

Alliance Touts Indiana Benefits Over Neighboring States

Regional economic development partnerships are expanding rapidly across Indiana. One of the newest uses a major city in neighboring Ohio to help advertise its amenities.

The Southeast Indiana Growth Alliance includes Dearborn, Franklin, Ohio, Ripley and Switzerland counties, as well as the city of Batesville. It promotes itself as the “affordable Cincinnati address.”

Gary Norman is economic development director in Ripley County and president of the new regional entity. He says Indiana’s strong business climate gives the southeastern Indiana counties the advantage over locations in Ohio and Kentucky. “When companies are looking at the Cincinnati area, we wanted to throw our name in the hat. We needed to align with Cincinnati and become part of the Tri-State region.”

Norman, despite an extensive real estate background, says the traditional “location, location, location” mantra has been adjusted to “location, labor force, location. You have to have the skilled labor, and we have that. Every county in the region exports a large percentage of its labor force.” He cites affordable real estate as another strong regional attribute.

The presence of Honda, while outside the region in neighboring Decatur County, has brought increased awareness to the area and substantial economic benefits, Norman reports. Among the recent additions within Ripley County has been Pike Lumber in Milan, which he calls the most sophisticated sawmill in the United States.

Resource: Gary Norman, Southeast Indiana Growth Alliance, at www.southeastindiana.org

Creating a New Way to Pay

The online payment space, currently dominated by PayPal, has been and will undoubtedly continue to see new potential entrants. One that is gaining traction is Palo Alto, California-based WePay.

While PayPal focuses on e-commerce and consumer transactions, WePay has targeted the group market. “If you want to sell something online, PayPal is a great option,” admits 25-year-old WePay co-founder Rich Aberman. “If you want to collect money for a fantasy football league or group trip, this is a better option.”

WePay has attracted more than \$9 million in venture capital, including the individual financial support of a number of top technology investors. The company makes money by charging a fee – either 50 cents or 3.5% of the deposit. Fraternities, sororities, scout troops, group trip planners and more helped weekly transaction totals hit \$1 million by the third quarter of 2010.

And the newcomer is not afraid to stir things up. In October, the WePay team decided to garner a bit of attention by placing a 600-pound block of ice at the entrance of a PayPal conference in San Francisco. Inside the ice, along with hundreds of dollars, a simple statement, “PayPal freezes your accounts ... unfreeze your money” with WePay.

Resource: WePay at www.wepay.com

Flagship Loan Program Assists Small Businesses

The Flagship Enterprise Center, an Anderson technology park that has helped more than 70 area businesses since it began in 2005, has added a microloan program to its portfolio.

“We’d been successful helping clients secure (Small Business Innovation Research) grants,” explains Adam Hoeksema, Flagship client services manager. “Those are primarily for technology-based companies.”

He says the loans – ranging from \$5,000 to \$35,000 – provide another capital source, in addition to investment and grants.

“We’re able to give to some strong loan applicants who can’t get them otherwise, because banks aren’t lending for example,” Hoeksema offers. “Many clients just need a little kick start to get going.”

The Flagship loans thus far have assisted companies in software development, health care manufacturing, landscaping, online retail and marketing. Six loans totaling \$67,100 have been provided as of mid-January, a number Hoeksema hopes to build upon.

“We’d love to do more,” he asserts. “It’s a process – and it’s hard to find too many who’ll go through the entire application process. But we’d love for more applications to come in.”

The Flagship Enterprise Center is a partnership between Anderson University and the city of Anderson.

Resource: Adam Hoeksema, Flagship Enterprise Center, at www.flagshipenterprise.org



E-books Flying Off Digital Shelves

Just two years ago, the first thing you saw when walking into a bookstore was books. Today, your eyes are likely drawn to a booth – usually accompanied by a large banner – advertising the store’s e-reader (a book-shaped device that has the capacity to hold a large number of digital books, or e-books).

E-books have been growing in popularity over the last several years and 2010 was no exception. According to the Association of American Publishers, e-book sales in November 2010 had a 130% increase over the same month in the previous year. The group also reports that e-books account for 9% of the total book market.

In January of 2010, Amazon reported that for every 10 physical books purchased, it sold six e-books for its Kindle e-reader; just nine months later the company announced that the sales of Kindle books had passed those of hardcover versions.

As more books become available digitally, these numbers are bound to grow.

While it’s hard to compete with the ability to carry around



hundreds or even thousands of your favorite book titles in one slim carrier, the printed word still has advantages. Not all titles are available digitally and there is currently no standard e-book format, which could hamper readability in the future.

Don't Bear Burden of Workplace Drug Abuse

It's the third leading cause of workplace violence. It accounts for 35% to 50% of worker's compensation claims and decreases employee morale and productivity. Substance abuse (drugs and alcohol) impacts businesses of all sizes, but can cripple smaller ones without the resources to implement – and enforce – drug-free workplace policies.

A new statewide initiative is bridging that gap by helping manufacturers with fewer than 500 employees “clean up” their businesses.

Last October, LaPorte-based Figment Group – a leading provider of drug-free workplace, federal regulatory consulting and safety compliance services – received funding from the U.S. Small Business Administration to launch (and manage) the Drug-Free Hoosiers project.

As part of a two-year grant, Figment Group will provide supervisory training (e.g., how to determine the signs of on-the-job abuse), free employee assistance programming, financial assistance (e.g., reduced-cost or free drug tests) and more. Also available is an implementation guide featuring policy template builders.

Participants in the program pay a nominal fee.

“Every year, American businesses lose \$82 billion in productivity, injuries, theft and absenteeism,” comments Mary Wellnitz, Figment Group president and CEO. “When you’re trying to keep a company afloat in today’s economy, these are things people need to start looking at.”

Resources: Figment Group at www.figmentgroupinc.com
Drug-Free Hoosiers at www.drugfreehoosiers.com

Demand Increases for Elkhart County ‘Trolley’

Residents requested it – and they got it. Starting last August, an expanded line was added to the Interurban Trolley public bus service in the Elkhart County region.

Among the stops now covered by the new Elkhart East/West route: the Middlebury Park industrial area, Ivy Tech, the THINK Corporation, other industrial and manufacturing businesses, plus several apartment complexes.

Five routes in total make up the Interurban Trolley system, managed by the Michiana Area Council of Government. Beside Elkhart, the cities of Goshen and Mishawaka are also served in some capacity. The system’s hub – the Elkhart transfer station – is located downtown, near the city’s courthouse.

These distinguished-looking buses (trolleys that resemble the interurban trains of a century ago) operate Monday through Saturday from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m., with no service on Sunday or major holidays. The Interurban Trolley fare is \$1 per one-way ride. Seniors and people with disabilities ride for half-price with a valid ID during non-peak hours.

Resource: Interurban Trolley at www.interurbantrolley.com

Shorts written by BizVoice® staff