

## Grow Lee

By Dennis Fraise, CEcD

### OVERCOMING CHALLENGES FOR DEVELOPING THE FUTURE WORKFORCE IN LEE COUNTY, IOWA

Grow Lee is a workforce program that was created to help address the future workforce needs of Lee County, Iowa. The goal was to bring together all the stakeholders and create an action plan to ensure the future economic viability of local industries, businesses, and the county. The program also strived to help connect the youth of the county to the available opportunities in the area.

Grow Lee is a 2017 IEDC Gold Award winner in the Human Capital category.

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**f**or many rural communities, a perfect storm is brewing that consists of an aging workforce, shrinking populations, mature manufacturing facilities, a large number of retirees, and a future workforce that will be smaller and less skilled. As communities and school districts shrink and desperately try to hold onto the past, infighting and finger-pointing can become common. Many people want to cling to a past that is not coming back and have a real fear of embracing a future filled with change.

In 2013, the Lee County Economic Development Group (LCEDG) in Iowa decided to go from a publicly funded entity to a public-private partnership. A capital campaign was conducted and \$1.3 million in private sector funding was pledged over a five-year period. Combined with the financial support from the county this allowed the organization to be funded 50:50 by public and private investors.

As part of a capital campaign, we interviewed over 60 businesses, industries, and stakeholders throughout the county. Based on the input from these interviews, we developed four pillars of activity for the organization and its efforts:

- 40 percent workforce development
- 40 percent business retention and expansion
- 10 percent new business attraction
- 10 percent marketing and communications

After completing the successful capital campaign, we conducted Synchronist interviews with industries representing Lee County's top 20 employers. These companies employ over 4,000 workers, or 94 percent of manufacturing employees in the county. Data from the Synchronist interviews determined the workforce to be the number one business retention and expansion issue facing

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our industries. Synchronist interviews are part of the on-line Synchronist system that are a powerful tool for understanding and managing an existing business strategy or a business retention program.

As we started collecting data and looking at the challenges that lie ahead, a bleak picture of Lee County's future was starting to form. Rural communities with a manufacturing base will face significant challenges in the coming years. Workforce issues can potentially have a severe impact on our communities. As baby boomers begin to retire en masse, there is a very real concern about the ability to not only find enough workers but to find enough workers with the skills that industries need.

Located in Southeast Iowa, Lee County has a population of just over 35,000 and is a perfect example of a rural community with a manufacturing base. One in four jobs is tied to manufacturing and those jobs represent the backbone of our economy. Since the 1970s, the county has lost over 9,000 residents, or roughly 20 percent of its population. Many of the manufacturing facilities were constructed in the 1970s.

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## OVERCOMING CHALLENGES FOR DEVELOPING THE FUTURE WORKFORCE IN LEE COUNTY, IOWA

*Grow Lee is a workforce program that was created to help address the future workforce needs of Lee County, Iowa. The goal was to bring together all the stakeholders and create an action plan to ensure the future economic viability of local industries, businesses, and the county. The program also strived to help connect the youth of the county to the available opportunities in the area. Grow Lee is a 2017 IEDC Gold Award winner in the Human Capital category.*

The deeper we delved into the numbers, the more daunting the problem seemed. A common refrain was to dwell on the negatives: a shrinking population, mature industries, mass retirements, unmotivated workforce, a skills gap and a lack of soft skills. To be successful in the future, we had to drill deeper into the data while building relationships and connecting with people. Certainly, there were challenges, but there were also opportunities.

We found opportunities among some of our motivated partners, including industries, community leaders, school districts, and community college. Unfortunately, we soon realized that these groups often spoke past each other, and when they spoke it was almost as though they were speaking different languages. Finding a common language became an almost larger task than overcoming our other issues.

## GROW LEE IS BORN

As a countywide economic development group, LCEDG was uniquely positioned to bring together these disparate groups. To be successful, we couldn't just think outside the box, we needed to imagine a new initiative where boxes didn't exist. We knew the story the numbers were telling us, but we didn't know the story behind the numbers. Why did these groups have such a difficult time communicating and how could we be the catalyst for change?

