

Job Creation, Technology, Tourism, & Economic Development

BACKGROUND & APPROACH

Rockford needs jobs; but there are no magic bullets or formulas to create jobs. We must focus on fundamentals: we need good schools, safe neighborhoods, and great infrastructure. We must sell our assets. We must also have the courage to act. Rockford achieved greatness as a great place to grow a small business and a great place to raise a family. To return to greatness, we must remember that legacy and focus on the fundamentals necessary to achieve that vision again.

The current administration has, unfortunately, focused too much on the icing instead of the cake. They seem to be searching for the magic bullets or secret formulas that simply do not exist. My priorities are not a gambling casino, a \$100 million convention center, or a \$20 Million Davis Park Improvement. These are expensive bets with risky returns and they have been subject to scathing reviews recently by economists. (*See, e.g., Sanders, Heywood, The Realities of Convention Centers as Economic Development Tools, The Brookings Institute, January 2005; Murphy, Victoria, The Answer is Always Yes: Where do politicians get the crazy idea that the world needs yet another convention center? From the experts, of course, Forbes Magazine, February 28, 2005*). If we have extra money to spend, we might consider some of those options, but not while we have glaring deficiencies in our fundamentals. A convention center for out-of-town visitors will not be a facility contributing to the quality of life of our local people. It will not help the local medical community or a locally owned manufacturing company to improve its bottom line. In fact, those options could have the opposite impact. ***It has been suggested by convention center proponents that a "broad-based tax" be levied upon the entire community to pay for the convention center.*** (*See Guest Column of Brian Brown, President, Rockford Area Hotel-Motel Association, Rockford Register Star, March 6, 2004*). The social and economic costs of a gambling casino might also far outweigh any suggested economic benefit. Indeed, this Mayor's focus on a local riverboat gambling casino and his efforts to kill a Beloit, WI casino has jeopardized the City's relationship with developers from Beloit that were working to redevelop our own riverfront.

The current administration has also designed an approach that has established a culture of dependancy instead of independence. The current Mayor suggests that the only way we will thrive is through his "connections." That is a beggars mentality. Rockford must walk with its head high instead of its hand out. Our most important "connections" are to one another. If we are strong locally, we can bring a unified agenda to Springfield and Washington. A mayor must also be able to work with both Republicans and Democrats in Illinois or Washington. The current Mayor fails to mention that most of our State delegation is Republican and that we have a local Republican Congressman, Republican President, and Republican U.S. Senate and House. Rockford must work with both Republicans and Democrats and be equally willing to give credit or critique to State and National elected officials. That is the way its done in many cities in Illinois, including Aurora, Illinois (nor our larger sibling city) where they elect their mayor on a non-partisan ballot.

If our representatives are supporting our Rockford agenda, then they deserve praise whether they are Republicans or Democrats. If they are ignoring our Rockford agenda, like our Governor did when he failed recently to mention the Rockford Airport in his State of the State address, then he should be publicly criticized, even if he is a “friend”. If we stand untied and strong supporting our own Rockford agenda, if we first take care of ourselves, then we can expect others to respect us. We must have a culture of internal strength and unity instead dependence on one person’s so-called “connections.” I expect production and contributions from everyone in this community, not just one person.

We have also created a stagnant culture where we study, plan, and task force ourselves to death. We have spent literally hundreds of thousand, if not millions, on trips, plans, and task forces without results. The current administration now begs for more time. Time’s up. It’s time for change. The current administration’s repeated reluctance to engage difficult issues has cost this community both jobs and credibility. Whether a baseball team like the River Hawks or a Trim-Rite pork processing facility, this administration is on record as having failed to return phone calls and failed to submit proposals. After spending more than \$180,000 on Hope VI consultants who were hired to develop a plan to bring housing and other economic opportunities in and around properties owned by the Rockford Housing Authority, this administration did not even move forward on the application. Meanwhile, Winnebago County Housing Authority obtained an \$18 Million Hope VI grant. This lack of engagement on the tough issues is inexcusable.

