

Wills hired as new Brillion city administrator

Community development now big part of role

By David Nordby
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BRILLION – Brillion residents, meet your new city administrator and community development director.

Peter Wills speaks fast, speaks passionately, and has ideas and plenty of experience.

“My background is diverse, but it’s always been close to our customers, and our customers is our businesses and it’s our workforce and it’s our people,” Wills said, as he plans to bring that same approach to Brillion.

Wills was executive director of Progress Lakeshore, an economic development group for Manitowoc County, from 2014 until his hire in Brillion.

“The largest percentage of my duties really have been in that economic development, community develop-



ment realm,” Wills said.

With Progress Lakeshore, Wills helped bring more than 1,200 jobs and \$200 million in projects.

In Brillion, he says, he wants to hear from residents on what they would like to see in the city.

“Part of that economic development, community development is kind of recognizing that we have to have opportunities, ensure a great quality of life and one of our key assets is our people, so how do we keep that talent?” Wills said.

Housing, retail shopping and attracting more people to Brillion are things that Wills mentions.

“As COVID has hit, we see people that may not have to live now where they work, so can we use that to attract people to our area that otherwise may have to pay a lot more for housing,” Wills said.

Wills speaks of attracting new companies, growing entrepreneurship and filling empty storefronts.

That is a similar vision to what

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Brillion Mayor Mel Edinger had in mind for the city administrator position expanding into a dual position with community development tied to it.

Wills’ first day on the job was this week Monday, overlapping with the final two weeks of Lori Gosz’s tenure. Gosz has been with the city for 21 years.

“She’s done a great job and we needed a very capable person to pick up on that and carry us forward,” Edinger said.

Edinger first noted publicly earlier this year that he would like to see the city administrator position expand.

“We felt that we were lacking in community development and we were looking for someone that can lead the city in developing Brillion and working with the Brillion Works project and other development that’s going on,” Edinger said.

Edinger said that Wills’ resume matches what the city was looking for in the position.

“We think he will be a strong leader,” Edinger said, adding that his expertise will help the city grow.

Wills’ work in Manitowoc County overlapped with Brillion. He has worked closely with Calumet County Economic Director Mary Kohrell and met with Ariens Company about

the Brillion Iron Works closing in 2016.

“Even when Ariens was trying to decide if they were going to work on the Brillion Works project, I came in and met with them and walked them through some steps that might be helpful for them to approach and to look at as they started to tackle that project,” Wills said.

“We needed someone with community development experience to also do more development in the Brillion Works site,” Edinger said.

Even without the Brillion Works development, Edinger says the city would have been looking for someone to look at the city’s development because of the empty buildings in the city, housing developments and business developments, like Country Visions now in Brillion on Highway 10.

“There’s a lot more to it than that because we have empty buildings that we need to fill,” Edinger said.

The city administrator position had 39 applicants, through the Indeed job search website. Indeed was recommended by community business leaders, including Professional Plating’s Larry Dietz, as opposed to the city’s prior plan to spend funds on advertising the position.

“We chose the top five to interview,” Edinger said.

Brillion Chamber of Commerce President Amy Myers and Ariens Company and Brillion Works redevelopment leader Mark Olsen joined the interviews with city council.

“We wanted their input as well,”

Edinger said.

In the end, it was Wills who was formally approved by city council last week.

Edinger has put together a list of goals for Wills.

“We have a lot of challenges in Brillion with taxes ... We need to grow Brillion so that we can increase revenues to reduce our tax rate,” Edinger said. “That’s one of the goals.”

Wills knows that will not happen overnight.

“I guess I prescribe to incremental development,” Wills said.

Wills grew up north of Green Bay in Abrams, has worked in sales, business management and in commercial banking helping small businesses receive loans.

Wills said that he wants to look at what Brillion already has and enhance the values that already exist, through residential and commercial buildings as one of his first steps in the position.

“Try to bring out that character and that value,” Wills said.

Wills said some will be project by project, like deciding if a building could be a fit for retail, as one example.

“It is a little bit more of a talent attraction in terms of what are the needs of the local businesses,” Wills said.

Ariens Company has been vocal about the need to hire more employees.

“Some of the apartment projects

that you’ve got going, that’s fantastic,” Wills said. “So, I do think there’s a lot more need for additional apartment units but then it’s also single family.”

Wills said that’s where the research for what the community’s unfilled needs are comes into place.

“Is there some condos or more luxury townhouses, or something like that, that are desired or is it not? Well, if that is, can we look at appropriate ways that really can capture some scenery maybe by the marsh or maybe by some of these other areas that would be appropriate to make sure we don’t lose folks that are looking at that option or might want to move out of their single family house that would free up more of those,” Wills said.

The development of housing and businesses feed into each other, he says.

“As you bring up housing you can support more retail and shopping and professional services. As you develop more of those professional services, you can attract more housing. You build more housing you can support more professional retail and shopping,” Wills said. “It’s kind of like taking lug nuts off a car. You kind of have to make sure you’re doing it in order so you don’t either A, overbuild your retail and hospitality to the point that now it’s just an inter-competition, but on the opposite making sure you don’t only build up the housing side,” Wills continued.

Wills’ first step is to get familiar

with his staff and community leadership and then speak with companies. Wills said that while building those relationships, he should learn more about the community’s “wish list.”

“It’s making sure that as a government agency, organization, we really understand what the companies need and knowing that can change quickly,” Wills said.

Wills plans to use social media to promote the city, like he did in Manitowoc, to reach new people. Wills said the community needs to promote the city, the projects going on and the successes that are happening.

“The moment you stop marketing [is] the moment you’re off someone’s radar,” Wills said.

Wills said that other communities would be envious of the industry in Brillion, mentioning Ariens Company and Endries International and Professional Plating.

He says Brillion also can use the marsh and greenspaces to help highlight the city.

“It’s not overnight ... and it’s a team effort,” Wills said, mentioning the Chamber of Commerce and the Redevelopment Authority.

“Not only are we a manufacturing community, but we’re a great destination community ... I think if we keep moving forward that way, I promise in five years you’re going to see a very different feel to the community,” Wills said.