



Dr. Nicholas Neupauer Guest Column From The Butler Eagle

2.4.2015

Butler County evolving by design

Engrained in our history, it could be argued that Western Pennsylvanians take pride in doing things “the way they have always been done.”

I fondly recall a conversation with my grandmother in the late 1980s. When I asked what she thought of plans to raze some older homes to make room for new businesses in our hometown of Ellwood City, she protested.

“That’s where Dr. Helling’s office used to be,” she said. “Don’t you know, that is where your mother was born?”

Even as the steel industry declined, people still held on to the past. Unfortunately, Western Pennsylvania hit rock bottom during the early to mid-1980s.

The steel industry, with massive layoffs, would forever change. One in four workers lost their jobs. Think about that: 25 percent unemployment. The figure hit close to home and included my father, uncles and fathers of many friends who were steelworkers.

Twenty five years later, some Western Pennsylvanian communities have never recovered. Fortunately, that is not the case for Butler County.

Our county prospers with low unemployment (4.4 percent as of November), diverse industries, population growth and numerous job opportunities in the energy field. All seems well, right? Recognizing this momentum and all of the good happening around us, the Community Development Corporation of Butler County is seizing the opportunity to plan for the future. Endorsed by the entire

CDC board, a newly created economic development committee is leading an effort to create a unified economic development master plan for the county.

From the onset, key tenets of the plan are collaboration and realizing the potential to — as author Jim Collins puts it — “go from good to great.”

If the make-up of the committee has anything to do with it, we are off to a strong start. Chaired by Dan Santoro of Herbert, Rowland, Grubic, Inc., the economic development committee consists of:

Ken Raybuck, executive director of the CDC;
Jerry Andree, board president of the CDC and Cranberry Township manager and secretary;
Dr. Dale Lumley, superintendent, Butler Area School District;
Dr. Cheryl Norton, president, Slippery Rock University;
Nadine Tripodi, president, Butler Technologies Inc.;
Jack Cohen, president, Butler County Tourism and Convention Bureau;
Stan Kosciuszko, president, Butler County Chamber of Commerce;
Aubrey Hulings, board chair, Butler County Chamber of Commerce, co-chair of the Butler County Young Professionals and Farmers National Bank; and
myself, President, Butler County Community College.

Partnering with Fourth Economy Consulting, a national economic development firm specializing in market analytics, strategic planning and community assessments, the committee had a kickoff meeting on Jan. 22 at Butler County Community College.

Flanked by some of Butler County’s finest, we agreed the conversation was rich. We discussed successful economic development models in places like Loraine, Ohio; Montgomery County, Md.; and the entire state of Rhode Island.

The discussion touched on basic economic development strategies of business retention and expansion and attraction of new industry.

We spoke of the uniqueness of our county including our geographic diversity; strong health care systems; innovative leaders in private industry; and tremendous educational institutions. We cited many examples of successful collaboration, including various partnerships with the commonwealth, local government, industry, private businesses, school districts, Slippery Rock University and BC3.

The topic that drew the longest conversation with the greatest potential was a surprise to most. We marveled at the possibilities of understanding the perspectives of the Millennial Generation. Trust me, anyone at SRU or BC3 can tell you what an incredible opportunity that can be.

It’s only one meeting, but the future of our wonderful county looks bright. And a unified economic development plan would make that future appear a little brighter.

Nicholas C. Neupauer is president of Butler County Community College. A current board member of the Community Development Corporation of Butler County, he was board chair of the Butler County Chamber of Commerce in 2011.