

Our View | Economic Development

City's strategic plan sets goals, steps for growth

Aug. 9, 2014

Milwaukee "needs a detailed, overarching statement of mission" for economic development, [we argued nearly three years ago](#).

Now, the city has one. The "[Growing Prosperity](#)" plan, released last month, is an improvement over anything Milwaukee has relied on in the past to guide the use of scarce resources. This is a more focused strategy that analyzes the strengths of the local economy and its human capital and recommends specific steps that should be taken by specific groups. It complements a regional plan by the [Milwaukee 7](#) economic development group, wisely focusing on jobs that only the city can do — including managing real estate.

We would have liked even more of an emphasis on the entrepreneurial culture in Milwaukee — although what's here is solid. A stronger sense of the challenges would have helped, too, something to suggest the urgency to figure out what comes next in this economy. The latest [Brookings Institution Metro Monitor](#) report ranks the metro area 80th out of 100 in performance since the end of the Great Recession. The need to move quickly is clear. Milwaukee needs to be benchmarked against peer cities on a range of metrics; city officials say that is coming before the plan becomes final.

Like any document of this nature, it has a tendency to feel, at times, like a laundry list of promises to satisfy various political constituencies.

But these are quibbles. This is a good start. The challenge will be executing the ideas in the plan and remaining committed to its goals and ideals.

Here are highlights from our reading of the plan, supplemented by interviews with Mayor Tom Barrett, Paul Brophy, a consultant who helped write it, and Rocky Marcoux, city development director:

- The plan focuses on major business clusters here and how government, in its limited role, can help those clusters grow. The M-7 has identified five, which the city plan embraces: food and beverage processing; power, energy, controls and automation; water technology; headquarters and business services; and finance and insurance. The emphasis here seems top heavy in manufacturing, but we concede that that's what this region still does as well as any in the country. So, there is an argument for building on your strengths.
- The plan recognizes that the city has to make it easy for entrepreneurs to start businesses. Marcoux promises a series of steps to streamline licensing and other city functions. And there are efforts to encourage risk-taking including establishment of an entrepreneur week and efforts to identify capital to loan to small businesses.

■ The city plan is meant to "nest into" the regional strategy, says Brophy, who was development chief in Pittsburgh for a decade and has worked with [Brookings](#). The city plan recognizes that there are human capital challenges in Milwaukee — more people in the city who are harder to employ, who don't have enough education or who have a criminal record. The plan suggests specific ideas to help them become ready for work. Regional leaders also have recognized an important fact: Metro areas that have a smaller gap between the haves and have-nots are doing better.

■ The plan sees neighborhood improvement and quality of life as essential elements to economic development.

■ It's a city plan, but only about half of the plan is "owned" by city government. Many other entities are called on to pitch in including nonprofits organizations and state government.

One promise in the plan should not be hard to keep: to "maintain an inventory of 100 acres of 'shovel-ready' industrial land for development." Milwaukee has about 500 acres of vacant industrial land, the report notes, including the sprawling former Tower Automotive site in the 30th St. Industrial Corridor.

City government has poured millions of dollars into rehabbing the site, dubbed Century City, and now proposes locating a center for advanced manufacturing there. We remain hopeful about this area, where so many people are unemployed. Over the course of a generation, city government has demonstrated that old industrial sites can be reclaimed and put to productive use. The Menomonee Valley is the best example; Reed Street Yards, near the [Global Water Center](#) south of downtown, may be the next.

Government can only do so much to assist in job creation, but what it does do it should do efficiently. "Growing Prosperity" should help in that effort. But much depends on how well it is executed and whether it is taken seriously by the Barrett administration and the administrations that may follow.

Part of any continuing effort depends on a very simple proposition: sending the right message. The report notes: "Public and private leadership needs to constantly articulate a positive vision and spirit of optimism about what Milwaukee is becoming, building from assets and promoting the city as a desirable place to live and work." That ought to include suburban and state politicians, who are prone to attack the city for political gain even though their own constituents rely on Milwaukee as a center for their livelihoods, culture and entertainment.

What's Milwaukee's elevator speech? We'd suggest riffing off something Marcoux told us.

"We want to become the easiest place in the United States to start a business and to grow that business."

That will do.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/opinion/citys-strategic-plan-sets-goals-steps-for-growth-b99326098z1-270546711.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.