

St. Leon plans for wooing businesses

BY ERIKA SCHMIDT RUSSELL
NEWS EDITOR

As the Town of St. Leon moves closer to new zoning regulations, it also is moving closer to creating its own economic development plan. April and May saw meetings with the town economic development commission, planning board and residents about the town's future. In April, a meeting with property owners and town residents yielded a vote of confidence in moving toward beginning a commission and designating properties for potential industrial/commercial development.

Dearborn County Planning Director Mark McCormack led the meeting to get an idea of what residents think, as well as what they might want for their town and what they don't want.

With about 20 attending, two areas were discussed. The first chunk of property, roughly a triangle, is bounded by Ind. 1 on the East, Interstate 74 on the South and Ind. 46 on the North.

St. Leon's 1993 zoning code does not have an industrial designation. The triangle property has about 500 feet of highway interchange zoning and the rest is designated general business, said McCormack, who is working with St. Leon officials to update the zoning code.

Since St. Leon is a small town, it pays the county to handle much of its planning and zoning working with the St. Leon Plan Commission.

The 1993 code does allow some light industry in both the highway interchange and the general business designations.

One of the attendees asked if there is another town St. Leon can use as a benchmark with similar development and are efforts under way to get industrial or retail/commercial development in the area.

There really isn't another town nearby similar to St. Leon. "There are not too many communities with this much land area, the low population and your sewer system," said McCormack, adding the town has a huge land area.

Batesville has done a lot, and he and others from St. Leon have been attending Greendale Redevelopment Commission meetings.

"We have modeled some of what might be done on Greendale. It has had some success, and they have a TIF (tax increment financing district). They have some projects they're working on and are doing infrastructure planning," said McCormack, adding St. Leon wasn't going to catch up with Greendale overnight.

The area does not necessarily have to be a TIF to attract business, said McCormack in response to a resident's question.

"You can decide that later and we can line up the pros and cons," said McCormack.

If the decision is made then attorneys from Cincinnati or Indianapolis would have to be hired to set it up because the process is complicated, he said.

Another area under consideration is along Ind. 1 and the Franklin County line. Most of the property is taken up by the Stenger Farm.

The property owner said the family intends to continue farming the area, but will "see what the future would bring, but we have no interest in re-zoning for now."

Even if the property were rezoned the property tax would be based on how the land is used, not how the land is zoned. For example the land could be zoned business, but still be used as agriculture and taxed for the agricultural use, said McCormack.

The benefit of having a site not zoned until there is an offer is what goes in there can be better controlled, he said.

Another resident asked about a site being shovel ready, and that has the benefit of not having to go through six months or even a year's worth of meetings, plan approvals and other steps so it could make the area more competitive, said McCormack.

Planning costs

At the meeting Wednesday, May 5, Jim Kinnett, a consultant with the Dearborn County Economic Development Initiative who does economic development planning, talked to the St. Leon officials and residents. The meeting attracted about 15 to 20 people, said McCormack.

Kinnett reviewed cost ranges for putting together an economic development plan and a shovel ready study. The plan would range between \$15,000 and \$25,000 and the study would be about \$30,000.

St. Leon may be able to get assistance with those early costs from Lawrenceburg, the county, DCEDI or the chamber of commerce, said McCormack.

He and others have been working with St. Leon to formulate plans for several reasons. One reason is to plan what property owners and town residents want before something just comes along, and the other is to take advantage of money that is available now, but may not be if riverboat gambling revenue shrinks, said McCormack.

"We want to help the town work ahead of the curve," he said.

Meanwhile, the town's plan commission could have final zoning and subdivision ordinance ready to pass onto the town council by the next meeting Wednesday, June 16, said McCormack.

McCormack has been working with St. Leon to make the ordinances similar to the county's and to make other changes including eliminating an interstate corridor overlay area.

The overlay area, though, needs to be addressed because it contained language for commercial, multi-family and industrial development.

Commercial and other more intensive development needs to be addressed because there are more items to be considered for it rather than a single family house. Those issues include storm water retention, grading, landscaping, set backs and lighting.

"There needs to be an itemized list of the requirements," and not referring a developer to several different sections of the code, said McCormack.

The new ordinances will go hand in glove with the economic development plans, and if the town moves forward on having Kinnett develop a plan starting in June, the ordinances will be needed.

If all goes as planned the town council could approve the revised zoning ordinances in July or August, and Kinnett, if he can start on the plans in June, could be finished in September or early October, said McCormack.

There is money set aside for land acquisition in Dearborn County, and St. Leon is in a good position to be in the running for it. St. Leon's sewer plant is expanding, and the additional capacity could be reserved for commercial-light industrial development, he said.

A green light to proceed with plans and put St. Leon in the running could be good for all of Dearborn County, because there would be a potential for more jobs and increasing the county's tax base, said McCormack.