Phase one was developing a strategy: What did we want to accomplish and what would success look like? To be successful, we needed to succinctly articulate our vision. We wanted to avoid business as usual and create another plan that would sit on a shelf and never produce any real change. In broad strokes, we identified a vision for the future that required our organization to be a catalyst for change, to create an impact on our future workforce, and to develop a mechanism that would allow everyone to speak a common language.

Phase two required us to create a plan to make our vision a reality, starting with the premise that most people are tired of going to meetings where nothing happens. Too many times, we have all assembled in a meeting and stuck Post-It notes or stickers to a wall, created a plan, and nothing happened. Good intentions don't always lead to results. Our mantra became: *What would we do if we knew we couldn't fail?*

We seized this opportunity and challenged ourselves to develop a plan of short, high-energy meetings that were fun and led us to action. Early on, it was important to build a brand for what we were doing and trying to accomplish. Through our planning process, we decided to call our effort Grow Lee. Short, simple and to the point, we wanted to grow Lee County. Using elements of our logo, we created a new logo for Grow Lee.



Grow Lee participants work together during a Talent for Today and Tomorrow meeting in an ice breaking exercise by forming symbols of unity from Play-Doh. Each Talent for Today and Tomorrow meeting lasts 58 minutes and starts with an ice breaker.

Phase three was involvement: Who needs to be part of this process? We wanted to cast a wide net and bring together a truly diverse group of stakeholders to have a conversation. One thing that became abundantly clear from the information gathering was that we needed to become better listeners. Active listening was going to be one of the cornerstones of Grow Lee. Too often, we had become victims of creating solutions to problems without soliciting enough input from the very people we were trying to help. Grow Lee partners and participants included:

- 30 Lee County manufacturers
- Southeastern Community College
- Fort Madison Economic Development Corporation
- Keokuk Economic Development Group
- Iowa State Extension
- Southeastern Community College Center for Business and Industry
- Iowa Workforce Development Region 16
- Southeast Iowa Labor Unions
- Fort Madison High School
- Central Lee High School
- Holy Trinity High School
- Keokuk High School
- Lee County Board of Supervisors
- Gate City Newspaper
- Daily Democrat Newspaper

We then developed a process to turn our planning into actions. Starting in June 2014, LCEDG began hosting a series of breakfast meetings called Talent for Today and Tomorrow to solicit input from investors and Lee County stakeholders. Information from these meetings would be combined with data collected from our Synchronist interviews to form our program of action called Grow Lee.

Frankly, we weren't sure how many people would attend our first meeting. When 75 people showed up, we knew that, despite our challenges, there was interest in moving Lee County forward. The initial meeting was a two-hour planning session to get the ball rolling. Each of

# GR<sup>W</sup> Lee

the subsequent Grow Lee meetings lasted only 58 minutes. We promised attendees two things: we would respect their time and there would be action.

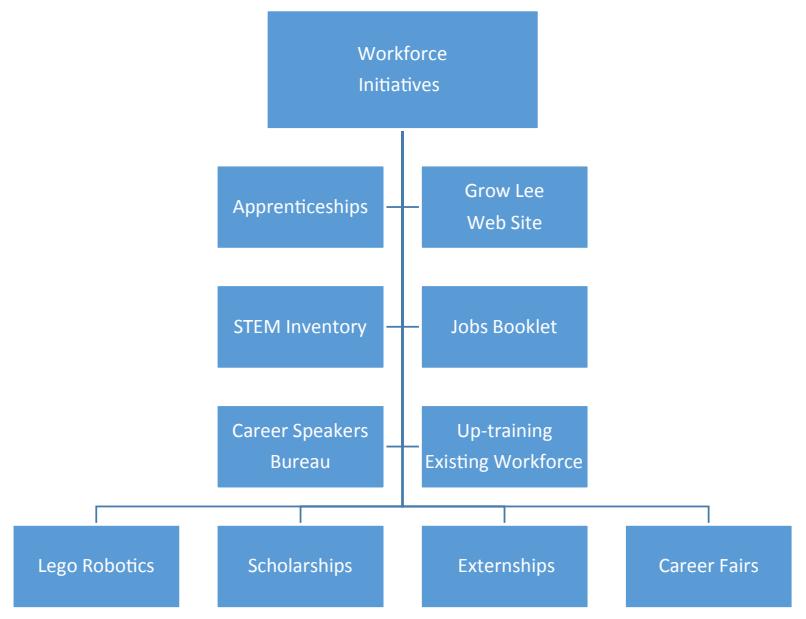
At the kickoff meeting, we worked to educate everyone on the challenges ahead and to ensure that all the participants were working from the same knowledge base. We challenged the group to come up with 10 specific workforce initiatives that could be accomplished in a year. To do this, we used a hybrid nominal group technique, a problem identification, solution generation, and decision-making process that included prioritizing using Post-It notes, as well as idea storms that were lightning rounds of potential workforce initiatives. Participants were encouraged to throw out ideas in a rapid-fire fashion. By utilizing different participation methods, we gave everyone a chance to have their voice heard. No ideas were deemed bad, and the group embraced the challenge.

