

To be honest, I'm not sure that I've ever struggled to prepare my remarks like I have this year. Already, before the first permit application has even been filed, I've had more dealings with windmills than Don Quixote, and that's been a bit draining. You may have heard recently that, since the 2010 Census, only one Indiana county has lost a greater percentage of its population than we have; 'disheartening' is not a strong-enough word. While Francesville's Uptown Project has taken off enough to have been asked to host an Indiana Main Street Exchange next month, Wander Our Winamac, of which I'm currently president, has flailed a bit. Maybe I'm a bit of Chicken Little, but I'm nervous — terrified, even — about the long-term financial health of Pulaski County. And don't get me started on my desk: I don't even remember what color it is, so many stacks of papers regarding so many disparate projects are covering it.

But I've preached enough doom and gloom the last couple of years; I don't want to gloss over or to whitewash very real struggles and challenges, but the fact is that, even as we battle our demons, we have angels on our side, and I'd like to talk about some of the good things happening tonight.

Although it often feels as if it's never enough, we continue to make headway on the ever-pressing workforce-development front.

After countless frustrating delays and hiccups, we're in the fourth semester of our Pulaski County Repair and Maintenance Technology program at West Central; students enrolled in this program, just by going through the prerequisites in the Conexus Hire Tech curriculum, have already had the opportunity to earn Ivy Tech credits and to test for — and in quite a few cases to pass — nationally recognized certifications. Born out of our Pulaski County Industrial Forum and funded in large part by a grant that my office received, RAM-Tech provides two years of broad-based introduction to modern manufacturing before exposing students to hands-on opportunities ranging from print-reading and measurement to electrical fabrication and fluid power.

I haven't the slightest idea as to how we'd staff it, pay for it, or figure out a dozen other details, but I'm 100-percent serious when I say that I envision opening this up to current employees of local companies looking to upskill and to unemployed and underemployed residents looking to find work at a local manufactory. Maybe even to qualified work-release inmates.

Yes, maybe even work-release inmates.

Our new all-star Superior Court Judge Kocher has come swinging like Shoeless Joe Jackson in his rookie season — and, for the record, I'm with Kevin Costner's Ray Kinsella: Shoeless Joe got hosed and deserves to be in the Hall of Fame. She's seeking to establish a problem-solving court in Pulaski County and generally to expand work-release opportunities to diminish the revolving-door effect that she's seen as a deputy prosecutor and judge. There's still a lot of work to be done, but our manufacturers have already shown interest in this opportunity — and if we can make it work, I'm ready to figure out the logistics to create a RAM-Tech program just for them.

Our Industrial Forum will be working with Ivy Tech to take a fresh look at some of the soft-skills courses that we have offered to existing employees in the past, with an eye to resuming these opportunities, potentially formalizing a Pulaski County Industrial Leadership Certificate, determining the best way to implement soft-skills education into the RAM-Tech curriculum, and, again, maybe expanding the Certificate program to the general population and to qualified work-release inmates.

Always finding new ways to fund workforce-development opportunities, the State has been offering Skill UP grants for partnership-based approaches to training. Collaborating with Ivy Tech, the Center of Workforce Innovations, and the Northwest Indiana Workforce Board, with

Winamac Coil Spring graciously offering space in their Winamac plant to host it, we put on a National Institute for Metalwork Skills electrical systems course, with the opportunity to test for certification, to employees of a number of local manufacturers, and even a couple from Jasper and Newton Counties. We're excited that the next NIMS sequence is now being offered in our area, with the first half again being hosted by our friends at WCS, and the second half to be held at the SCILL Center in Knox.

Speaking of Winamac Coil Spring, it's worth noting that their Winamac labor force remains ahead of the requirements tied to the forgivable loan that the County provided a few years ago, proving that it pays to be creative to bring new life to dormant buildings, to help homegrown companies, and to put more persons to work.

And speaking of incentives, I had the pleasure of assisting Metal Fab with a small tax abatement in 2017. It helped to ease the burden of some significant capital investment, which led to a pretty impressive increase in the number of employees they have, and, perhaps most important for us, it helped us to rebuild a relationship with a company that plays a role in supplying multiple manufacturers in the area.

I want to make quick mention of what I think may have been the coolest thing we saw all year in Pulaski County — or at least within our manufacturing sector. After having been bought by a private equity firm, merged into a larger company with divisions in parts and distribution as well as manufacturing, and renamed, Galfab returned to its independent roots with the sale of the company to its employees through an e.s.o.p. The marriage of local, employee ownership with the expert leadership that their former parent company brought to the company is heartening.

Just about all of our major companies are searching for workers in an increasingly tight market, and that's problematic, but the silver lining, of course, is that our manufacturing sector remains resilient and strong, and I'd rather have to fight the uphill workforce battle than the uphill we-have-no-tax-base battle.

A few years ago, I found myself on television, when the PBS-aired *ExtraordINARY Indiana* profiled Pulaski County. I do not get to return to the small screen this year, but our community does; later this month, our spectacular television commercial returns to Chicagoland, apprising all of those suburbanites and yuppies of the great day-trip destination that we offer. The Tippy, the State Park, the trail, affordable golf, pizza and beer, face-sized tenderloins and a lot of beer, top-notch paintball, sandhill cranes, and so much more — all so close to one of the largest metro areas in the country: fortieth-largest in the world, in fact.

Speaking of pizza and beer, we continued to show that we support small business in Pulaski County with the loan that we made to help Tippy's to move to an upgraded facility. In order to expand and to strengthen our small-business support network, the CDC is facilitating a partnership among the Chamber, the Uptown Project, and Wander Our Winamac to sponsor a series of Indiana Small Business Development Center workshops this summer.

Last July, we hosted our first-ever farmers' breakfast; we plan to do this again this year and are looking at opportunities for increasing our engagement in the agricultural economy. We're ideally situated for all kinds of value-added opportunities and diversification, and taking advantage of this has to be a stronger component of our vision moving forward. And it's nice to see more State-level agencies than just Ag realizing this. On the smaller scale, under Krysten's leadership, the Pulaski County Farmers' Market is this summer expanding to two markets per week.

Things certainly are not perfect, and plenty of distractions conspire to keep us from always being able to focus on what we should prefer to prioritize, but we have a lot of great things

going on in Pulaski County. It's hard not to find it all a little bittersweet, but I hope you remember that today is never too late to be brand-new; I challenge everyone here to be willing to start anew as we work to build Pulaski County into Mayberry 2.0