

Historical Assessment of Past Development Efforts

Economic History

In years past, the North Central District has experienced a relatively stable economy supported by broad, diverse industry and business distributed evenly across the five-county district. Geographic characteristics and location are favorable for economic development, and have assisted in shielding the district from economic fluctuations in the past. After the founding of the counties in the first half of the 19th century, the counties have experienced a relatively slow but steady progress in industry, commerce, employment, and population base.

Rich, fertile soils and prevailing waterway locations attracted settlers to the district from the north and east in the 1820s and 1830s. Agriculture and mining soon proved to be the most successful industries within the district and remained that way for nearly 100 years. Separate counties began to sprout out of larger, original counties and began to give the North Central District a more distinguished location. Sangamon County, which included most of northern Illinois, began to split up into the smaller counties now found in the district. Putnam County was the first to form in 1825, then LaSalle County in 1831. After being a part of Putnam County for twelve years, Bureau County was established in 1837. Marshall and Stark Counties followed in 1839. District economy and industry grew steadily along with population for the next 100 years.

Population growth began to slow down in the 1950s and 1960s for most counties in the district. This decrease produced a population loss for each county by the 1970 Census and has continued slowly since. This decrease in population is believed to be a large factor in the economic distress of the North Central District. The coal mining industry also began to slow down to a stop in the 1940s to 1950s. Very few new industries were established during this period, thus reflecting the modest population growth.

Counties and communities began to realize that further economic diversification to the areas was necessary. Many communities began to work to induce commerce and industry back to the area in their own separate ways. Slowly, this effort began to pay off, and the completion of Interstates 39 and 80 within the area brought new hope to the district as industries and commerce began to relocate into the North Central District once again. Many improvements in the district economy were attributed to the existing and improved transportation system within the district including highways, rails, rivers, and the completion of the Illinois-Michigan Canal.

The district began to notice another decrease in industry and commerce into the 1960s and 1970s as population continued to decrease. Several counties tried implementing new programs for improving their economies. This effort led to the adoption of Overall Economic Development Programs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. All of the counties in the North Central District were designated as redevelopment areas at one time. Many of the counties have not updated their respective CEDS to maintain this designation, which leads to the formation of this district and the completion of this plan.

Past Development Efforts

Several steps have been taken in producing district or area-wide organizations for bringing economic development to the North Central District. One of the first steps was the creation of the North Central Illinois Council of Governments in 1979. This regional council, located in

Princeton in Bureau County, provides planning and grant administration services to the primary counties of Bureau, LaSalle, Marshall, Putnam, Stark, and Grundy, along with member communities within those counties.

The Illinois Valley Area Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development in LaSalle has been assisting district counties and communities since 1911. The Illinois River Area Chamber of Commerce combines the efforts of Seneca and Marseilles in LaSalle County and has been in Operation since 1969. Many communities have their own local Chambers of Commerce to assist local businesses and residents. Some major local chambers that have contributed to this plan include the Princeton, Ottawa, and Streator Chambers of Commerce.

The Main Street Illinois Program is currently providing their downtown revitalization program services to the city of Princeton and Mendota. Ottawa was previously a Main Street city. Other district-wide improvements have been in the form of Community Development Application Program (CDAP) grants for the improvement of infrastructure and facilities, tax-increment financing (TIF) districts (Table 2), and community-based revolving loan funds (Table 3).

This enterprise zones brings state and local incentives to growing businesses and industries within the district. An enterprise zone called the Illinois Valley Area Economic Development zone brings the same incentives to Peru and LaSalle. All of the Enterprise Zones are identified in Table 1A. Four of the five counties in the North Central District are Community Development Corporations (CDCs), which assists with economic development issues within the counties. Stark County is not currently a part of the CDC effort, which is controlled by the Upper Illinois River Valley Development Authority.

The Illinois River Road recently received its designation as a scenic byway. This byway covers 291 miles on both sides of the Illinois River from Ottawa to Havana. This designation and the funding made available as a result of the designation will bring much attention to the Region for tourism possibilities.

The Economic District Designation received for the North Central Illinois Region in in February 2005. A Planning Grant was received from EDA for the implementation of the District in October 2006. The Region Developed is first CEDS document in 1998 and had been working together for economic development since then.

The District is covered by 2 Workforce Investment Board regions; they are the Central Illinois Workforce Investment Board and North Central Illinois (NCI) Works. It is very important to collaborate when possible with these two organizations. Not having a sufficient well-prepared workforce will hinder economic development in the District. NCI works is in the process of updating their 2003 State of the Workforce Report. A preliminary report is already completed and the final should be done in the near future. NCI works has started a logistics council in the District to respond to the increasing number of distribution centers.

