

Clare economy holding steady

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Despite a sluggish economy statewide, Clare County is holding its own when it comes to growth, the president of Middle Michigan Development Corp. told county commissioners Wednesday.

In giving an update, George Dunn said the county has lost some jobs with industrial plant closings but has for the most part brought aboard

new businesses to fill in the gap.

In terms of economic stability, Clare County is better off than many areas in Michigan, Dunn said.

Jobs were lost with the closing of Martinrea in Clare, but that company was in essence replaced by Alro Steel in the Clare Industrial Park, Dunn said.

Although Alro Steel is in the portion of the city that is in Isabella County, Dunn said, it is included in Clare County's industrial base.

Clare County, with industrial parks in Clare and Harrison, along with an enterprise park in Farwell, has the ability to attract more industrial and other business, Dunn said.

In 2000, the first year MMDC began working to attract business in Clare County, there were 17 industrial businesses; today, there are 38, he said.

"That speaks very well for the economic potential for this county,"

Dunn said.

Other industrial businesses in Clare County, such as Renosol in Farwell, have been hit by the downturn in the automotive industry but are still thriving, Dunn said.

Although Renosol cut about 115 to 120 people from its workforce, it still employs 140 to 150 people, he said.

"That's really unheard of for an automotive industry supplier," he said.

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While automotive-related industries in southern Michigan are suffering, those operating in Isabella and Clare counties are in better shape, Dunn said.

Although there are fewer jobs - Alro Steel does not employ as many people as Martinrea did in its prime - the jobs that have been created

are higher-paying, Dunn said.

In addition, the county's industrial State Equalized Valuation has grown from \$6.9 million in 1999 to \$14.4 million this year, he said.

"That's huge...significant growth in an area that's supposed to not be growing," Dunn said. "Overall, we're doing very well."

While the Clare Industrial Park continues to be an interest to businesses, another development could be on the horizon in what is now the area under an Urban Cooperation Agreement between the city of Clare and Grant Township, Dunn said.

Dunn also discussed current projects, including the enterprise park and the industrial park in Harrison, where MMDC works with officials from the Harrison

Area Economic Development Corp.

A four-acre parcel in the enterprise park was recently purchased by a company with plans to build a rail spur, Dunn said.

The Tuscola-Saginaw Bay Railroad runs adjacent to the enterprise park and industry leaders are looking into rail transport because of rising fuel prices, Dunn said.

Dunn also said the Harrison Industrial Park and HAEDCO recently received a \$99,500 grant from United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development to conduct a study on the viability of incubator businesses, Dunn said.

Other initiatives Dunn discussed were MMDC's retention program, mock interview day, its Web site content and business ethics training.