

# Marion CAN DO! joins Columbus regional group

Lengieza: Development moves to 'fourth gear'

Written by  
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MARION -- Described as a "potential game changer" by the city/county regional planning director, Marion CAN DO!'s joining of a 10-county regional economic development initiative is already showing promise, its president says.

"We're already working with them on a prospect, an active prospect," said Craig Thompson, president of CAN DO!, a private/public economic development agent for the city and county.

Thompson declined to disclose any further information about the prospect, a practice often employed to avoid compromising potential economic development projects.



Sitting in his office across a table from Thompson, Ken Lengieza, regional planning director, shared his colleague's enthusiasm for the new partnership.

"I see it as a potential game changer," Lengieza said. "It's like moving from third to fourth gear."

Columbus 2020 is a private/public partnership in which the Columbus Partnership joined with many people and groups including more than 500 community leaders in the 10-county region to improve economic development in central Ohio.

The organization identified central Ohio's key assets and challenges, visited peer cities, compiled a fact base on the region's current economic development efforts and developed a case for regional change.

Kenny McDonald, chief economic officer for Columbus 2020, said he was glad Marion and Knox counties were added to the central Ohio region, which initially comprised only Franklin, Delaware, Union, Morrow, Licking, Fairfield, Pickaway and Madison counties. He said including Marion and Knox counties "makes a lot of sense because of the proximity to the Port Columbus Airport. ... I think it's fantastic."

"Marion brings some real unique assets," McDonald said. "You have a dual rail site, which is one of the very few true dual rail sites in the whole Midwest, not just Ohio. You have some terrific companies out there that are part of the existing employers in the region, and they bring their own business networks and knowledge to the table. And we want to try to extract that to leverage business for the area."

A recognition the Ohio Department of Development was realigning its 12 regions into six as part of JobsOhio drove Marion CAN DO!'s effort to join the central Ohio region, Thompson said.

JobsOhio is Gov. John Kasich's formation of a new not-for-profit corporation that will report to the governor and oversee the state's efforts to revive the state's economy and create jobs. His intention is to create a private-sector approach that he says will be more responsive to the needs of business.

Columbus 2020 grew out of an initiative by Columbus Partnership, a group of 40-plus chief executive officers in central Ohio that discuss issues that affect the region, McDonald said. Columbus 2020 has involved 500 community leaders from large corporations, small owner-operator businesses, state government, township government, The Ohio State University and community colleges.

Lengieza said working with Columbus 2020 expands the Marion area's capability to reach out to business prospects worldwide while allowing Thompson to focus on other aspects of his job.

"They're doing international visits, going across the country, stuff that Craig's budget wouldn't even touch," he said.

Columbus 2020 will provide contacts and information regarding state tax and other incentives, and Thompson will be responsible for similar functions regarding local incentives available to business prospects.

The CAN DO! budget for 2011 is \$168,839, consisting primarily of city and county funding plus private contributions. The organization also has a Workforce Investment Act budget of \$34,672, which must be used for identified workforce projects.

To partner with Columbus 2020 will cost Marion CAN DO! \$3,750 for the last six months of 2011, one-third to be paid by CAN DO!, with each of the other two-thirds being paid for with private contributions by John Scharer, CAN DO! board president, and Ted Graham, CAN DO! board member, respectively, Thompson said. The fee next year will be \$7,500, which will be paid with private contributions, he said.

McDonald said the partnership frees Thompson and other small-staffed economic development organizations to work more efficiently.

"It's almost like the more Craig knows what we're doing regionally to market the region the more he can concentrate, and he can put the resources in place so we can cover the whole field," he said.

Columbus 2020 has a staff of 15, some of whom provide shared services, and will add more. Learning what the Marion area has to offer in the way of industrial and commercial sites is important he said.

"We'll be up there quite a bit actually," McDonald said. "We've got to know our product if we're going to sell it."

Lengieza said he's not worried Columbus 2020 will favor Columbus industrial sites over Marion locations.

"The client's going to choose," he said.

Thompson said joining with Columbus 2020 improves Marion CAN DO!'s abilities to draw new industry and retain existing industry.

"The bottom line is we're leveraging resources we don't come close to being able to do with our budget," he said.