

Thinking Big Means Developing the Innovation Community for Sheboygan County

By: Mayor Michael Vandersteen

Recently, the City and the Sheboygan County Economic Development Corporation announced a new initiative for Indiana Avenue, an Innovation Community. Prior to making the public announcement, the Director of Planning and Development and two representatives from the Sheboygan County Economic Development Corporation traveled to three Midwestern cities that are in three different stages of developing innovation district/communities. They first visited Cortex in St. Louis which has been in existence for 12 years, the Edney Innovation Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee which is about three years into developing an Innovation Community and Indianapolis, Indiana which just finished the planning stages. What was determined is that Sheboygan lined up the best with the activities that are happening in Chattanooga, Tennessee and the population and demographics are similar to Sheboygan County.

In Chattanooga, a community with a population of 176,588, the effort was led by the mayor of Chattanooga. Currently, Sheboygan County is experiencing a huge hurdle to retain top tier talent at our multi-generational family owned businesses across the county. In order to engage this workforce and encourage new workforce to relocate for job opportunities, we need to provide collaboration and networking space the new workforce is looking for.

The development of the Innovation Community is not about just Sheboygan. It is about Sheboygan County, Eastern Wisconsin and Wisconsin as a state. Indiana Avenue was chosen because of its urban location, access to the waterfront, access to amenities and walkability that the new workforce is looking for. Three years ago, Sheboygan heard the call that there was a significant need to develop more urban downtown housing. We delivered with the two projects that are completed and the third that is under construction and several that intend to start next spring. To help our local companies continue to draw top talent and retain that talent, we need to all work together including the leaders of other urban areas like Sheboygan Falls, Plymouth and throughout Sheboygan County. We also need to continue to encourage new business startups. The Innovation Community will provide the resources for people that have not had a lot of assistance to move their business idea forward.

The vision of our Innovation Community is: A thriving, global live-work-play talent magnet for innovation and entrepreneurship. The mission is: Deliver the core programming and ecosystem to attract and retain talent to generate marketable ideas to expand Sheboygan County's economy.

As the Mayor of Sheboygan, I hope you will join me in supporting this new initiative. Yes, this is what some have said is "thinking big", but in order for our region to continue to be the powerhouse in manufacturing and business growth, we need to think big. This community is use to thinking big. We thought big when the lakefront including the marina was developed, we thought big when the C. Reiss coal property was purchased and redeveloped in the South Pier District. Getting the right public and private players to the table, we can think big and transform the Indiana Avenue corridor.

As Chattanooga's Mayor Andy Berke said "Chattanooga's Innovation District is our place where people of all walks of life come together to explore and collaborate, whether it's within the realm of technology, art, recreation, commerce, or civic engagement. Thinkers, starters and doers – it is a bold place full of people working together to discover the next big thing." We too can embrace the big thinking of Chattanooga right here in Sheboygan if we join forces with the public and private sector and think big again.