Given the fact that there was very little momentum and energy for workforce initiatives, it was vitally important to create a program that could deliver results within the 12-month period. Early success would beget future success and create a sense of accomplishment within the group. It was important to the future of Grow Lee that everyone's time and effort resulted in actions. We took the work from the planning session and summarized the information, ensuring that every participant received a copy of the notes within a few days of the planning session.

At the next meeting, the group reviewed their work from the planning session and turned ideas into action groups that would become the basis for Grow Lee. We formed sub-action groups to work in concert with the professional economic development staff on each aspect of Grow Lee. Everything we did with the program was built around the concept of *Data–Knowledge–Action*.

Momentum was starting to build, and Grow Lee was becoming a topic of discussion outside of our meetings. Each meeting starts with an audience participation ice breaker. We've stuck straws through potatoes, wrapped everyone in twine, and made symbols of unity out of Play-Doh. When you come to a meeting, there is a 100 percent guarantee that you will be engaged, listened to, and out the door in 58 minutes.

Once we determined our 10 workforce initiatives that could be accomplished in a year, it was important to push the group to do more and think bigger. A dual track was established: 1) we continued to work on our initial



10 items and 2) we challenged the group to create a list of whoppers, which are ideas that could impact Lee County in the long term. Creating these two tracks gave us the best of both worlds in the forms of short- and long-term goals and activities.

Throughout the Grow Lee process, we talked about how change can make some people feel uncomfortable and how we can best embrace that change. Given the complexity of the change-related problems, change had to be a part of this process. We also committed to pivoting away, if necessary, so as not to get stuck on methods or ideas that weren't working.

Lee County EDG named 2015 as the year of action. Our group had successfully identified the 10 workforce initiatives that they wanted to work on, and now it was time to turn the rhetoric into action. Success was going to be measured by outputs and outcomes. The nascent workforce program was beginning to take shape and was about to turn into much more than we had imagined. (See chart on workforce initiatives.)

One of our challenges was to ensure that we were not just generating activities for the sake of activities. We worked closely with stakeholders to examine our programs and measure our results. Grow Lee has always taken a long view of the county's workforce challenges. We've been willing to invest time and effort in our youngest school children to help create a positive impact on our future workforce. Some of our Grow Lee success stories follow.

#### LEGO Robotics

LCEDG purchased LEGO kits and started a LEGO Robotics Program at four locations throughout the county to introduce students to basic mechanical skills and teach computer programming, science, engineering, and teamwork. Since the program's inception, more than 250 students, second through sixth grade, have participated, along with volunteer teachers from eight local companies.

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Lee County students utilize the latest technology to explore career paths. At the SE Iowa STEM Fest, students experience what it's like to be a semi-driver through a virtual driving simulator from the University of Iowa.

## Scholarships

LCEDG awarded 90 scholarships for local students to attend one of Southeastern Community College's Kidtek U STEM summer camps, a program that provides week-long STEM camps for students, grades four to six. Through our promotion of these camps and these scholarships, we increased local students' participation by 229 percent.

