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CEDA wraps up strategic overview

► New job creation
agency seeking
public feedback.

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The Cayuga Economic Development Agency released its countywide strategic plan Saturday, stressing infrastructure development, government streamlining and industry-specific initiatives as ways to attract and retain business.

The plan, developed with a pair of outside consulting agencies, lays out about 50 "action steps" and calls on every major stakeholder to help make them happen, with CEDA playing a central role.

ON THE WEB

To read the full report, go to cayugaeda.org.

"I think this gives us a good three-year punch list," CEDA Executive Director Terry Masterson said Thursday. "It can be a consensus builder on what we need to do and how to do it."

Masterson will present the plan over the coming months at a series of forums around the county.

There are five main components to the report, all under the overarching theme of "One Cayuga."

1. Strengthen CEDA

CEDA was established in June 2010 with Masterson as executive director. It's funded by Cayuga County and the county's industrial development agency.

Its role is to act as a first stop for businesses looking to relocate or expand in the county.

In its short existence, CEDA has focused on identifying and cataloging available industrial properties and handling inquiries from interested investors.

The problem is that it entered an already-crowded field of local economic development agencies, each with its own staff, budget and agenda.

The report recommends a consolidation of those activities, and Masterson has already approached the city and county about finding a way to accomplish that.

"Everybody's got to decide what they want CEDA to be," he said. "There are some core expectations people have, but unless there's some sharing of the road, CEDA won't meet them."

CEDA commissioned the report for \$65,000, including a \$15,000 private investment.

2. Improve communication among businesses and within industries

This step entails two complementary approaches, Masterson said.

On one hand, CEDA aims to reach out to individual businesses to make them aware of incentives and benefits available. It's already purchased a software program to help track those visits.

At the same time, the report recommends industry-specific roundtable discussions that will benefit larger groups of business people.

Some industries already meet semi-regularly through the Chamber of Commerce, but Masterson said he hopes to expand that effort into the fields of agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and education.

The goal of both efforts will be to improve upon the retention and expansion rates of existing businesses, which Masterson said constitutes more than 70 percent of development efforts.

Report examines agency consolidation

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3. Upgrade infrastructure

The report points out glaring shortcomings in several areas of local infrastructure: high property taxes, confusing water and sewer districts, expensive energy, a lack of broadband Internet in rural areas and a dearth of shovel-ready industrial sites.

Efforts to remedy several of those problems are now under way. CEDA is searching for available tracts of land in the county that can be used for industrial development, and the county is leading the effort to consolidate municipalities' water and sewer.

It is checking on the status of shuttered buildings like the GE and Bombardier plants to see whether they can be rehabilitated.

"If we can't salvage these sites, it makes it even more imperative to identify new ones, because we do have companies here in Cayuga that want to expand and grow," Masterson said.

CEDA also hopes to work with towns to streamline their permitting processes so that investors can break ground sooner and with fewer hassles.

EXCERPT FROM THE STRATEGIC PLAN:

In the face of severe economic hardships and challenges, we should all work toward a "One Cayuga" in our philosophy and approaches to common challenges. We should objectively analyze the financial and operational benefits of unified operations in any operational category.

Action Steps

1. Cayuga County should secure professional analysts to measure the costs and benefits of merging and consolidating entities that deliver identical services.
2. The analysis process should be a good time for a countywide discussion of ways to unify services and operations across all disciplines.
3. One action step to take would be for Cayuga County to convene an Infrastructure Forum to analyze and recommend action steps to address infrastructure delivery gaps, redundancies and price point variances. These conditions are unfortunate realities presented to potential Cayuga County investors. On the positive side, unified operations can help us realize the many unique energy generating innovations and assets that Cayuga County possesses.

Last, planning officials are searching for cheaper forms of energy.

The best known of these efforts is the county's biogas pipeline proposal, but Masterson said that other ideas, including better harnessing of the Owasco River for hydropower, have been considered.

"Apart from the biogas pipeline, the county is still sitting on a lot of interesting assets (for energy production)," he said.

4. Concentrate on specific industries

The report lists agriculture, tourism and manufacturing as the three key industries locally and gives specific ways to strengthen each of them.

For agriculture, it recommends levying a new tax on

Auburn, Fair Haven, Weedport, Sennett, Aurora, Port Byron and Montezuma as communities particularly interested in development, but Masterson said he will work to eventually encompass every town and village that wishes to work with CEDA.

It lists specific needs in each community: dredging Little Sodus Bay in Fair Haven, adding community programs at Wells College in Aurora, developing walking and bicycling trails to connect the village of Port Byron with the Erie Canal.

CEDA also pledges to improve communication with local developers to help link them with potential sites, according to the report.

6. Work toward "One Cayuga"

This overarching recommendation is at once the most fundamental and the most controversial.

Local economic development experts agree with the report's conclusion that "the appearance of multiple entities addressing the same functions creates operational inefficiencies, higher costs and compels investors in Cayuga County to deal with redundancies."

The more difficult question is which entities should be eliminated.

The consultants who worked on the study, John Rhodes and Ellen Pemrick, told the county Legislature this summer that the county should consider merging its seven school districts into one big district with shared administration — a far-reaching suggestion that Masterson, in the report, did not fully endorse.

The report recommends hiring analysts and convening an "infrastructure forum" to identify opportunities for consolidation.

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