

Without a doubt, we've had some good things happening in Pulaski County over the last year: new investment has been made at the former Anvil & Saw/T&S Recycle facility, with a plastics manufacturer preparing to launch operations. Downtown Medaryville is seeing the rehabilitation of buildings, Star City has a new gun shop in the former Lightstream bank building, and the Uptown Project has been doing incredible things in Francesville, especially with their Montgomery Mercantile. The RAM-Tech program that we established at West Central High School continues to grow, offering students preparation for a pathway rooted in industrial maintenance and repair and related fields. We're hopeful for the successes of a new commercial agricultural venture north of Francesville, J.S.I. north of Winamac is in the middle of significant investments, Clear Decision Filtration just paid off one of its County loans and is expanding again, Black Gold Farms and Pipestone have added significant agricultural assessed value in the county while creating new jobs, and all of our major manufacturers are keeping busy and in desperate need of a reliable workforce.

Nonetheless, something is rotten in the state of Pulaski. Our largest employer, BraunAbility, is moving its headquarters to Carmel, and with it more than 100 well-paying positions. It will be investing about \$7.5-million in offices and a new R&D facility and creating something like 70 jobs that we won't host here. We're grateful that they'll continue to add production jobs locally, and it's not difficult to see why a large company in need of talent would move to a community with a growing population that offers the kinds of amenities that attract residents, but it still hurts. But how could we possibly expect to keep a company of that magnitude when we have the highest income-tax rate in the state, which is hardly attractive, and don't offer the kinds of amenities that you'd like to think would indicate a solid R.O.I. on that "investment" that we ask wage-earners to make with each paycheck.

Like I said, our major employers all desire a more reliable workforce, and BraunAbility went where there's talent to be found. Pulaski County continues to lose people — at a rate of about 100 per year since 2010. This is unsustainable for our major employers, and we're looking at a couple of strategies for addressing this, but it's not healthy. It also bodes poorly for our County's financial well-being.

At the Monday, 8-April joint session, we learned that within a few years, the County will be looking at an annual operating deficit of about \$2.5-million if something significant doesn't change. Two. Point. Five. Million. Let that sink in for a moment. That's equal to about one-third of our annual general-fund revenues. And this amount doesn't even include potential annual payments on either courthouse repairs or the demolition of that grand structure and the construction of an addition on the justice center. For years, I've been arguing that our highest-in-the-state local income tax discourages residential and business investment in our community, and that we should look at the possibility of lowering the rate and offsetting the consequent losses with an increase to our property-tax rate. Well, at this point, the 2020 expiration of the special jail tax is going to take a toll on our financial health, and a net increase in taxes, rather than a re-balancing, may be necessary. I fail to see how that could possibly be conducive to halting our population loss or encouraging new business development here.

Do we need to make cuts? Absolutely. Do we know where? Probably not. Is cutting \$6,000 from a professional employee's promised annual salary where to start? Only if you're looking to create dissatisfied employees. Anyone can cut expenses — even by reducing the workforce if needed —, but it's a lot harder to make cuts effectively and responsibly than it is to slash and burn.

This speech is supposed to be about the state of the Pulaski County economy, but, ultimately, our problems are not economic. They're not even just about our fiscal health. It is time to admit what I've long been loath to acknowledge: the underlying problem hurting Pulaski County is cultural. We are our own worst enemy.

The quarrel *du jour* centers around the fate of our courthouse — whether we should invest in rehabilitating and modernizing it, or either demolish or find a buyer for it while we add on to the justice center. I have thoughts on this matter, but this is neither the time nor place for me to express those. Rather, I call attention to this contentious issue because it is the perfect example of two of the more noxious components of our culture.

First, the courthouse's structural problems are not the result of a cruel fate, but the product of decades' worth of neglect and failure to make necessary investments in it — just as, time and again, Pulaski County has failed to invest in its own future. It's a sad irony that a community that has so often faced the future with fear and doubt is struggling to preserve the most magnificent symbol of its past.

Second, the increasingly problematic discourse surrounding this issue is indicative of our apparently inescapable inability to argue civilly in Pulaski County. I am deeply sympathetic to those fighting to save our courthouse and should hate to see it no longer serve as a county building or to stand at all, but it's deeply dispiriting to see people take to Facebook, anonymously behind the cover of a Facebook page, accusing our current County leadership of being equally culpable for the state of affairs because they've not implemented small-scale security and safety improvements or pushed for better regular maintenance. These things matter, and our leaders should be called out for not addressing them timely, but commissioners who've been on the job for a couple of years can hardly be blamed for \$2-million worth of structural problems that have been systematically disregarded by regime after regime. But the truth should never get in the way of a good story.

Of course, we all recall the great wind storm of 2018. I'm not saying that the County made the right or wrong decision, but the way we handled that situation, with the Plan Commission eventually recommending a complete ban on wind turbines against the County Attorney's advice after being bullied by a contingent of vocal, disrespectful opponents, many of whom don't even live in this county, just further reminds us of our apparently constitutional inability to deal with heated issues maturely. Hell, I was accused of trying to subvert the process of amending the ordinance because I wanted to make sure that we didn't adopt rules that wouldn't stand up to a legal challenge.

Earlier, I alluded to the significant investment being made by Pipestone at Morgan Hill, the hog operation on State Road 14 west of Winamac. I've had to make phone calls to IDEM to ascertain the truth about false rumors being spread by someone who isn't happy that this project is moving forward and decided that dishonesty is the best way to express his feelings.

I have long argued that we need to envision building our community not to remain stuck in the 1950s or 60s, but as Mayberry 2.0. Unfortunately, rather than taking our lead from Andy, Barney, and Aunt Bee, we all too often behave more like we're denizens of South Park, Colorado. If we want to be a healthy community, then we need to fix our culture. We need to fix ourselves.

For as long as I've held this job, I've put my physical and emotional well-being on the line fighting the good fight and seen my hair and beard grey significantly. For a half-decade, I've been blaring the siren about our financial sickliness; only now are more than a handful of us taking this seriously. As long as I'm still with the C.D.C., I'll keep pushing to make Pulaski County the best that it can be.

What are you, the people who call this place home, going to do to ensure that you don't start paying your property taxes to Monticello or Rochester in the future?

Thank you very much.