## Up-Training the Workforce

**Manufacturing 101:** This class is designed to assist our workforce in obtaining a manufacturing position by teaching the basic skills necessary for an entry-level position. The initial class had the following numbers:

- 9 different partner agencies and manufacturers designed the class
- 14 manufacturing partners supported the program
- 15 adults registered for the class
- 5 graduated, and 2 other students found employment prior to graduation
- All 5 graduates received a Silver or better on the National Career Readiness Certification
- Graduates completed 75 hours of instruction
- 95 percent attendance requirement, 3 attendees had perfect attendance

## 12+ Class

In 2016, we started offering classes in our high schools that combine career exploration, soft skills, and technical and mechanical knowledge. Each class utilizes a different community speaker with topics ranging from leadership, how to read a tape measure, and interview skills. Students are partnered with a participating industry and work in teams on a specific real-world project led by company representatives. Each student leaves the class with a personal portfolio of accomplishments.

## BUILDING MOMENTUM

As Grow Lee continued to build momentum, other groups started organically forming, including a Lee County industrial leaders group, high school student



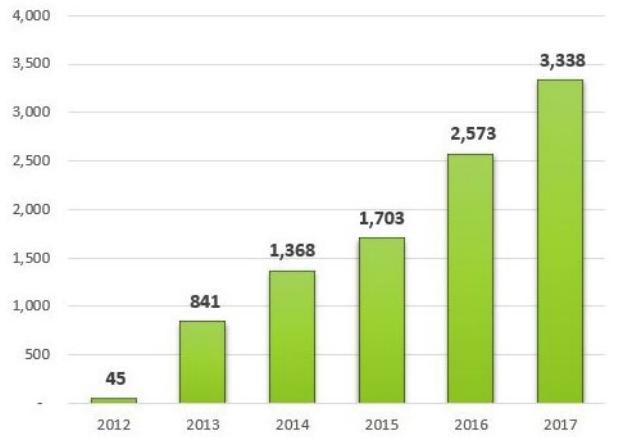
High school guidance counselors and education leaders learn about job skills needed while touring a Climax Molybdenum facility

leaders group, Lee County apprenticeship task force, manufacturing transportation task force, and a county-wide government affairs committee.

Collaborations started to form that would have seemed impossible at the beginning of our process. Industries, large and small, stepped up: Axalta Coating Systems, Climax Molybdenum Co., Huffman Welding & Machine, Inc., Iowa Fertilizer Company, Pinnacle Foods Group, Roquette America, Inc., Siemens Gamesa Renewable Energy, Silgan Containers, Steffensmeier Welding & Manufacturing, and Seither & Cherry.

As we continued our process, attendance at Grow Lee meetings continued to increase. Since the program's inception in 2013, we have hosted over a dozen Talent for Today and Tomorrow breakfast meetings and countless small action group meetings. It's not uncommon to see high school students sitting with plant managers and community leaders and having in-depth discussions. Involving high school students in our meetings has been one of the key elements of our success. It's hard to imagine discussing future workforce needs and not including the group that we are targeting. If you want the unvarnished truth about your workforce efforts and communities, then ask a group of high school students their opinions.

## NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN GROW LEE PROGRAMS



We've brought in several outside experts to present to our group and keep the group's energy high. Most notable were Mark Lautman, author of *When the Boomers Bail* and a leading authority on the coming so-called silver tsunami, and Kevin Fleming, author of *(Re)Defining the Goal: The True Path to Career Readiness in the 21st Century* and a real thought leader on career technical education and job skills. Each of these speakers has helped bring more stakeholders to the table to refine our message.

The deeper we delved into our workforce issues, the more it became abundantly clear that learning to speak a common language remained our greatest challenge. We soon realized how little industry and education know about each other. To help remedy this situation, we started regional industry tours for high school counselors. It was important for these counselors to understand the needs of today's industries and see the opportunities in our students' backyards.

Companies were invited into the schools to tour their career and technical education programs and to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing the educators. Conversely, our high school principals and superintendents participated in a field trip to tour local industries and gain a better understanding of their workforce needs and to see the manufacturing facilities. Amazingly, most principals and superintendents had never visited our industries.

