

Strong park system could enhance Portage County's economic climate

PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT

The 2010 class of Leadership Portage County recently embarked on a Portage County Regional Vision Plan or simply called "Visioning in Portage." While the class is also helping to mentor children with economic needs, we saw a bigger picture issue that needed to be addressed.

Leadership Portage County is an excellent program to learn about the various aspects of the community, presented by many former Leadership alumni. Our class wanted not only to be the best class ever but also to team up and help form the best county ever.

Portage County does not have a county-wide comprehensive economic development plan.

We hope to change that. The result of not having these tools in our planning tool box is a very reactive county as well as reactive independent local governments. However, when a plan is in place, you have a direction in which to move. It is difficult to plan for the future if you are not sure what future everyone wants.

One of the biggest shortfalls of not having a direction is not being able to recruit new business opportunities effectively.

Recently at our Portage County Planning and Revitalization and Economic Planning meetings, a group of local economic development specialists, area city planners, county chambers of commerce and zoning inspectors heard from a Northeastern Ohio agency that markets the entire region describe Portage County as an "enigma."

Agencies from outside Portage County do not know how to market our area. We "lack a cohesive brand" that they can sell to potential businesses. I have found this lack of cohesiveness to be true in our ability as a county to obtain regional grants that always seem to go to the larger metropolitan areas.

At a recent PREP meeting, a community representative told us about a business that wanted to relocate here, but first wanted to know more about the county park system — or if we had one, but specifically what kind of trails do we have, what are the plans to expand, what is

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the interconnectivity to other trail systems? It was important to this business that this amenity was in place and that the community was interested in actively maintaining and improving it. We must become proactive in what we want for our future.

We need to establish some short- to long-range goals and work together to achieve them.

One of the realities to having healthy communities is a strong Portage Park District. While the park district has great leadership and excellent volunteer support, it needs community support as well. A shared vision throughout the county would not only enhance the park district but also be an economic generator for current and new businesses.

Back to Visioning in Portage. We had an initial meeting in October with all the Leadership Portage alumni to gauge interest. Fifty people signed up to create a county-wide comprehensive plan. There will be a strong emphasis on economic development and on who we are and what we want to be. Sustainability is also a key to our future.

At our kick-off meeting on Jan. 25, we had 75 community members interested in creating a plan for our future. Anyone interested in participating is welcome to join this endeavor.

We also will be reaching out to the community throughout the spring and summer months. The next full meeting will be in March. If you are interested in attending or learning more, please contact me at the Portage County Regional Planning Commission, 330-297-3613.

Todd Peetz is the director of the Portage County Regional Planning Commission. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier.

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