

Greater Wichita Partnership to create a more coordinated approach to Economic Development

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WICHITA, Kan. - 4/17/2015 - The business leadership of the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce, Leadership Council, Wichita Downtown Development Corporation (WDDC) and the Greater Wichita Economic Development Coalition (GWEDC) announced they are working toward a closer alignment of economic development related groups through the formation of an umbrella entity called the Greater Wichita Partnership. The Partnership will help increase private sector commitment and investment to grow the community.

“We already have a lot of great organizations working on different aspects of growing our community. It’s time to work together even more closely because both the challenges and opportunities for our city and region are so great,” said Charlie Chandler, Leadership Council Co-Chair.

CONCEPT OVERVIEW
Business volunteers say initial plans call for the Leadership Council to transition from the Chamber to the Greater Wichita Partnership. The Partnership will work with organizations and initiatives focused on increasing private sector economic growth and investment in the community and region, including two organizations:
- Wichita Downtown Development Corporation (WDDC)
- Greater Wichita Economic Development Coalition (GWEDC)
And two committees:
- Entrepreneurship Task Force
- Business and Education Alliance

WDDC and GWEDC would continue as separate organizations with their own Boards and missions. The Entrepreneurship Task Force and Business and Education Alliance are both priority initiatives of the Leadership Council driven by business volunteers from business, education and entrepreneurship support networks.

“There’s been a lot of discussion from many that it’s time to align, focus and fast-forward our economy in new ways,” said Jeff Turner, Co-Chairman of the Leadership Council. “Just as in business, it’s important to recognize opportunities for change and respond to the current environment. Everyone wants to see the next generation grow here, and it’s going to take everyone working together in new and smart ways to ensure that.”

Chandler added, “We’ve been hearing throughout the community that the lack of economic growth in our community is of great concern and frankly hearing a lot of frustration from people on the community’s overall approach. While there are bright spots, including WSU’s Innovation Campus and Downtown, it’s time to create a new framework and this starts that discussion. As a community we must determine how to ensure a bright future.”

Past, present and future volunteer leadership of the four organizations began discussing the concept with input from executive committees, boards and funders, plus discussions with partners, including the City of Wichita and Sedgwick



County. The idea is to work together toward a transition to the Partnership this summer.

"Leadership of this aligned effort is key, and we've tapped Jeff Fluhr who's proven his abilities to bring people together, align efforts and lead collaborations," Chandler said. Fluhr would also remain as WDDC President and CEO. "We're bringing him on board to help work through all the details that come with new alignment, from staffing to refocused activities."

WORKING TOGETHER

"It's an exciting idea, and the City Council and I are eager to be part of the discussion," said Mayor Jeff Longwell. "It's gratifying to see the private sector step up and present a new idea on how we approach working together to increase jobs and growth. We've been very supportive of Wichita State's Innovation Campus, the Regional Export Plan, and the BREG initiative. We look forward to working with everyone to help link all of this together to benefit the community."

Chandler said the transition will include input from every organization and partner. "This is the time for us to come together because we must look to the future and what we're leaving to the next generation."

Wichita State University President John Bardo expressed support saying, "Strong economic regions are using all the resources available to them to really focus on connecting innovation and entrepreneurship networks, while working closely together to create quality, connected places where a great workforce wants to live. I believe this framework could really help our region take advantage of all we have to offer while linking the region together in new ways through powerful collaborations. We're excited to be a part of the process."

The plan is for the Leadership Council to work closely with its founder, the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce in the transition and moving forward. The formation of the Leadership Council was an initiative of the Chamber. The Chamber has managed GWEDC since 2003.

"The partnership among all organizations is vitally important," said Jon Rosell, Chamber Chairman. "We know that it takes the work of everyone to grow a community and everyone rowing in the same direction."

Chandler said, "The Chamber is the largest business organization in the region and state, and it is imperative we work closely together."

The Chamber represents more than 1,900 members.

A FOCUS ON ECONOMIC GROWTH
The Greater Wichita Partnership will be focused on aligning economic growth initiatives.