From the beginning, Grow Lee has been driven by a group effort, and when we started, we weren't sure where our conversations would take us. The program's early success resulted in bigger discussions that went beyond workforce-related issues. Discussions began about housing, our communities, and learning to work together. If we were going to see success in the future, real change was necessary, supported by some serious introspection.



Iowa Lieutenant Governor (now governor) Kim Reynolds was the keynote speaker for the Grow Lee 2.0 kickoff event. Grow Lee and Grow Lee 2.0 now cover workforce issues, Lee County's image, and the county's future.

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Eventually, the group created Grow Lee 2.0 to tackle the larger societal and community issues. Together, Grow Lee and Grow Lee 2.0 now cover workforce issues, Lee County's image, and the county's future. Iowa Lieutenant Governor Kim Reynolds was the keynote speaker for our Grow Lee 2.0 kickoff event in June 2016. Several hundred people are now involved in both programs and our momentum continues to accelerate. Learning to work together has been a goal throughout this process. Successfully setting a Guinness World Record demonstrated the power of working together to program participants.

### SETTING A GUINNESS WORLD RECORD

Lee County has two county seats, Keokuk and Fort Madison, each with a population of just over 10,000 people. What makes Lee County unique is that, among Iowa's 99 counties, it is the only one with two county seats. Having two courthouses and two county seats has led to a north/south mentality, and this distinction sometimes polarizes residents and their feelings. Therefore, the group created an event to bridge the gap between these communities and promote working together.

The group chose to attempt to break the Guinness world record for the greatest number of people planting flower bulbs simultaneously, which was 750 people in Birmingham, England. The planning team consisted of representatives from the Lee County Conservation Board, Iowa Workforce Development, Southeastern Community College, Siemens Wind Energy, local chambers of commerce, and the LCEDG. Our group wanted to show what we could accomplish if we all worked together to beautify Lee County.

The goal for the world record attempt was to showcase the power of working together. We wanted to bring together our young people, businesses, community leaders, elected officials, and community stakeholders to demonstrate the power of cooperation. Too often the news headlines only reflect the negative side of life. Planting over 7,500 tulips and native blazing star bulbs (pollinators for monarch butterflies) seemed like the perfect way to celebrate Grow Lee. Pheasants Forever provided major funding for the bulb planting project.



Guinness world record participants receive instructions before the successful attempt begins. Each participant individually planted five tulip bulbs in various colors. The planting lasted 33 minutes.

We wanted to change the conversation from *What we don't have and what are our problems?* to *What can we accomplish if we dream big?* Setting a Guinness world record gave us an event that everyone could rally around. Positive energy replaced attitudes of apathy and disillusionment. We set a goal the county could achieve if everyone helped.

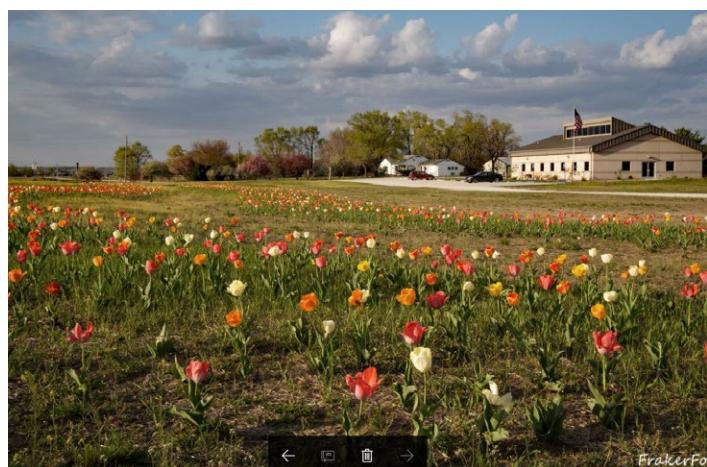
Our world record event brought together the largest gathering of residents in recent memory. Excitement built throughout the county as our young people, businesses, community leaders, politicians, and community stakeholders came together for a common goal. Five different school districts (over 1,000 students) came together during the attempt. They were joined by hundreds of residents. Since everyone was wearing a world record t-shirt, you couldn't tell one school district from another or north/south Lee County residents apart.

