



VANDERBURGH VIBE

All Agree: People Make It Special

By Charlee Beasor

Ask several people the same few questions and no doubt you'll receive a variety of answers – especially when the participants come from different backgrounds and industries.

But one theme that stood out as strikingly similar in Vanderburgh County was the answer to one of five questions *BizVoice* posed to business leaders: What makes Vanderburgh County a special place to live?

Across the board: “the people.”

University of Evansville President Thomas Kazee, who took the reins of the university in 2010 after living in Greenville, S.C. for several years, points to the community feel and authenticity he noticed upon returning to the Midwest.

“The thing that immediately struck us was the character of the people. The lack of pretention, the sort of integrity in the culture; the ‘what you see is what you get.’ That is a wonderful quality,” he asserts.

Darren Stearns, general manager of SMG-Evansville (the management company for the Old National Events Plaza, Evansville’s downtown convention center), takes an even broader perspective.

“For me, I think it’s the community. The friendliness. Southern Indiana is very open to all people. It’s very friendly; a nice place to go and visit. Everybody is welcoming, no matter where you’re going,” he notes.

Others, such as local labor and employment law attorney and Evansville native Michael Schiff (partner at Ziemer Stayman Weitzel and Shoulders LLP), highlighted the “small town friendly atmosphere,” as a constant in the county, despite the amount of growth that has taken place.

Like Schiff, Dean Bosler was born and raised in Evansville. Bosler is owner of Dean Bosler’s Furniture Showroom. He says one thing that

hasn’t changed over the years is the way the community comes together for a variety of causes.

“When there’s any kind of tragedy, you see so many people come together. Any kind of fundraisers, this community just shines. A lot of communities give, but ours does an outstanding job,” he states.

Of course, it’s not all sunshine and roses when it comes to living and working in a community – as anyone will attest. There are problems and challenges too. These leaders touch on those when answering the additional questions:

- What is the biggest business challenge in Vanderburgh County? The biggest opportunity?
- Is the workforce able to sustain the businesses in the county?
- Is it possible for people to live, work and play in Vanderburgh County – or do people seek any of those elsewhere in the region?
- If someone were to visit the county for the first time, what would you recommend they do?

Promising developments on the horizon

In discussing the county’s opportunities, the four leaders mention many of the exciting changes that have come to Vanderburgh County, and downtown Evansville, in particular:

- A new Indiana University medical school is coming to downtown (due to be completed in late 2017), next to the new Evansville Doubletree Convention Center Hotel that is under construction and set to open in late 2016
- The new hotel will be connected to the Old National Events Plaza convention center (where renovations and upgrades are taking place) and with the Ford Center, which opened in 2011 and hosts a number of sporting events, concerts and shows
- The Tropicana Casino, a mainstay for 20 years, will be moving to a land-based facility (groundbreaking to commence this year). The casino will pay \$1 million toward the relocation of the LST-325 World War II decommissioned vessel to the spot where the Tropicana is currently docked

- And don't forget the new stretch of Interstate 69 that is literally opening new roads for the region

Despite all these economic opportunities and positive developments, Kazee laments that Evansville still has an image problem, part of it springing from its location away from the state's "significant urban area."

"I think the biggest challenge is location. The perception of Evansville as being sort of off the beaten path, in a sense. I-69 has helped a great deal, but we're still two-and-a-half hours away from Indianapolis," he says.

"Related to that is the perception of the city. With some changes in the American economy and the decline in American manufacturing and the departure of Whirlpool (in 2009) ... the biggest challenge was, and continues to be in some respects, for Evansville to be seen as an area of economic vitality and an area where there is a capable labor force and a lot of strength in terms of business leadership in the community."

Workforce woes

Most other business challenges facing Vanderburgh County center on the workforce.

Using his own personal anecdotes, Schiff says his four children who are out of college didn't return to Evansville.

"We need to do a better job of ensuring there are meaningful jobs so that our kids will come back home and remain in the community," he offers.

The new medical school is a ray of hope in that regard, Schiff says, because of the possibility of his two younger children taking advantage of the proximity of the school and staying in the area after graduation.

The flip side to curbing the brain drain is having trained and talented workers who actually want to show up and work, Bosler exclaims. He opened his company's main store 40 years ago and has added three more over the years, employing over 100 people.

While many workers at Bosler's main store have been there for anywhere from 10 to 30 years, he struggles to fill positions at his two Ashley Home Furniture outlets.

"I think the challenge for any business owner nationwide is finding people that want to work. That's our No. 1 thing, no matter who I talk to. ... Just finding somebody that wants to work. Nobody has the answer," Bosler states.

Unfortunately, he says, many times the people that do walk in for job interviews are either underwhelming (in terms of "dos" and "don'ts" for a job interview, t-shirts and shorts should be an obvious "don't," he emphasizes) or

are not interested in the schedule demands of a retail job.

"This is an ongoing problem for businesses," he laments.

Kazee acknowledges a mismatch in terms of education and available jobs in the region. He highlights all higher education institutions as examples of where more communication among the business and education communities could make a big difference.

"It's important for groups like the chamber and economic development groups, for them to help us as educational institutions identify where needs are," he says.

While more local companies are looking at University of Evansville graduates for

we have to offer," he declares.

The additional amenities that are coming are not only bringing people in, but also showing younger people they can stay in the area and raise families there, he adds.

Schiff hopes the amenities do keep those young people close to home.

"With all the positives that are going on and other things – we've built some new sports facilities, and we've got the Evansville museum, children's museum, two great universities down here that always present sporting events," he notes. "I do think it's possible to live, work and play in Vanderburgh County. And I hope the young people will come back and check all that out."



University of Evansville President Thomas Kazee looks to the school's new physician's assistant program, which will operate out of the soon-to-be-built medical school campus in downtown Evansville, as a major change on the horizon. "Evansville is a surprisingly vital place for health professionals," he says.

engineering and health care jobs, the small, private college that enrolls about 2,500 students is also home to popular theater and archaeology programs – fields that are not necessarily in high demand in the region.

Amenities, attractions galore

Of course, Stearns would know about the amenities offered in Vanderburgh County. Attracting not only people, but conventions to the area is an important economic advantage.

"(It's about) getting people into the city to see what we have to offer. The city and the people will sell itself. The convention hotel is going to help us draw in some we wouldn't have had before. All of this development is showing that the city is moving forward. Our job is to bring them in and let them see what

Other highlights include the riverfront area. That's where Kazee would send someone new to the county and visiting for the first time.

"It's really one of the world's great rivers. We're so used to it, but it's such an impressive thing," he suggests. "And then I'd encourage them to walk around – there's a wonderful historic district of magnificent homes."

Bosler also highlights the natural scenery of the area, and mentions the biking and hiking trails that are a fairly recent addition.

"I would talk about the riverfront; the biking and walking paths, riding paths and new ones that are being tied into Evansville from Newburgh," he asserts. "We're coming in a little late, but we're getting there. I think that's going to be really phenomenal."