

Marshall hosts third economic development meeting

By Maggie Menderski. The Marshall Democrat-News: March 13, 2012.

Marshall-Saline Development Corporation Executive Director Bill Riggins held a microphone up to each of the 45 participants at the Marshall economic development meeting on Tuesday, March 13.

After Zimmer Real Estate Group's Troy Nash facilitated a dialogue regarding the area's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, he asked the community members to list the attributes of utopian Marshall.

Zimmer, a Kansas City-based company, has developed numerous economic strategies in 44 states and four foreign countries. This agency contributed to the plan for The Legends entertainment area near Kansas City, and now the company intends to formulate a comprehensive economic plan for Saline County.

"This is a really exciting time for our city, our county and our region," said City Administrator Connie Latimer. "I now see what our vehicle is to the future, and it's Troy and this group."

Several ideas recurred throughout the crowd of businesspeople, elected officials and residents, as the microphone rotated through the crowd. An overwhelming majority suggested support for the schools, careers for those with higher education degrees, more businesses and a need to care for the amenities Marshall does have.

But before Zimmer can generate a plan for this utopia, Nash has two hours worth of new data to sort through.

First the participants cited the community's great work ethic, caring demeanor, location and willingness to volunteer as strengths.

"When we see that something needs to be done, we do it," said Library Director Amy Crump.

Nash complimented these assets.

He noted that while some communities can't rally enough support for a bus stop, Marshall simultaneously supported the Martin Community Center as well as Fitzgibbon Hospital's Community Cancer Center.

Others listed the community's honesty, proximity to a main waterway, musical organizations, preservation efforts, committed leadership and Missouri Valley College as assets.

When one participant mentioned Saline County had more Century Farms than any other county in the state, Nash interjected with a potential strategy.

"Package that and market that in a way that makes you competitive," he told the crowd.

Another recognized the collaboration between Marshall's current entities. Businesses such as Cargill, ConAgra, Missouri Valley College and Fitzgibbon Hospital were specifically mentioned as strong supporters of the community.

"Getting all the entities talking together is a big strength," Nash said. " ... There's a lot of hidden treasures here."

However, Nash also asked the community members to define the area's weaknesses. First, attendees used clichés such as "if it was good enough for me, it's good enough for kids" and "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" to describe the town's mentality.

"We live in a vastly different world, and this resistance is a form of weakness," Nash said.

The group also cited the city's finances, few retail opportunities, minimal choices and a lack of community support for local businesses as drawbacks.

"People think there's no opportunities, they get themselves defeated before they even start," Crump said.

She cited the lack of appropriate housing for young, single professionals as a huge hazard to the area. She noted most of the comfortable, affordable rental properties are limited to those who have filed for section eight assistance. Crump suggested turning the old hospital on Brunswick Avenue into an apartment complex for incoming professionals.

Nash used the listed weaknesses as a segue for the younger attendees to explain why they'd returned to the community. Marshall Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Marsh-on Umaña said she'd returned for family reasons, but she hadn't intended to stay. Eventually, she recognized the need to support her hometown.

"Everything I've ever gotten ... I've gotten from here," she said. "So why should I benefit someone else when my community is suffering?"

On the note of suffering, Nash transitioned the conversation to Marshall's threats. Participants suggested dishonesty, negativity, lack of money and the rural economy could threaten the community. One person called Marshall Public School's elementary buildings an insult to the area's children.

Nash asked the group to consider what lured people to Sedalia and Columbia, and how to channel those needs into the present community.

Attendees suggested establishing more hotels, more restaurant options, more entertainment, re-forming blighted areas, creating a theme park, providing assistance to new business owners, establishing an internship program for area youth, fixing infrastructure, improving after-school programs and initiating competition within businesses.

Nash promised to analyze the information collected before the next meeting on March 27 at 5:30 p.m. at the Martin Community Center.

Riggins asked everyone in attendance to come to the follow up and bring another community member along.

"There's been a lot of good ideas coming out here," Riggins said. "We're all pulling together."