The city managers of our two competing cities served as the official world record judges in a show of unity. Scotts Miracle Gro shut down its facility for the morning and sent all 178 employees to participate in the world record attempt. Almost every resident was affected either as a participant, a volunteer, or a viewer of the media coverage.

A final total of 1,463 residents set the Guinness world record for the most people planting flower bulbs simultaneously:

- 7,500 flowers were planted in 33 minutes.
- Each participant individually planted 5 tulip bulbs in various colors.
- Over 1,000 Lee County students participated in this event.
- 16 partner industries, agencies, and organizations supported this record-breaking event.

Since this successful world record attempt, new alliances and partnerships have been formed and connections made at a deeper level, along with a new can-do spirit. Conversations have begun on what could happen



7,500 tulips and blazing star bulbs that were planted as part of the successful attempt to set a Guinness world record bloom. The most people planting flower bulbs simultaneously is 1,463, achieved by the Lee County Economic Development Group at the Lee County Conservation Center in Montrose, Iowa, on October 18, 2016.

if we all worked together? These conversations have led to a broader discussion as part of our Grow Lee workforce initiative.

Another direct result of our collaborations is the formation of a group to study the concept of a joint career technical education center in the county. Industry and schools are now sitting at the same table discussing ways to meet our future workforce needs. This is the beginning of a common language and a new-found respect and understanding on both sides. These conversations would have never happened without our Grow Lee process.

Through the participants' hard work and dedication, the program has been named the best business retention and expansion program in Iowa by the Professional Developers of Iowa for the past two years. In September 2017, the program received a Gold Award from the International Economic Development Council for Excellence in Economic Development in the human capital category.

In October 2017, more than 185 community leaders, industries, political leaders, students, and stakeholders joined LCEDG at its 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Salute to Industry for our first Grow Lee awards. The event's keynote speakers, the Honorable Governor Kim Reynolds and the Honorable Lt. Governor Adam Gregg, presented the awards.

The Grow Lee awards recognize the outstanding efforts of local industry in LCEDG's efforts to move the county forward. Awards were presented in the following categories:

- **Workforce Champion Award:** Recipients provided outstanding support for Grow Lee programs to develop the county's future workforce.
- **World Record Champion:** The recipient provided tremendous support for the county's successful Guinness world record attempt by sending all its employees to the event.
- **Legacy Award:** Recipients have over 100 years of operations in the county.

We didn't know what to expect when we started Grow Lee. Trust and collaborations among disparate groups doesn't happen overnight. Our biggest takeaway was learning to listen and ensuring that everyone had a voice in the process. Action is a key ingredient for a successful workforce program. In simple terms, people are willing to engage in a process for a while, but they want to see results. We also learned to pivot and be flexible and adaptable.

### LESSONS LEARNED

We didn't know what to expect when we started Grow Lee. Trust and collaborations among disparate groups doesn't happen overnight. Our biggest takeaway was learning to listen and ensuring that everyone had a voice in the process. Action is a key ingredient for a successful workforce program. In simple terms, people are willing to engage in a process for a while, but they want to see results. We also learned to pivot and be flexible and adaptable.

No program is perfect and Grow Lee is no exception. We did not accomplish all 10 of our initial workforce initiatives. Some proved to be too difficult and others were deemed to not be the right fit as our process evolved and grew. No matter how much energy and passion you put into a project and process, there will always be naysayers. Educating stakeholders about the importance of workforce initiatives could be its own full-time job. The task is simply too important to ignore and, if done correctly, the positive energy and progress will ultimately overwhelm those with negative attitudes.

Over the past four years, we have learned a great deal about ourselves, our communities, and our industries. To have a great workforce program requires adequate financial resources, dedication, perseverance, and a can-do attitude. If you give stakeholders a reason to join you, they will.

For us, those reasons were a promise of action and about not wasting people's time while helping create a better Lee County. It's possible to create a common language, but it will be harder than you think and take more time than you think it should. Success takes time and requires uncomfortable conversations, creativity, and building your tribe.

Grow Lee has meant a great deal to Lee County and its residents. We've been able to find success 58 minutes at a time because of our partners' hard work and dedication.



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