

The past year has been tough for our community. Following the warrant signed by the County Council, Pleasant View finally met its death just shy of a year ago. Whether this decision was good or bad isn't for me to say, but it created unfortunate division and controversy amongst friends and neighbors, and amongst elected officials. The end of 2015 closed more than 45 years of library service in Medaryville. Again, although I certainly recognize the quality-of-life benefits of having a library in the town, it's not my position to second-guess the decision; as a member of a library board, myself, I understand the need to balance providing services with fiscal responsibility. They did what they had to do, but it didn't come without frustration, controversy, and disappointment. On the bright side, the Library and Pulaski County Human Services are working out an arrangement whereby some library services will continue to be provided, and Human Services' west-side location will be in an upgraded facility. This is a positive step forward, for sure.

And, admittedly, I've landed in the pages of the newspaper a couple of times myself in recent months.

Economically, we've experienced a few letdowns, too. Pentair corporate shut down the rural Winamac plant, moving production to New York. Antares (later Direct Trailer), just a couple of years ago a shining new star in our manufacturing sky, burned out as 2015 came to a close. Another major employer, undergoing restructuring and diversification, is running below its optimum level.

Although our unemployment rate continues to drop and is lower than it was a year ago, no longer are we a leader in the state, instead trailing two-thirds of Indiana counties on this metric.

As we at the CDC continue to focus much of our energy on capacity building and improving quality of life, one of the greatest obstacles that we face comes in the form of friendly fire: not only do we have the highest income-tax rate of any county in the state, but it just went up again. This will not help to reverse our negative population trend. The fact is that concerns that acquisition by a Swedish company will lead to BraunAbility's leaving Winamac are misplaced, but if ever we were to lose them or another major employer, I'm quite afraid that it'd be because they are tired of not having enough people. It kinda reminds me of the 1970s Seattle billboard: Will the last person leaving Pulaski County turn out the lights?

But enough with the doom and gloom! There are bright spots, and I'd be remiss not to mention them.

Last spring, we assisted Galbreath in securing a small tax abatement and some State incentives to support a modest expansion. For now, even though more than half of their workforce lives out of the county, BraunAbility is not yet tired of not having enough people, and they continue marching forward with expansion from a few years ago and natural growth as key demographic bases enlarge. Winamac Coil Spring's Winamac plant is continuing along healthily — such a wonderful story for a building that has brought so much frustration to this community. I've spoken recently with two or three manufacturers

contemplating expansion; it's always kinda cool to get to know about these plans before the general public ever does.

A lot of the successes of the past year, as I hinted earlier, have come on the capacity-building and broader community-development fronts.

Pulaski County is about to hit the small screen — again. A couple of years ago, we produced TV-show episodes profiling our community and cool places to visit, and local economic leaders. These shows still air on PBS, and I finally saw myself on Channel 56 just last month. Now, we'll be airing an amazing 30-second commercial promoting Pulaski County as a tourist destination on WBBM-TV out of Chicago. The team who built our fabulous County Website had this developed, and it's almost breathtaking. It'll run 38 times over the week leading up to the Academy of Country Music awards in early April. A longer version of the clip is already online, on our Tourism Website and elsewhere.

We've partnered with Purdue Extension – Pulaski County and an excellent steering committee to develop Leadership Pulaski County; our first cohort will start up, we hope, this fall, or early in 2017 at the latest.

Our monthly manufacturing-group luncheons continue, as do the Ivy Tech training programs through which our companies send employees to learn communication, leadership, and other soft skills to make them more valuable to their employers and likelier to move up the ladder. Out of this group has grown our brand-new Pulaski County Human Resources group, offering participants

beyond the manufacturing sector the opportunity to network, to learn, and to collaborate.

At last year's summit, I spoke of the 80-plus-thousand-dollar grant that we received to develop a new industrial maintenance and repair program at West Central High School. We've been set back by one obstacle after another, but the State has been quite flexible with us, and it's turned out that this delay has given us the opportunity to work with another training provider to strengthen the proposed curriculum. Students will be able to take prerequisite courses this coming fall and spring, and by fall 2017, spring 2018 at the latest, we should have our first cohort on those brand-new training modules. The need for qualified workers in this field is tremendous, and we're investigating multiple avenues for filling this void.

CDC Project Coordinator Krysten Hinkle has been working her tail off to re-establish a farmers' market in Winamac, with plans to expand across the county in the future. As the Pulaski County coordinator for the Indiana Bicentennial, not only as she been involved in the torchbearer-selection process, but she's the chair of our committee that will soon be diving into planning a wonderful weekend event, Torchfest, that will occur in early October when the Bicentennial Torch makes its way from Cass County to Starke County.

After a year of meetings, cross-county tours, and a lot of brainstorming, our Hometown Collaboration Initiative committee reached two decisions at our December meeting: we're developing a countywide on-road bike-route network, dubbed "Cranes, Trains, and Pedalmobiles", and we're preparing a real tourism plan to

guide our efforts in marketing this community and taking better advantage of all of the wonderful natural amenities that we're so lucky to possess.

There's always work to be done, but we're doing it. We have to. Here's the fundamental choice we have to make: Are we going to invest in our future or are we going to manage our decline? Do we want to take some chances and be great again or do we not take risks and see if we can lose slower than everybody else?

My answer: we keep working to build Mayberry 2.0.