

SUPERIOR 'WHIT'

County Takes a Pro-Business Approach

By Matt Ottinger

If you ask people in Whitley County about the challenges of building a business in the area, be prepared for an awkward pause. According to local leaders, that hesitation is because county officials have made an employer-friendly atmosphere a priority.

“There’s an ease of doing business in a smaller environment,” reveals Brian Emerick, owner of Columbia City orthopedic manufacturer Micropulse. “We know everybody and everybody knows us when it comes to local government and the (Whitley County Economic Development Corporation). Getting things done through the commissioners has been friendly, and our county is pro-business.”

Nestled between economic hubs Fort Wayne and Warsaw, Whitley County boasts an advantageous locale. But capitalizing on those advantages takes a unified front.

“Our government officials understand they need to promote business, especially when it comes to local permitting,” Emerick says. “It’s a one-stop shop in our county government center. You can visit every office you need in the same facility.”

Emerick notes that his company is literally in the middle of a cornfield.

“Although next year it will be beans,” he quips, noting he employs about 300 staffers in 160,000 square feet of space, and the rural setting affords him plenty of room to grow.

Hoosier heft

Jon Myers has only been president of the Whitley County Economic Development Corporation (EDC) for just over a year. But he grew up in the area, for which he holds a strong affinity. He’s seen its evolution, and believes the work ethic of those in the county remains a vital asset.

“We’ve always been strong in manufacturing because you have kids coming off the farm that know how to tear a tractor apart and put it back together,” he asserts.

Columbia City-based Impact CNC



Downtown Columbia City anchors Whitley County’s quaint, but thriving business atmosphere.

ranked 50th in the latest “Inc. 5000” list of the country’s fastest growing businesses – second fastest in the state, in fact.

Owner Jerry Busche launched Impact CNC, which builds machine components for original equipment manufacturers, in 2012. (Toyota Forklift in Columbus is one of its largest customers.) He too finds little to complain about in the workers he’s able to find in Whitley County.

“The Hoosier work ethic is second to none. ... We’re not having too much trouble hiring workers,” he points out. “Everybody wants to do a good job, so as long as you put a good training program in, you can find them.”

The greatest challenge these days, according to Busche, is absorbing all the growth that comes with new business.

Additionally, Myers notes that over 20 years ago, the county government (commissioners and council) launched a push to encourage manufacturing.

“They set up a TIF district on the U.S. 30 corridor between Columbia City and Fort Wayne,” he says, and his organization’s web

site notes the TIF is one of the largest in the state. “They set up (the EDC) to go out and attract new industrial businesses and encourage the folks we already had here. It’s really grown significantly in that time. The Whitley County EDC is probably one of the older EDCs in the state. Our 25th anniversary is coming up in January.”

Warming the climate

Busche credits the pro-jobs mentality as an attraction for prospective employers.

“When we started to look (at potential locations), we looked at Fort Wayne, but Whitley County was very proactive in helping us with tax abatements ...” he relays. “The EDC worked very hard to help us find ways to finance, employees and training grants. They even helped us with a grant to renovate a building. They were very creative – the county commissioners, the town, they are very pro-business to try to help us get going.”

Another asset in the community is the “Orthovation Center,” orchestrated by Micropulse.

“We have several companies we’re incubating both inside Micropulse and outside, and we’re building a 36,000-square-foot building in the Park 30 Industrial Park for one of our most recent start-ups,” Emerick reveals.

He explains the center tailors its services to best help entrepreneurs.

“We don’t have a sign hanging out that says ‘Orthovation Center,’ but we’ve coined that term for what we do,” Emerick notes. “It can take a lot of different shapes. We provide space, but more importantly provide guidance, counseling, engineering and accounting services, corporate governance, fundraising, providing capital, manufacturing, IT, you name it. We have four companies we’re involved with – all in orthopedics.”

Getting schooled

Education is an ongoing focus as Whitley County residents plan for its economic future.