WDDC and GWEDC both have contracts with the City of Wichita to deliver services related to economic development and growth. GWEDC also has a contract for services with Sedgwick County.

Wichita Downtown Development Corporation (WDDC) – The Wichita Downtown Development Corporation (WDDC) was launched in 2002 to revitalize and enhance the center city. WDDC is a private 501c3, not-for-profit corporation that works closely with the private sector and local government to stimulate new investment and interest in Downtown Wichita. WDDC directs a comprehensive economic development program to strengthen Downtown. It is governed by a 25-member Board of Directors elected by members of the organization.

WDDC Chairman Bill Livingston said, "Research shows that successful economic regions have strong, vibrant core areas. Following the Project Downtown planning process, the private sector has invested millions in Downtown Wichita with more to come."



Livingston added, "WDDC has a very active and engaged board that represents Downtown property owners. Our Board is made up of those owners and accountable to all of them and to the City to deliver continued economic growth in the Downtown region. We think working more closely with other economic development groups will strengthen our efforts on behalf of Downtown."

Greater Wichita Economic Development Coalition – Founded in 2003, GWEDC is led by an 18-member Steering Council comprised of eleven private sector leaders, elected officials from Sedgwick County and the City of Wichita, a representative from the Regional Economic Area Partnership (REAP), and two representatives from the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce.

GWEDC is focused on supporting local companies that want to expand in the community and assisting new businesses interested in locating here. It also markets the nine county region of South Central Kansas. In the last year it has partnered with other organizations to help create a new Regional Export Plan and is now working on the Blueprint for Regional Economic Growth (BREG).

Gary Schmitt, chairman of GWEDC said, "We'll be working with stakeholders and taking their input plus what we learn from the BREG process on what companies need most to grow here. That will help us restructure and focus GWEDC activities and initiatives. We've lost thousands of jobs and we've got to grow companies of all sizes in our region, from the one-person entrepreneur to established companies, and connect them closely with Wichita State and its Innovation Campus."

Schmitt will serve as a part-time loaned executive for ongoing GWEDC activities working closely with Jeff Fluhr, including on the BREG efforts. WDDC and GWEDC are both partners in BREG. The Steering Council will continue to serve as the governing body.

Leadership Council – The Leadership Council was formed in 2012 and now consists of more than 100 top business, non-profit, public-sector and labor leaders. It was formed by the Chamber with the purpose of discussing and pursuing resolutions of major issues or projects to make the Wichita area competitive for job creation, talent attraction, capital investment and therefore long-term economic prosperity. Members identified three top priorities as growing primary jobs, entrepreneurship and educational attainment and workforce development.

Entrepreneurship Task Force – This task force led by Co-Chairmen Scott Schwindaman and Gary Oborny has been moving fast to align the entrepreneurial eco-system and efforts at all levels and increase business start-ups and success through mentoring support, private funding and more.

Business and Education Alliance – Led by Barry Schwan and Jackie Vietti, this group has been focused on bringing together business and education leaders in the community to ensure a workforce that is well-prepared for the global economy. Educational attainment, building a community that values education and a focus on improving "soft skills" – such as working as part of a team and communicating effectively – are current priorities for the Alliance.

NEXT STEPS
Boards of each of the groups have been discussing the proposed structure and will continue to provide input as the process moves forward. The groups will seek additional input from all partners, including the City of Wichita, Sedgwick County, Wichita State University, REAP, WIBA, Kansas Global, and all additional partners and investors.

Turner said as the Partnership focuses on economic growth to begin with, the plan is for it to be strategic and expandable as the region changes and other issues arise. For instance, the boards have said that they will have a plan developed by next summer on how to bring the Chamber under the Partnership's umbrella.

"We've got to keep going where we are successful, align our resources and actions and rethink strategies where needed,"



Turner said. “The community has watched Jeff Fluhr approach economic growth and business investment in the downtown area in a strategic and collaborative process, and we are excited about him agreeing to work with us as we focus in a new way on our community’s economic future.”