

## Economic Development Insight

### Leave Things Alone

*By Joan Bethell*

I'm fortunate to work with many people who are actively passionate about making Greene County the best it can be but, on a few occasions, I've heard an individual say something like, "I wish you'd leave things alone and let Greene County stay the way it is." Well, let's examine that.

First, various agencies (local, state and federal) are constantly anticipating the future. For example, transportation departments are tracking traffic volumes and making projections based upon anticipated increases in population and trucking, so that road improvements can be made, ideally before those roads are overflowing and backlogged. Greene County has a total of ten highways and, someday, an interstate. How federal and state plans impact a community can be influenced significantly by local comprehensive plans or other development guidelines. Planners will research and review those documents and be sensitive to the vision a community has developed for itself.

Second, non-residents may visit Greene County, enjoy the experience and move here to enjoy the rural way of life. This increases the population but a certain amount of in-migration is healthy because these folks bring with them their knowledge, energies and assets, and often become very active community citizens. Plus, their home purchase helps to improve residential property values.

However, there is also the kind that occurs because Greene County has no zoning ordinances or because those that exist in some of our incorporated communities are not being enforced or, because we're rural, there are less law officers per square mile. This creates a more negative impact because, statistically, these folks are not as appreciative of the value of keeping the groundwater and land unpolluted, they don't care if their property or neighborhood looks like a junk-yard and, if they're avoiding the police, they're most likely doing something illicit. (You may not realize there's a meth lab next door until they have an accident and the house blows up and you'll be thanking God, if you weren't home when it happened!)

The third dynamic that occurs in rural communities, and we're no different, is that parents have been telling their children, 'In order to succeed you have to study hard, get a scholarship to college/university and a good job but don't come back, except to visit. At first, the youth want to leave because the 'outside world' seems exciting and glamorous. Then, after a few years, they settle down, get married and start a family. Quite often, that's when they begin to yearn for a way to return home, so that their children can enjoy the kind of childhood they'd had themselves.

The other fallout caused by the mass departure of the youth is that aging parents, when they start needing help, such as would normally be provided by their adult children, find themselves in a dilemma. They may have to move to some form of assisted living environment or a full-time care facility or relocate to wherever their adult children are. Either way, they experience the trauma of being forced to move from their home, perhaps the home in which they've spent most of their lives. Community developments that accommodate the elderly, such as the recent trend

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of Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (there's one being developed in Linton), do help but, until they become far more widespread, the impact is minimal.

So, as desirable as it seems, for us to think that our neighborhood will stay as it is, if we do nothing, the facts and historical trends paint a very different picture. Then only one question remains, "What are we going to do about it?"

I believe we need to continue developing a diversity of job opportunities - high-tech, industrial, retail and service (especially tourism.) Plus, we need to continue to nurture the development of business start-ups, while appreciating and supporting our existing businesses, so that they can prosper, grow and create more jobs.

My dream is that someday we will be able to say to those returning for their school reunions, "Come home. Bring your young families. Bring your talents and fresh perspectives. We have a job for you or we can help you start your own business and create jobs for yourself and others."

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