“We’re lucky in that we have three really good public school systems in the county,” Myers contends. “Being a small enough county, the communication is much better here than other places around the country or state. (The EDC) works with schools to do a quarterly Industry Immersion Program where a local business will host teachers from different schools to show them what they do (at that company) and how they do it.”

The program fosters experiential learning for both teachers and students.

“It’s really been a great program because then those teachers can go back and give real life examples of why math skills are important and why you should take chemistry, and why you need to be able to write in a clear and concise manner,” he adds. “Right before this interview, I was talking to the superintendent of Columbia City High School, and we were talking about the great feedback she’s received from the teachers who had that opportunity to go out and see how

those things are done.”

Outside of school, the EDC’s Agribusiness Initiative seeks to spur development in that important industry. It presents case studies and career opportunities.

Move toward a million

A team approach is now the modus operandi in Northeast Indiana, and the region was one of three to receive state funding through the Regional Cities Initiative. Northeast Indiana’s “Road to One Million Plan” encompasses 41 regional development projects with investments totaling over \$471 million.

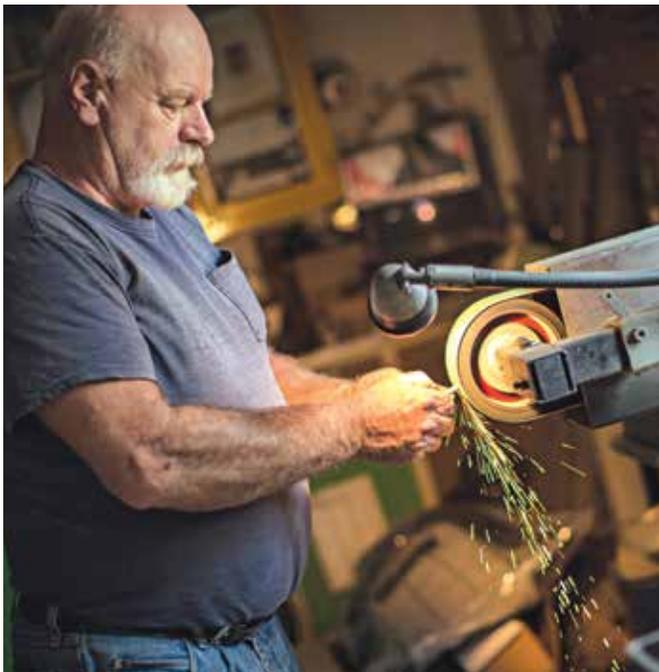
“If you look at Northeast Indiana as a whole, one of the big goals for all of us is to take our population base to one million people,” Myers notes. (Northeast Indiana’s Regional Cities Initiative submission listed the population as nearly 790,000 in 2015, with the goal to enhance economic conditions so that number reaches one million by 2031.) “That goes back to attracting talented people who want to do the jobs we have here.”

Emerick believes collaboration among the region’s 13 counties is critical for progress.

“It used to be in the old days it was every man for themselves,” he recalls. “Allen County was the big shark and all the little counties were fighting for their crumbs. Maybe there’s still a little bit of that, but people in the other counties have gone so far in regional thought.”

While the region grows, Whitley County will look to capture not just employers and employees, but residents as well.

“There may be more amenities in Fort Wayne or Warsaw, so people may prefer to live there,” Myers concludes. “So what can we do to promote ourselves as a place to live and raise a family and have the quality of life amenities that other places have? I think any businesses you talk to in the county will tell you they’re concerned about keeping the talent pipeline full and recruiting people to do some of the high-end work that we do.”



Be Adaptive Equipment – a producer of hunting and fishing gear for disabled outdoorsmen – and orthopedic manufacturer Micropulse exemplify the innovative companies that call Whitley County home.

RESOURCES: Jerry Busche, Impact CNC, at www.impactcnc.net | Brian Emerick, Micropulse Inc., at www.micropulseinc.com | Jon Myers, Whitley County Economic Development Corporation, at www.whitleyedc.com