

Lessons from Dubuque

IBM recently announced plans to open a technology service delivery center in Dubuque, Iowa. The IBM facility will create 1,300 jobs in renovated space in downtown Dubuque. The facility will occupy the Dubuque Building built during the Great Depression. The massive building formerly housed Roshek's Department Store and will be rebuilt to the highest environmental and ergonomic standards.

The IBM Dubuque partnership goes much further than jobs. More recently, IBM has asked Dubuque to become a "Smart City" following a European program developed by IBM. The program allows IBM to use its massive array of technological equipment and expertise to improve how local water, energy and transportation systems operate. Dubuque will become the first US Smart City and the plan suggests that Dubuque will become an international model for environmental sustainability.

While researching this project and economic development in our neighboring state for a FutureIowa.com website, I found a great deal of cooperation and coordination between all levels of government, the private sector and public education. I was impressed with the ability to put together TIF, State incentives, historical use permits, educational partners, and other perks for a project of this magnitude in a very short time span. What I discovered at the heart of the proposal was a fairly comprehensive plan already in place well before IBM came knocking.

Madison has had similar opportunities; in fact we were on the IBM radar screen as they were looking in the Midwest for a site for their center. I question how many state and local officials, developers, UW staff, regional advocates, and press were even aware of their presence much less working together to lay a package deal on the table. We simply are not doing a good job of promoting our region and an even poorer job of courting companies who may be looking. I could point to the long list of potential projects that we have chased away, but I truly believe we need to look forward, so I will focus on opportunity.

Let's look at the variables for just one corridor in the city, East Washington Avenue. Do we have a good understanding of the existing inventory of brick and mortar and the availability of the buildings? What is the comfort level of the council for TIF and how quickly could we make a firm offer to a company interested in the area? Could existing plans for Central Park play a role? What state participation is available and who are the contacts? Could the UW play a role? How would existing businesses in the area be involved? How would we address parking and transportation?

Flash back to Iowa. When IBM announced they were interested, Dubuque already had many of the answers in hand. They had done the homework before they had a project, before they knew IBM was even looking. Contrast that to Madison where we wait for a proposal before we even begin the process of approvals and participation -- and we see vastly different approach to attracting business to the area.

When we wait for developers or companies to bring proposals forward and then begin the process of review, community involvement, funding and/or community participation, alternative proposals and permitting, we send a clear message that any project presented in Madison is going to be an uphill battle. We need to look at some of the obvious areas for development and do a little pre-planning. In the case of East Washington, we have a new road, a proposed park, existing buildings, and a plan

suggesting what we might like to see. We know the players and the critics, in fact we even have a very outside the box proposal for a huge project.

This knowledge presents us with an opportunity to suggest what we may be willing to approve if the right company or project were to emerge. I am not suggesting a rubber stamp, but rather an opportunity to work with a company or developer with the clear understanding that we want them here and we can get things done.

Also if IBM is still listening we could use a little help with water, energy and transportation whether you do business here or not.