

I don't want to jinx things, but Pulaski County is in pretty danged good shape right now. A month or so ago, in the wake of the December labor-force report, Indiana economist Morton J. Marcus published some reflections, in which he noted that relative to December 2007, just before the Great Recession, Indiana has a job deficit of 1.12 percent — something like 28,000 jobs shy of that December-2007 mark. In Pulaski County, we were one job shy. Now, in fairness, I have to point out that the estimated population of Pulaski County has decreased by roughly 400 since then — a trend that we absolutely must stop, unless we want to become a county of old-folks'-home residents and employees —, but it's hard to say how many of those would be in the workforce. It's also important to note that we have a higher unemployment rate than we had in December of 2007, 5.4 percent, which is still pretty fantastic, compared to 4.3 percent — and this is actually a good thing: we have as many people employed now as we had then, but we actually have more people actively looking for work now than then. Where are they going to find jobs?

As most of you are aware, the Braun Corporation announced a significant expansion last summer. They were able to retain 30 existing jobs, moved 28 positions from Michigan to Winamac (a handful of which were filled by transferees), and are adding nearly 40 jobs over the next couple of years. A few weeks ago, the Winamac Town Council approved tax abatements to secure Antares Trailers' commitment to Winamac, bringing new life and 40-plus jobs to the former Tippecanoe Beverage facility. And just last night, the County Commissioners formally approved a forgivable-loan agreement with Winamac Coil Spring, the fruit of months of discussions and progressive thinking on the company's part. This is bringing redemption to the darkly clouded

Eaton/Chesapeake building, and although right now they're only transferring a handful of existing employees, they hope to create ten to 20 new positions over the next five to ten years. Just these three projects are going to create at least 100 new positions in Winamac, to say nothing of the increases to the local property-tax base. And this doesn't hit on the rest of our largest employers, each one of which has, at some point, been considering plans that would further increase production and employment locally. Some of these plans have been put on the backburner, and some are still in their inchoate stages, but things are looking great here.

In my line of work, we get credit for these projects, which is nice. Sure, I did some "hand-holding" for these companies, and I'm not going to shy away from congratulations, but these private-sector companies deserve the real credit; I'm just here to help. That's not to say that the CDC and I aren't making our contributions to sustainable economic growth in the community, though!

We declared 2012 "the Year of the Entrepreneur" and hosted a number of entrepreneurship events. The combination of my attention deficiencies, the CDC's having a staff of only 1.5, and the sheer diversity and quantity of projects with which we must deal have sidetracked us from continuing to emphasize the importance of entrepreneurial development to our economy as much as we should be, but we've not been totally dormant. Pairing this focus with ever-important youth-retention efforts (Remember what I said about old folks' homes?), we've completed two very small student-business-plan competitions at Winamac Community High School. We're on hiatus this spring, allowing me to determine necessary improvements and to figure out how to open the program

to more students, including at West Central, but this program will continue.

Right now, we're working on starting a young professionals organization in Pulaski County. The specifics are going to be decided by the members, but this group is going to provide opportunities for networking, mentoring, and civic engagement and philanthropy — a place where young professionals who stayed here, came back after college, or decided that big-city living isn't for them can have a sense of belonging in a community from which, regrettably, too many bright youths have fled for allegedly greener pastures. This group, I sincerely hope, will cultivate generations of Pulaski County leaders.

The downside of our recent successes is that we have just about no available industrial property left in the county. It's nice not to have vacancies, but it's not so great not to be able to offer anything, other than some acreage south of Braun, with neither rail nor major-highway access, when companies are looking to expand or to relocate. To that end, only a few years behind schedule, we've hired Territorial Engineering, out of Koontz Lake, to conduct feasibility studies on some properties in the U.S.-421/CSX corridor. Studies on two locations are nearing completion, and we're working on securing access to a third site. Pulaski County's is primarily a homegrown economy — and a fabulous testament to the grow-your-own method —, but at least being able to compete to attract from the outside is important. So is being able to offer infrastructure-served industrial land for the next generation of local entrepreneurs. And when this rail-served industrial park does finally get built, it'll even offer team-track rail access for companies nowhere near the railroad.

In order to attract those outside companies — and tourists —, the CDC has stepped up marketing efforts like never before. Early this year, our *Savor Indiana* and *ExtraordINary Indiana* episodes debuted on PBS stations across the state, on demand with some cable providers, and online. These episodes are fantastic, far exceeding my expectations. We still have a lot of work to do to make sure that as many people across Indiana, the Midwest, and the whole world see them; once we make this happen, I'm quite sure that these videos won't fail us: companies will keep Pulaski County on their look-into lists, and vacationers near and far will decide that a day on the river, some paintball, and a monstrosity of a burger at the Patio are calling them to our neck of the woods.

We're also investing in a complete overhaul of *Pulaski Online*, which hasn't looked current and fresh in about five years. The new Website will be much more attractive, user-friendlier, and Nathan-friendlier (somehow, Website Manager is one of my responsibilities), with a vastly improved economic-development toolkit and a greater wealth of information and documents available to local residents. This project is the Website equivalent of HGTV's *Curb Appeal* — no more uncut grass, peeling paint, or brown hedges for us!

If, as I'm optimistic will be the case, we do see an increase in tourism, where are the people going to stay? Our bed-and-breakfasts don't allow for much occupancy, so, as some of you are aware, we're working on developing a hotel in Winamac. This is moving more slowly than I'd prefer, but I'm so committed to seeing this through, then I'm going to be in Peru — Miami County, not South America, thankfully — at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow to meet with a

colleague who's worked with the same company in his community and a hotel-finance specialist.

Finally, the project of which I think I'm proudest right now: working with Ivy Tech and human-resources and operations officers from our major employers, we've started workforce-training programming locally. Right now, with an early focus on leadership skills, we're hosting training workshops for current employees; I hope that we can expand to more hands-on programming, including maintenance, mechanical, and electrical, in the near future. Eventually, bringing WorkOne into the partnership more fully, I hope that we can begin to offer training outside of companies, for the unemployed looking to improve their chances and for the employed looking for opportunities to climb the ladder. We've only offered one class, with the second taking place on Friday, but so far, the responses have been overwhelmingly positive.

So, there you have it: the state of the Pulaski County economy.