My strategies for creating jobs builds on our local strengths, instead of putting us in a position where we must wait to be “saved” by the State. We will tackle the tough issues. We will focus first on tackling the local issues because that is where most of the money is spent. The amount of money local communities get from the State or Federal government pales in comparison to the monies generated through local property taxes. Local taxpayers pay for the vast majority of the \$180 Million City budget, \$260 Million School District budget, and \$240 Million County budget. Unfortunately, this administration’s hypnotic focus on Springfield and Washington has left it inattentive on the most pressing local leadership issues. While we must work with the State and Federal government to bring back our fair share of support, we must have our local act together in the first instance because that is where most of the decisions and dollars are located. When we are united locally, moreover, we will be respected and revered when we go to make our reasonable requests for support from our Republican and Democrat State and Federal delegations.

JOB CREATION/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

We must focus on meeting the needs of the businesses that are here. We too often ignore the needs and opportunities of the local small businesses. If we are attractive to local business, we will be attractive to outsiders looking for a good place to locate.

In the industry today, they call it “economic farming”. Economists have recognized that

local communities must work to cultivate their own “soil” to make it supportive of growing locally owned businesses. Over the generations, Rockford has survived many evolutions in manufacturing when local capitalists expended capital to invest in new opportunities. The problem today is that we have lost a lot of locally owned businesses that have been sold to outside interests or simply close down. To improve, rather than wait for a magic bullet solution or get in a bidding game to lure in an outside company, our first efforts must be to support and invest in the many local capitalists and small businesses that are still here.

Some of the key areas in which we can provide that support include:

- ✿ Education/workforce development
- ✿ Tax incentives for existing small businesses
- ✿ Local investment networks
- ✿ Invest in local research to support local industry
- ✿ Great infrastructure (roads, rail, airport, fiber optics)
- ✿ Developing a Minority Certification Program;
- ✿ Creating Targeted Minority Recruitment Plans;
- ✿ Tax Incentives to Encourage Development in Targeted Areas;

We must engage the tough issues, unlike the current administration which has dodged controversial opportunities. Whether a baseball team or a manufacturing plant, the Mayor’s office must lead this community through difficult decisions.

TECHNOLOGY

We live in a world where technology means the end of many jobs, but the creation of many new job opportunities. While technology and automation has brought efficiencies that have ended many low-skilled jobs, many higher skill jobs have been created. Rockford’s educational resources must be preparing our people for the skills they need. I will hire a director of Education & Life-Long Learning who will help implement our strategies for life-long learning by working with all of our local educational resources to make sure labor needs and educational needs are met.

Ironically, many technologies created by large business has also enable smaller businesses to compete. Broad-band internet access has enabled small businesses to compete with much larger businesses by making logistics and just-in-time ordering and fulfillment available to much smaller companies. This technology has also enable “flexible networks” of individual small businesses to work together to get larger jobs done. Locally, a group called MARRV has been a leader in this area.

MARRV stands for the Manufacturing Alliance of the Rock River Valley. It is a private group of small manufacturers that are building a network of working together to bid on larger contacts and proposals that would typically only be available to larger companies. This has been supported by Congressman Manzullo and the City of Rockford. I will continue to fully support this effort as it focuses on local businesses working together to create competitive solutions.

The EIGER lab is another great example of current research that can help us stay ahead of the field in areas of manufacturing research. We can thank local visionaries like Jon Lundin of the Abilities Center/Goodwill Industries and Republic Congressman Don Manzullo who have pushed for federal support for these research efforts.

The problem with the current administration's efforts in developing a Broad-Bank fiber optic ring, however, is in both the concept and execution. The administration's primary focus has been to network large institutions. While it is critical to have both the medical community and large industry involved in a fiber-optic solution, the administration's concept has largely ignored small business. The pricing and planning for the administration's fiber concept removes it from the grasp of most small businesses.

The current administration's first efforts to build this network has failed. The administration supported and executed a no-bid contract with a vendors, which have been criticized as both costly and one-sided. (*See Rock River Times*). The network has not been fully built and will not get done successfully with such execution. When the administration is perceived as playing favorites and having an unfair playing field for developers and businesses, we discourage many other developers and businesses from doing business in Rockford. That is extremely damaging to this community.

Under my administration, we will play fair and we will play smart. We will focus on building fiber optic infrastructure that meets the needs of both small and large business. We will get the fiber optic ring lit and make it available to this community on a timely basis.