Bureau County

The earliest economic development efforts in Bureau County began in 1977 with the completion of its first OEDP publication, making the county an EDA redevelopment district. This plan noted that Bureau County was at that time part of a Tri-County economic structure that included Bureau, LaSalle, and Putnam Counties. This formation no longer exists.

Industrial and retail expansions were the majority of the improvements in Bureau County communities since the release of the first OEDP. Other achieved goals included infrastructure and services improvements and additions, grant funding, city and county buildings, subdivisions, completion of planning documents, construction of housing units, recreation spaces, and community beautification projects. Many communities received new water towers or improvements and new city buildings.

Several interest and focus groups were created, including a Spring Valley local investment group and the Business, Industry, and Professional Association of Spring Valley (BIPS), the Upper Illinois River Valley Development Authority. A number of countywide programs were created as well. These included the Bureau County Home Health Association, Neighborly Older Americans (Project NOA), Senior Citizens Association, and Para-Transit Services, Inc.

LaSalle County

Prior to the 1994 plan, LaSalle County had not completed many projects relating to the economic development effort. The LaSalle County Soil and Water Conservation Service conducted an "Urban Water Quality" workshop to provide information on erosion control and storm water management. Siting requirements for the LaSalle County Landfill were also completed.

The LaSalle County 1994 OEDP outlined many new goals and objectives for the county. Overall goals for the county included planning coordination, development areas identification, protection of sensitive lands, and the establishment of a Community Development Corporation (CDC).

Since the 1994 plan, LaSalle County's efforts for economic development have greatly increased. The county has established itself as a redevelopment district with the plan's completion, and they have established their own CDC. Efforts from regional agencies for economic development such as the Illinois Valley Area Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development, and the Illinois River Area Chamber of Commerce continue to improve the economic status of the county and surrounding areas. (Streator Chamber, Ottawa Chamber) Local chambers, tourism committees, marketing programs, revolving loan funds, and Tax Increment Financing have also worked to bring economic development to the county.

In 1998 LaSalle County completed their first Comprehensive Plan including an extensive study of current land use and proposed future land use throughout the county. They adopted their first countywide zoning in the spring of 2005.

The LaSalle County Development Connection started in the last few years and is an organization that markets LaSalle County as a place to come do business. This organization is made up of representatives from community economic development groups, chambers of commerce, labor organizations, utility companies and other regional organizations.

Marshall County

Marshall County began their economic development efforts in 1987. The county realized that they needed to focus more efforts on economic issues due to a large population decrease and hard economic times during the 1980s. A series of countywide meetings were held to gather public input toward the formation of a Marshall County Economic Development Committee. A steering committee was formed, and proposed ways to gather funds for the formation of an economic development committee. The funds were gathered, and the Marshall County Economic

Development Committee was formed.

The committee began work immediately identifying county strengths and weaknesses. They gathered this information, along with expressed goals and objectives, to prepare Marshall County's first OEDP document, which was finished in 1994. The plan outlined many goals, which were focused on population increase, planned growth, quality of life, job retention, retail and industrial expansion, community services, and tourism.

Many of the goals expressed in the 1994 plan have not yet been met. County officials hope that with its recently completed zoning ordinance and enacted county-wide zoning, along with the completion of CEDS in 1998 document, that many of the original goals will soon be faced.

Putnam County

Putnam County's economic development efforts began in 1978 with the completion of the county's first Overall Economic Development Plan (OEDP) and formation of an economic development committee. The plan was approved by EDA and allowed Putnam County to become eligible for grant funding for economic development projects.

Many of the county's goals and objectives were met since the completion of the first OEDP. County and community improvements outlined the list, including services improvements, utilities, road and highway improvements, retail expansion, and transportation services.

The county's most recent OEDP update took place in 1994. Many goals have been met since this update. An enterprise zone has been established located in Putnam and Bureau Counties. The Hennepin Business Association was formed uniting local businesses. Phone services in the county were upgraded and improved. Several communities made improvements to utilities while others were searching for funding sources.

Stark County

Stark County's economic development activity began with the formation of the Stark County OEDP Committee in 1993. Stark County had their Initial Overall Economic Development Plan completed in that same year and approved by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) in 1994, designating Stark County as a redevelopment district.

The top five priorities identified by the Stark County OEDP Committee involved small business expansion, health care facilities increase, and attraction of value-added business, housing improvements, and utility improvements. A list of strengths and weaknesses was also compiled to assist the committee in formulating the goals and objectives for the county.