



## **History of Williston Economic Development**

Opinion/Letter to Editor by Shawn Wenko

The City of Williston is celebrating Economic Development Week now through May 10. The week is filled with events and activities designed to demonstrate the importance of economic development and what economic developers do every day. To further educate our community we decided to look back at how our office was started.

Williston Economic Development (WED) was founded more than 30 years ago by a group of Williston businessmen who initially formed what they called Williston Jobs and Industries. The original board of directors included Garvin Stevens, Vern Neff, Curtis Carlson, Gary Sukut and Richard Rolfstad. The purpose of the group was to further economic growth in Williston and Williams County.

Two years later, the City of Williston recognized the need for a localized approach to help diversify the region's economy. In 1991, the Williston City Commission created Williston Economic Development and hired Thomas Rolfstad to oversee the city's planning and economic development efforts. In addition to Tom's role as WED executive director, he was also appointed to oversee the activities of Williston Jobs and Industries, which had since changed its name to the Williston Area Development Foundation (WADF).

It was also in 1991 that city leaders asked voters to approve a one cent sales tax to ease infrastructure debt created by a slowdown in the oil and gas industry. The one cent sales tax had a sunset of 10 years; but voters have approved renewal efforts three times, extending the sunset to 2030.

Today the Williston STAR Fund allocates a quarter of each penny to economic and community development projects for job retention expansion and creation. In 2018, the STAR Fund assisted 63 industrial, commercial, retail and restaurant projects with a private investment of \$23 million.

Since its creation more than 30 years ago, WADF has evolved to Western Region Economic Development (WRED). WRED has a 23-member board of directors that includes stakeholders, city commissioners and economic development representatives from Divide, McKenzie, Mountrail and Williams Counties. WRED's mission is to facilitate and promote a vibrant, diversified and sustainable economy through collaboration and outreach. This group takes a 30,000-foot view of the region while focusing on primary sector projects and legislative issues.

WED exists today with a full-time staff of four that consists of Shawn Wenko Executive Director, Ann Kvande Program Development Coordinator, Barbara Peterson Marketing Coordinator and Brenda Schmidt Administrative Assistant. The mission of WED is to facilitate, lead and promote a vibrant business climate through sound economic policy. WED takes a localized approach to economic development with heavy emphasis on quality of life development. WED also works hand in hand with the seven-member Williston STAR Fund board of directors and oversees incentive and grant opportunities through the fund.

WED has come a long way since it was created 30 years as a small, grass roots effort to the broad programs and services we offer today at the City of Williston Center for Development.

Tomorrow we will take a closer look at the financial incentives and programs that WED utilizes to promote growth in Williston.