TOURISM STRATEGIES & EXPENDITURES

Tourism is an important business. It means jobs and opportunity. But our tourism investments must be leveraged to create assets and enjoyment that enhance the quality of life for our local people as well as people from out of town.

My tourism focus is on selling that which is uniquely Rockford. We currently do a good job of selling golf courses and sports tournaments, but there is so much more to Rockford that has not been developed or sold correctly. We have a rich variety of ethnic neighborhoods with a rich variety of small retail businesses, restaurants and entertainment offerings. The City must employ a strategy to enhance and market those areas, just like they have done in cities like Chicago.

The riverfront has also been largely ignored from a core infrastructure investment standpoint. While other river communities in Illinois like Peoria, Naperville, Geneva, and St. Charles have invested in connecting their riverfronts, Rockford still has many pieces that are not connected.

Rather than building a \$100 Million convention center, which would be an asset primarily for out-of-town visitors, I am proposing that we build a connected riverfront pathway that will

continue southward that path that currently stops at the YMCA. The path would also be able to move inward along Kent Creek and Keith Creek. This path would connect assets on both sides of the river including Burpee, Discovery Center Children's Museum, the Rockford Art Museum, Downtown including the Coronado, MetroCenter, and Library, Tinker Swiss Cottage, Marinelli Stadium, and Klehm Arboretum. The path would also make accessible undeveloped properties that the City now owns including the old Ingersoll property and the old Barber-Coleman property. The path would not force existing businesses out of business, and would not always be directly on the river. It would, however, provide a safe and beautiful connection to our entire riverfront. It would provide a huge incentive to attract new private restaurants and retail shops along the waterfront. After talking to hotel developers, it is anticipated that the construction of this pathway will bring several hotel development proposals for our downtown and waterfront.

We want our river and our downtown to be an everyday economy, not just a place to visit during the July 4th Celebration or On the Waterfront. This fully developed riverfront will go a long way to make our downtown and waterfront everyday places to visit and shop. We must, however, also work on changing the way parking spots are allocated in our downtown parking decks. We must allow for anyone to park in the decks as opposed to the current system which requires the purchase of a monthly parking pass. We must also do the long-overdue obvious thing of adding lighted signs to the parking decks so people know they exist. We will also work to provide a system of trolley-style buses to provide transit services in and around our riverfront and downtown areas.

How to pay for the system? Right now Rockford and Winnebago County have built miles and miles of new pathways and our planning 28 miles more . . . the river just has not been prioritized in the past. That can and must change. Most of the money for development of this pathway system can come from federal motor fuel taxes directed to our community. In the past, those funds have built over 14 miles of pathway stretching from Rock Cut State Park along Perryville road to the Kishwaukee River. Such funds have also recently been allocated to build 28 miles of pathway from Pecatonica to Rockford. Those funds just have not been prioritized for Rockford's riverfront. That is a mistake and it must change.

The City must work with the County and the Park District to plan a four-year capital budget to get the pathway completed in that four-year time period. It can and must be done. We lose out on property tax base and sales tax base every day that goes by without such an infrastructure asset in place. This is critical. By building upon a great resource like our river, we will be adding to the quality of life of the local people, making physical connections for our people, and also creating a great tourism asset to bring in new money to our community.

TOURISM MARKETING & SALES

As we improve our core fundamentals, we must sell our advantages and opportunities and incentives. We need to tell the world we are business friendly and "open for business." We must also end the perception that we only favor certain vendors or developers. We must be accountable and successful in using our economic development tools by ending the complete

“out-sourcing” of many of our economic development tools.

We currently send approximately \$1.5 Million in economic development funds to non-profit organizations, the Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Council of 100, which are outside the direct control of the mayor’s office. To retain accountability and direct these agencies, the City of Rockford must have a Mayor’s office of Tourism, Culture, and Special Events.

The focus of the Convention & Visitor’s Bureau must be directed from the Mayor’s office. I want the CVB to help sell tourism packages for our Riverfront and to market our diverse neighborhoods and business districts throughout the City. As we build wonderful destinations, we can, for example, sell weekend packages that include a stay at a hotel, an inclusive pass to all of the museums, free rides on the Trolley-Car shuttle system, and discounts at area retail stores and restaurants. We have a wonderful City, which will become even more attractive by acting on these priorities.