

Butler Eagle

Economic unity is goal

BC3 funds county study

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By Joe Genco



ZELIENOPLE — Butler County already has a foundation for economic success: population growth and low property taxes.

If the county's economic groups are more unified, its economic development could go from good to great, said Nick Neupauer, president of **Butler County Community College**, who made a presentation Monday night to borough council.

“What I found out doing my research is — and this is not meant as a criticism of anybody — but the right arm doesn't really know what the left arm is doing in a lot of cases in Butler County,” Neupauer said.

To push for this economic unity, BC3 is working on the Butler County Unified Plan, a study and planning process for economic development.

The plan will aim to unify a number of interest groups and agencies under a common vision. The study by Fourth Economy, a Pittsburgh-based consultant, will begin in January and take nine months to complete, Neupauer said.

According to its website, Fourth Economy's consulting process involves doing interviews and surveys with business and community representatives, analyzing data to identify trends and making recommendations that include connecting partners and focus on solutions.

The study will cost \$84,250 and is being paid for by BC3. A portion of the cost is being covered by an anonymous \$30,000 donation that BC3 received through its Education Foundation.

Some aspects of the plan include identifying the county's advantages and barriers to growth, investing in infrastructure, addressing business retention and creating an organizational structure for implementation and communication.

One goal is to make the county hospitable to business growth, said Ken Raybuck, executive director of the Butler County Community Development Corporation, on Tuesday.

“We want to improve our ability to work together to promote the county and make it attractive to companies considering Butler County as a place to rebuild or as a place to move their operations,” Raybuck said.

The CDC's economic development committee has been doing some research in advance of the study, by visiting other areas that use a unified plan for economic development.

The committee visited Indiana County and Blair County, which operate different organizations for unified economic development. Blair County has a nonprofit organization that links groups, while Indiana operates through its county government, he said. One of the aims of the study is to figure out what organizational structure would work best in Butler County, he said.

The groups which will participate in the unified plan include BC3, Slippery Rock University, school districts, county commissioners, CDC, county planning commission, county redevelopment authority, representatives of agriculture, businesses, the Butler County Tourism and Convention Bureau, Butler County Council of Governments, Butler County Association of Township Officials, Butler Health System and chambers of commerce.

Raybuck and Neupauer both said they had talked to representatives of many of the groups and the idea for the study was met with enthusiasm. People want to work together to make the county better, Neupauer said.

"There is not a turf protection here. People want to go forward and take the county from good to great," he said.

One opportunity for development is the potential for businesses associated with natural gas drilling, Neupauer said.

"There are so many upstream and downstream jobs that are basically giving people the opportunity to have space that is off the well site and that ultimately tie into that energy sector," he said.

He said he would like the college to look into a business incubator program to help new businesses mature, which could include manufacturing or other businesses based on the county's natural gas production.

The county also has opportunities that stem from BC3 and SRU, where students can earn an affordable education.

BC3 is working on a new program where it would partner with universities to offer specific four-year degree programs at BC3's main campus, he said.

Borough council member Greg Semel said he invited Neupauer to speak to Zelienople's council after hearing him talk about the unified plan at a recent Butler Council of Governments meeting. Semel also invited officials from Harmony to hear him speak.

Zelienople would be involved in the communication network outlined in the plan through its participation in the council of governments, Semel said.