

DEALS

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Roach is proud of the fact that within the past three years, three companies headquartered outside of Illinois chose O’Fallon over anywhere in the state to expand their firms. The companies hail from Tennessee, Kentucky and South Carolina.

Eric Whitfield is senior manager of the Ameren Illinois economic development team. The company’s expansive territory spans 43,700 square miles, or about three-quarters of the state of Illinois. Whitfield serves with Zuber on the economic development committee of Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, a nonprofit entity fostering public and private economic development across the Illinois portion of the Greater St. Louis region. Whitfield works daily with municipalities in dozens of counties. She said preparation is key.

“These communities are ready for a business or industry to come long before the firm ever contacts them – with effective zoning, fast-track permitting, a sense of what incentives might or might not be available and how to access them, knowing their infrastructural capacity (utilities, water/sewer), knowing their available sites and knowing any site-specific challenges and having a plan in place to address those challenges. For cities, it’s not about size and resources. It’s being progressive, pro-business and knowing what you have.”

It is common for a site selector’s window of time to be condensed, according to Whitfield. “We receive requests for information every day and we often get less than a week’s turnaround time,” he said.

No matter what company you ask, no matter which economic sector, the number-one core factor that attracts development is an available, skilled workforce, Whitfield says.

“This is a solution that every com-



Zuber

munity in America is trying to solve,” he said. This is closely followed by having a site or building that meets the prospect’s needs, followed by the cost of labor, tax environment and then incentives.

“Many people think incentives drive projects, but it’s really the cherry on top. If you don’t have all these other assets, incentives generally aren’t going to matter. Incentives aren’t the end-all, be-all,” he said.

How do municipalities ensure that a viable development proposal doesn’t get bogged down in bureaucratic mud?

“City leaders need to make sure they have the necessary approval processes in place and that they’re continuously working to eliminate any potential or actual bottlenecks,” Whitfield said. “Leaders need to be asking questions such as, ‘Are there measures we can put into place to shorten the process, such as pre-approved limits and do we have the staff in place to make those happen?’”

Fairview Heights Director of Economic Development Paul Ellis is a firm believer that continuous im-



Ellis

provement and creativity positions a community to adapt and succeed.

“So much of this business is built upon dynamic relationships and people you can trust,” said Ellis, whose team’s successes include re-envisioning Fairview Height’s longstanding retail shopping mall, launching a business incubator and creating an economic development website for developer prospects. Ellis says the city is continuously improving the way it obtains and tracks retail sales analytics. As per its city charter more than a half century ago, Fairview Heights relies on zero city property tax revenue and about 70 percent of the budget is fueled by sales tax revenue.

“We’re primarily a retail center,” Ellis said. “Our city population is 17,000 in the evening but 50,000 during the day with employees and shoppers. Fairview Heights has more than 1 million square feet of developed office space and more than 3.5 million square feet of retail. We track real-time retail sales analytics since so much of our budget is based upon sales tax revenues but state sales tax revenue reporting lags by three months.”

The city updates and reinvigorates its economic development strategic plan every five years, aligning all its programs, goals and processes.

PGAV’s 8-member planning team serves as a comprehensive planning and economic development consultant for cities across the bi-state region. Senior Project Manager Adam Stroud says the firm regularly develops feasibility studies for potential projects, advising municipalities in how to make appropriate, doable projects happen.

“We’re there to help communities make the best choices and to protect their best interests in the process,” said Stroud. “We’re often taking phone calls from cities



Pierceall

asking, ‘Developer X wants to do this ... do we need incentives?’ Each incentive deals with a different revenue stream and potentially changes the tax structure for a project. While an incentive is a tool, it’s not just a carrot to attract development. It can sometimes be a means to an end for a municipality. Cities need to be careful not to overextend themselves.”

BARBERMURPHY Broker Associate Mike Pierceall has actively served on planning/zoning and economic development commissions at the local and regional level for years.

“Competition is fierce in terms of putting the best communities and sites forward,” said Pierceall. “A lot of times, communities look at themselves as the one and only project destination, but it’s more far-reaching than that. One community is going to have a tough time telling a regional story to a large employer looking for the best site, an available skilled workforce and more. One community may be part of that story, but there are another eight to 10 chapters in that book.”

Having an up-to-date database to instantly provide relevant site analytics to interested site selectors and to commercial realtors assisting them is essential, according to Pierceall.

“Communities have to have people and a process, rather than just working from request to request,” he said. “Communities must understand that developers are totally in it to make money. Holding developers hostage by making them jump through bureaucratic hoops, spending their own time and money to try to make a deal work – only to learn weeks or months into the process that the city ultimately isn’t going to allow the development to happen – is the best way to fracture a future relationship with that developer and others.”

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