seven years. And the housing market is picking up as well.

However, Greuling lamented the political bickering between Gov. Bruce Rauner and Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan.

He recited the list of budget and pension problems facing the state, and the setbacks to projects like the Illiana Expressway, and regional planners' focus on the fully developed counties near Chicago over Will County.

Will County Executive Larry Walsh Sr. said the presentation's theme lightened the mood.

"It has brought a lot of municipalities together," he said. "We've all got somewhat the same problems and we can work together under this plan."

As a business owner, Kat Cutler of Cutler Eye Care and C&C Vision Gallery, said she'd like to see the CED succeed in its goals because it means more patients through the door.

"I think it's important to shoot for the moon," she said.

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