

Local growth

Dunn's optimistic about area's prospects

By IAN PATRICK GRAY
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Despite ambiguous, flat unemployment rates in Michigan and a state economy that lags behind the nation, central Michigan and Mt. Pleasant are strong business generators, said a business development expert.

"The Mt. Pleasant 'micropolitan' community (which includes Clare County) is actually in great shape, particularly when compared to much of the balance of the state. Our economy is not like the rest of the state," said George Dunn, president of the Middle Michigan Development Corp., a private, non-profit economic development organization responsible for the industrial and technological development of both Clare and Isabella counties.

"All the bad stuff going on in the state is in southeast Michigan. Those guys are facing big problems."

But auto suppliers in both counties are doing very well, Dunn said.

"These companies are growing, adding space, buying new equipment, hiring people," he said. "If the economy is so bad, how are they doing that?"

Recent closings of several businesses, particularly in downtown Mt. Pleasant, such as Chloe's, Agnes Wonderland Diner, The Skateboard Shop, Burger King on M-20 and Rooster's Restaurant on Mission Street, might be a predictor for tough times ahead, but Dunn said that it's all a matter of perception.

"These are not all closing due to the new 'big box' development coming in Union Township or because of a bad economy," Dunn said. "One (Chloe's) closed because the owner moved to Detroit, and others haven't found their niche."

The recent influx of new businesses, combined with a healthy industrial sector and the Bluegrass Road retail development in Union Township forecast a strong business environment, he said.

"They have a lot of money and are professionals. They know their business better than I do," Dunn said, referring to the big box developers and the officials at stores such as Kohl's, Menard's and Wal-mart, who are slated to fill a portion of the Bluegrass development. "The development out there is a huge positive indicator for our community. Big box



Sun photograph by VICTOR FITZSIMONS

George Dunn, president of Middle Michigan Development Corp., says the economic forecast for Mt. Pleasant and surrounding areas is positive.

and junior box development do not create economic affluence, but, rather, mirror it."

Three key strengths of Mt. Pleasant and central Michigan include the vibrant industrial sector including the local gas and oil industry, Central Michigan University and Soaring Eagle Casino and Resort, Dunn said.

"We have an industrial base that's growing very well, primarily because they are working smarter, working leaner and have diversified and faced the competition head on. We have a very popular university with more students than ever, and a viable economic engine (in Soaring Eagle)," Dunn said. "We are very fortunate in that and I don't see it changing."

Diversity in business is one great strength of the mid-Michigan area, Dunn said.

"We are fortunate that we are not a one-company town. We have a diverse economy," he said. "We have a lot of great companies that employ 50 to 100 workers. I'd rather have 10 of those than one company that employs 1,000 people any day. Plus, these companies are still small enough that people matter."

Some manufacturing compa-

nies in Clare County are growing faster than ones in Isabella County, Dunn said, despite high unemployment in Clare County.

Some other strengths include a burgeoning high-technology business sector, based currently

in the CMU Center for Applied Research and Technology, with the potential for attracting high-paying jobs to the area as well as companies eager to capitalize on the research, and unemployment rates that rank consistently with the lowest in the state (for Isabella County).

Many of the qualities required to attract the companies that are needed to maintain the area's healthy business environment already exist in mid-Michigan, Dunn said.

"The area has a lot of amenities, especially for those who want a four-season lifestyle," Dunn said. "There has to be parks, recreation opportunities, a variety of religious institutions, quality hospitals and diverse retail offerings."

Two things that Mt. Pleasant needs to climb to the next level of development include a much more aggressive airport and an interchange on U.S. 127 at Broomfield, Dunn said.

"We have an airport capable of handling jet traffic. We need to make that a real asset of the community," Dunn said. "We also need a full interchange, my guess would be at Broomfield. It will cost \$10 million to \$12 million

that will need to be found privately. We aren't going to find it from the federal government or the state. They don't have that money to spare with everything else. To get the kind of access and viability to grow, we ought to be able to invest that kind of money in ourselves. The importance of this is beyond understanding."

Minor improvements that would help include controlling or reducing the traffic on Mission Street and continuing improvements to the interior road system.

Even without a new interchange or more aggressively utilized airport, Dunn said that middle Michigan has the right blend of qualities for the business community.

"We've got all the pieces in place. We have the right kind of commonality of purpose," Dunn said. "We'll continue to do well as long as we keep sitting at the same table; the township and city are working as well together as they ever have."