

Coaches wooed to aid community

Instead of sounding the gong and reciting the platitudes and positive aspects of just one address, as was the case when he was president of the Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce from 1986 to 1990, Jim Dittoe is spreading his optimism to any city, any town, any village that is willing to listen to his hope for the future.

No, that's not entirely right, either.

As president of his Indianapolis-based consulting firm Winning Communities, Dittoe is ready to offer a blueprint – an outline – of how to build community success to any community that is willing to help itself.

But now even Dittoe, who in 1994 founded the company to develop goals and action plans for cities and towns, is looking for help. And he's looking in football fields and locker rooms and schools.



Dittoe

"Coaches are the most optimistic people I know," Dittoe said.

It was last July when he had his friend Bill Lynch, Indiana University's head football coach, open the door to the Indiana Football Coaches Association.

Lynch and Dittoe go way back; back to when Dittoe's son, Chris – the former Bishop Dwenger standout – played at Indiana and Lynch was the quarterbacks coach.

With Lynch's assistance, Dittoe talked with leaders of the coaches association who, in turn, passed the message of Winning Communities down to the state's coaches.

"A coach, just as a mayor or a Chamber of Commerce executive or a banker, can convene people and get folks around a table in the community ...," Dittoe said.

Just a few weeks ago Dittoe's firm's marketing arm announced its "Coaches for a Winning Community" program.

"I'm asking them to provide leadership at the local level," he said.

But here's the rub, of which Dittoe is aware: Not everyone can be on the same page. Even the most popular coach has his or her detractors.

There is bureaucratic red tape to wade through; city versus county; territorial egos with heels ready to dig in until they bleed.

"When people at the local level say they've tried that before or we can't get along or whatever it is, I have to say, 'OK, that's the past. We, as a community, need to come together because the competition is not

locally. The competition is in China. The competition is in Brazil if you're a farming community. The competition is emerging in Eastern Europe, where people are more hungry.

"We've gotten very content in the United States, and it's showing, I'm afraid, but we have to renew the spirit of entrepreneurship at the local level and come together as a team. And I think coaches can provide that."

If coaches do become involved – and Dittoe stressed that it doesn't have to be a football coach; it could be any coach at any level – the long-term effect could be the recruitment of the youth community.

"That is extremely important," Dittoe said. "I would love to get more and more young people involved. They can do surveys, they can interview people, they can come up with ideas on their own and they can do research. I would challenge them to do that."

And so the man who offers to help those to help themselves is seeking help.

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