

Last year, although I certainly noted the positive things happening, I offered a pretty bleak outlook. It was probably unnecessarily pessimistic, but I felt compelled to play the role of Cassandra. This year, I'd like to offer a more optimistic report. Certainly, things are not perfect, and some of the concerns that I raised last year are at least as relevant, if not more so, now. We still have skills gaps, empty downtowns, brain-drain concerns, a diminishing workforce, and an aging, shrinking population, the latter two of which I addressed in an op.-ed. piece earlier this year. Nonetheless, I am upbeat about the present and maybe even hopeful for the future of this county.

Our unemployment rate consistently remains best or second-best in the northwest quarter of the state and in the top 10-to-20 percent of all Indiana counties. At 6.8 percent in May, with a *real* rate of closer to 12 percent, it's still too high for my liking, but if "the new normal" is anywhere from 6.7 percent to 9 percent, then we're in a good place, and we remain in better shape than the state and the nation. A few weeks ago, Eric Doden, president of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation, visited Winamac. During a small-group roundtable discussion, he remarked that he had been surprised and pleased by our average-income statistics. Although below the state median, our annual average wages per job and per capita income are superior to those of most of our neighbors and generally impressive for a small, rural county.

In the last seventh months, we've lost two noteworthy businesses in Winamac. To me, the silver lining is much brighter than the greyness of this news. Most, though not all, of those who lost their jobs when Chesapeake Recycling and Tippecanoe Beverage ceased operations have found new opportunities, and for the first time during my tenure here, we have buildings — two of them, attractive and with highway access — available for relocation, expansion, or start-up development. Too often in the past, when the State has distributed project leads, I've had to disregard them because I had no existing facility to offer. Already, we've seen some interest expressed in one of these facilities, and the other has multiple serious prospects.

On the other side of the county, although we're behind schedule, we're slowly making progress on the premier Key Action Step of our strategic plan, the development of a rail-served ag.-tech/ industrial park. CSX is on-board, and, already, existing companies are intrigued; even businesses twenty miles from the railroad will have the opportunity to benefit from freight rail when the proposed team-track dock facility is operational.

We'd likely be moving more rapidly on this project, but one obstacle stands in our way, one about which it's hard to complain too much. Finding landowners willing to consider selling right now, especially for a low price, is difficult. This, of course, is because agriculture, one of our most important industries, is so strong. Unfortunately, the best place for industrial development in the county, is also home to some of the best farmland in the area. That's still better than not having excellent ground or development potential, and you'll never hear me complain that such an import economic sector is in such good shape.

Late last year and early this year, GalFab, under new ownership, announced plans for significant investment in Winamac with the promise of 20 new jobs over the next four year. Recently, I've met with management at two companies, one of which is planning a substantial investment, with new jobs, and the other of which may secure a contract that will require even more investment than has already been made recently and even more hiring. I'm aware of two or three other larger companies contemplating expansion projects.

As I recently highlighted in our quarterly newsletter and the *Journal*, our community is reaping the successes sown by the Revolving Loan Fund. Adaptasoft is thriving and growing as a white-collar business in Francesville. Clear Decision Filtration gains more customers every month and hopes nearly to double its workforce over the next few years. T&S Recycle is buzzing with activity — and the sounds of saws. And we still have a public-oriented lumberyard, one that has substantially increased and diversified its line of products this year. Over the past several months, we've also seen the opening of a bakery, an antiques-and-more shop, a breakfast-and-barbecue restaurant, and a health-goods/at-home—dependence store in Winamac. In Francesville, Five Loaves Bakery is under new management and still serving delightful baked goods and lunches.

This spring, with support from the Chamber of Commerce and the Indiana Small Business Development Center, we piloted a student—business-plan competition in the Business Management class at Winamac Community High School. There were some rough patches and growing pains, but it was an eye-opening experience; we intend to expand this program to a class at West Central, and eventually to open it to any high-school—aged student in the county. Later this year, younger members of the CDC and I shall get the ball rolling on a Pulaski County Young Professionals Network. I still hope, within the next few years, to establish an internship program, either locally or regionally, and some sort of “junior CDC” comprising civic-minded high-school students.

In 2012, the Indiana Department of Education gave ‘A’ grades to both of our high schools, up from an F for one of the schools and a B for the other in 2010. Although still well below average, our rate of higher-education attainment has increased. The percentage of the population with at least an associate’s degree has risen by more than five percentage points since 2000; we’ve seen a slight decline in the associate’s-only rate, while more residents have earned a Bachelor’s, graduate, or professional degree.

Finally, our wonderful natural resources, like the Tippecanoe River and the state park bearing its name, and the long-necked migratory birds as Jasper-Pulaski, continue to bring visitors — and potential future residents — into our community. Slowly, but surely, the Panhandle Pathway creeps farther and farther northward. Right now, we await word from the County Council on a requested additional appropriation that would allow us to fund the production of a tourism-marketing television episode to help us to sell Pulaski County to a broader audience. My office and the Town of Winamac are even working with a consulting firm on a hotel-feasibility study. That’s a pretty cool step forward if you ask me.

Many concerns need to be addressed, and some may never fully be fixed, but I am quite confident in stating that, all things considered, Pulaski County is in good shape. In order for it to remain so, and to go from good to great, the CDC and I, county and municipal officials, the Chamber, local businesses, and every citizen have to take on our share of the responsibility for moving forward in a healthy, responsible way. We’ll never be Mayberry again, but the desiccation of the Heartland is not foreordained, and I truly believe that it is within our power to make Pulaski County into Mayberry 2.0. Thank you.

If anyone has any comments or questions, then I’ll allow a brief amount of time for them, but I am happy to turn things over to Mr. Watts as soon as possible.

