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Q&A: Dean Monske, President and CEO, Regional Growth Partnership

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Dean Monske is the latest participant in our Q&A series with prominent economic developers across the country. Dean is the President and CEO of the Regional Growth Partnership (RGP), a role he has held for over eight years. The RGP is the lead economic development group for the Toledo, Ohio region, 17 counties of Northwest Ohio and a section of Southeast Michigan. We asked Dean to answer questions regarding the Qualified Opportunity Zone program, changes he has seen in the key industries in the RGP's territory, how the RGP has adapted since JobsOhio was created, and how the RGP balances its role between Ohio and Michigan.

How has the Qualified Opportunity Zone program impacted your team's approach to projects?

The program hasn't changed the RGP's approach to projects. We still look for opportunities in our core industries which our region can compete for and win. However, the Opportunity Zone program has had two impacts on our day-to-day work. First, the program has brought new attention to the urban center and other locations that qualify for the Opportunity Zone program. Second, we see project leads coming from different sources such as attorneys, bankers, and accountants whose clients understand and can utilize the benefits of the Opportunity Zone.

RGP's territory includes a large section of Northwest Ohio, but also part of Michigan as well. How do you balance the dynamics between the two states (for example, two sets of state laws, two states that compete for projects, and the Ohio State-Michigan game each November)?

The RGP balances our relationship with Ohio and Michigan based on the nature of our relationship with each local entity and by the legal structure of each local entity, as well as the basis of our relationship with the larger state organizations. For example, in Ohio, the RGP has a contract with JobsOhio to provide certain economic development services for a fee. Opportunities, leads, and projects sourced from work funded by JobsOhio are not shared with Michigan agencies. However, opportunities sourced by the private business funding of RGP investors are shared with Michigan agencies. At the local level, most Ohio LEDO's are privately funded. Some agencies are public-private partnerships but only one Ohio agency in our 17-county footprint in Ohio is fully public. Due to the private nature of the legal structure in Ohio, communication works as a two-way street. The RGP can be fully open with our local partners, and our local partners are free to be fully open with us. In Michigan, however, the local agencies are 100% public which limits their ability to communicate openly with the RGP. For example, generally if a Michigan company was looking for a new location, the local Michigan agency is not going to have the RGP show them sites in Ohio because it would cause political issues. Therefore, the RGP accepts the rules of the game by supporting the needs of businesses first and working with our Michigan partners when we are able to do so. In regards to "The Game," with Toledo being closer to Ann Arbor than Columbus, you will find that the area has an evenly split fan base. At the RGP office, it comes down to personal relationships and experiences with each program, but we are also equally split in November.

RGP existed for many years prior to JobsOhio being established in 2012. How has the RGP adapted to JobsOhio and has the RGP's role in economic development changed at all?

The RGP believes very strongly that the JobsOhio model is the best economic delivery system the State of Ohio has ever had. The model is not tied to strict Ohio Revised Code rules for every aspect of their decision making so JobsOhio has the ability to be flexible and meet the unique needs of its business clients. The RGP has adapted to the JobsOhio model by adding staff throughout our region. Prior to JobsOhio, much of the project work occurred in Columbus where government staff didn't understand the local issues related to projects, and the distance caused delays in completing the work. With the RGP JobsOhio staffers located throughout our region, our team understands the local issues associated with each project at a very granular level and response time is very fast. The RGP's role in economic development has changed and evolved with the JobsOhio model. The RGP now has a much more active role from the start to finish in a project. For example, in the past the RGP often found an opportunity and then handed that opportunity to a local partner for site choice. The RGP also handed that opportunity to Columbus to directly manage the incentive process. Today, the RGP has tools and resources to prepare sites and makes the initial recommendation for incentives to JobsOhio. Thus, the RGP has to have a more in-depth understanding of the company and the project, and the RGP works with companies as the single point of contact throughout the entire process. Other changes in the RGP's initiatives include: engaging more with elected officials at state and local levels; assisting companies with talent and workforce needs; being a resource for economic data; training local officials about the economic development sales process; and helping local communities develop economic development plans.

How have you seen the traditional industries in the RGP’s territory, such as auto, glass, and agriculture, evolve to remain competitive in the global landscape?

Companies involved in our region’s traditional industries understand the innovation required to remain competitive in a global market and have made investments to gain competitive advantage. For example, with automobile sales becoming flat one might expect auto investment and job creation to flatten as well. However, because of industry trends such as lightweighting, electric vehicles, autonomous & connected vehicles, smart cities and safety, automotive companies in the RGP region continue to invest in research and development, new manufacturing processes, smarter supply chains, and logistical innovations. The glass industry is seeing an explosion in the functionality of its product due to technology, and the solar industry continues to grow in our region. In agriculture, our region has seen investments in new greenhouse technology, high pressure packaging, logistics, and processes related to the federal Food Safety Act.

Are there any exciting changes or developments at the RGP you would like to share?

There are many exciting developments in the RGP region that promise to continue to make our region more vibrant, economically stable, and a fun place to live. First, the revitalization of downtown Toledo which began with ProMedica’s headquarters project was not a one and done. Toledo has seen investment in downtown by professional firms, construction firms, hotels, restaurants, and transportation systems. On any given night in downtown Toledo you might find millennial residents riding their bike to a concert, boats in the Maumee River, out-of-towners taking golf carts to local watering holes, or families at a Mud Hens game. On the industrial side, the Nexus and Rover pipelines carry the shale oil and gas from eastern Ohio to our part of the state. Those pipelines combined with our existing refineries, rail infrastructure, port infrastructure, available land, and workforce will create development opportunities for the foreseeable future. Also, the construction of the Cliffs HBI plant at the Port of Toledo will complement steel producers in the region and attract new opportunities. Finally, the announcement by CSX and BNSF to support a global intermodal logistics facility at North Baltimore, Ohio, will generate many opportunities in distribution and will support e-commerce in the region. It is a very exciting time to in northwest Ohio.