

Is data in our future?

EDC SEEKS TO ATTRACT DATA CENTERS, LIFE SCIENCES TO COUNTY

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A local organization isn't waiting for the metropolitan area's economy to rebound on its own.

"We're going to focus directly on two types of industries as opportunities to grow what we have and attract new investment," said Greg Prestemon, president of the Economic Development Center of St. Charles County.

The two industries are IT/financial services and life sciences.

Prestemon discussed the economic development initiatives with the EDC directors during a board meeting Friday morning.

"We know that there are a lot of major data center facilities that are going to be put somewhere in the United States the next few years," he said. By major, he means "acres of computers" with hundreds of employees earning high rates of pay.

The corridor along Highway 40 in St. Charles County already "has the beginnings" of a cluster of data centers inside it, Prestemon said. Enterprise Rent-A-Car's Weldon Spring data center and MasterCard International's global technology center in O'Fallon are located inside the corridor. Verizon and other telecommunications companies also have data facilities there.

The same is true in the life sciences arena, the EDC chief said. He noted that Novus International, AFB International and Millipore Corp., have operations inside the Missouri Research Park located at highways 40 and 94. Novus makes nutrients that are used in the production of animal feed. AFB supplies pet food flavors, and Millipore is a bioscience research company involved in biopharmaceutical manufacturing.

These companies and others like them "offer a large upside for employment growth in the county," Prestemon said.

The Highway 40 corridor also offers advantages over other sites in the county. He said it was his understanding that the corridor's geology makes it a stable location for data centers, which can't tolerate much in the way of ground movement. Minor tremors hit the region from time to time, which could wreak havoc on data operations if the computer systems aren't stable, he added.

Prestemon said "time is of the essence," but that the EDC doesn't have a deadline for attracting these industries. Some cooperative action with the St. Louis Regional Chamber and Commerce Association is possible, especially with regard to attracting life-sciences firms, he said.

The EDC also plans to strengthen its ties with higher education. If the EDC is going to go after IT and life-science companies, “we’re going to have to have deep connections with the educational institutions in this county,” he said.

To that end, the EDC has asked Lindenwood University President James Evans to join its board beginning in 2010. Evans did not attend the EDC board meeting. He was out of town attending a Lindenwood sporting event, and was unavailable for comment.

The county doesn’t have a research university, but Prestemon said the EDC can strengthen its relationship with the University of Missouri system, which owns and operates the Missouri Research Park, and with research universities that are located in the area.

“I really wish we had Washington University here in the county,” he said.

The quality of the area’s workforce is going to be the key in recruiting these companies, Prestemon said, adding that 10 years ago companies were more concerned about land prices and taxes. He also would like local municipalities to play a role.

In the past, Prestemon said, cities have concentrated on retail development because of the sales tax revenue it generates. “We need to broaden that out,” he said.

Earlier this year the EDC indicated that it would seek out companies involved in the production of alternative energy, including wind and solar energy production. But Prestemon said Missouri doesn’t have much in the way of wind and solar energy production, and that other regions of the country already have advantages over St. Charles when it comes to attracting those companies.

More promising and more immediate opportunities present themselves in IT and life sciences, he said.