

Winning Communities to recognize Kokomo

Alliance president confident community can compete for businesses.

By K.O. Jackson
Tribune business writer

With 20 percent unemployment, he acknowledges Kokomo has the state's highest unemployment rate.

But listening to Jeb Conrad speak about businesses considering locating in the City of Firsts and other unseen, ongoing changes within the city, the president of the Greater Kokomo Economic Development Alliance is confident brighter economic days await.

The city will celebrate those brighter days and ongoing plans at 5 p.m. today at The Quarry, 2130 W. Sycamore St., as the Alliance is recognized as a "Certified Winning Community" by the Indiana Association of Indiana Counties.

The guest speaker will be Bill Lynch, Indiana University's head football coach.

Conrad said community leaders and citizens worked and planned for more than a year to determine an attainable future for Kokomo.

Along with the Alliance, the group was led by The Community Foundation of Howard County.

The group focused on seven goal areas: Image and positive attitude, excellent and efficient health care, faith-based communities, world-class schools and lifelong learning, a thriving non-profit sector, sound proactive government and infrastructure, and a robust, growing 21st century economic climate.

Through public input, the groups examined and discussed issues to create the final vision, goal areas of opportunity, and measurable objectives for Kokomo.

"We have created the goals and objectives and now we have put into place an action plan to accomplish them," said Ron Harper, president of the community foundation.

Being a "Certified Winning Community" means success has been achieved in the follow-up implementation of the ideas coming out of the plan, said Conrad.

Furthermore, additional implementation will continue as the plan "unfolds in the various seven goal areas," Conrad said.

"As our community continues to grow and change, we felt a strong need to develop a consensus about the future," said Conrad, adding outside the Kokomo/Howard County Chamber, all other community organizations will use the Alliance's brand as recognition.

"We all need to connect for future growth in the community and for economic development. We just received the 10th tenant in the Inventrek building. It is now at 70 percent capacity. We have other business looking at Kokomo that we never had before.

"We are finally getting a chance to play where historically we had been pigeonholed on what we could do and put into a box. We've had to take the time to convince ourselves to think outside of the box. Now, we are getting a shot at new businesses, and that's so exciting."

Conrad has been a busy traveler — nationally and internationally — and spokesman — interviewed by CNN's Anderson Cooper — highlighting why a company should consider locating in Kokomo.

Although it's too early in many of the conversations to mention the companies' names, Conrad said being

able to compete with other cities for jobs shows "this is a good place to do business. We are not standing still.

"In the last six months, we have been one city competing with Indianapolis, Ohio, and other [areas] for businesses. We are getting a shot. We have a work force that is well trained – the best trained in the world – and we are getting a shot at those jobs. It's got me fired up. We are doing the right things and we are getting to the right people."

James T. Dittoe, Winning Communities' president and community coach, shares in Conrad's vision.

And Dittoe's vision isn't shaded by the money he's paid to organize Kokomo's participation with his organization. Dittoe was once a Kokomo resident.

"I once worked for the [Kokomo] Chamber. There is still a piece of me here. We have friends that live here. This is a city of good, hard-working people and we will rebound," said Dittoe, adding the seven groups now have a timetable, and a list of costs and resources needed to accomplish their goals. Once achieved, a report will be provided to the community.

"There are economic development plans, and people are taking steps to achieving them. Two years ago, before the automotive crisis, people said 'enough is enough.' They are tired of being beat up in the media every day. Every community goes through its up and downs, but the people here have passion and they want to make a difference.

"The determination of the community's leaders makes a huge difference in the challenges facing Kokomo. This community will be a showcase for a can-do attitude and follow-up. People don't always agree, but in the long run they support one another and this community. There is so much potential here."

• K.O. Jackson is the Tribune's business writer. He can be reached at (765) 854-6739 or via e-mail kirven.jackson@kokomotribune.com

