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BEST PLACES TO WORK IN ILLINOIS

Growing industry clusters cited by regional planning agency

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By Dan McLeister
Contributing Writer

Future economic growth in the Chicago area is coming into focus through clusters.

Likely clusters, more complex than single-industry sectors, will have a regional focus, include Professional and Business Services, Advanced Materials and Transportation & Logistics, according to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP).

Clusters are different than industry, according to Bola Delano, deputy director of CMAP. Clusters are interdependent firms that:

- are linked through the buyer-supplier relationship,
- share common resources and technologies,
- depend on a similar labor pool and institutions,
- rely on specific infrastructure.

Officials in sections of the region such as DuPage County and Will County said in interviews that clusters mentioned by CMAP will play key roles in their particular areas.

One focus for DuPage County will be in either bio-fuel development or providing fuel ingredients as part of general fuel research for alternatives to products using oil, according to Roger Hopkins of Choose DuPage.

Transportation and Logistics also remain still fairly significant in DuPage because of global air cargo companies located in the county, he indicated.

Transportation facilities are a key in Will County, according to Board Chairman Jim Moustis. The intermodal transportation operation in Elwood outside of Joliet by the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe railroads gives the county a strong transportation hub which extends to all parts of the United States, he noted.

Interstate highways running through the county provide a strong partner for the distribution by trucks of goods brought into the area by the railroads, according to the county official.

Will County's strength in transportation will be increased with the building of another intermodal facility in the area by the Union Pacific railroad, added John Grueling, president and CEO of the Will County Center for Economic Development.

"We consider Will County the largest inland port in the Western Hemisphere. Most people do not realize that or believe it."

Grueling explained that manufactured goods like cars and refrigerators come into Will County in shipping containers. Once those containers are unloaded, the empty space is filled with products such as corn and soybeans most of which go to Asian countries, he said.

To make sure there are enough qualified people to fill the jobs in clusters like the transportation one, local officials are figuring out how to obtain some of the job training money from the federal government. This effort is particularly important since there have been losses of jobs in various sectors of the local economy, according to Grueling.

To help local governments analyze the status of industry clusters such as the ones mentioned here by DuPage and Will County officials as well as those in the other five counties in the Chicago region, CMAP has started a study of what the situation is in each county.

Delano said information should be available sometime early in 2010. "I stress the point that CMAP is not an economic development organization. We provide statistics to support local economic development organizations."

The recently released CMAP report on clusters provided information about the region as a whole. In addition to the categories previously mentioned here in this story, the report said that others that may be relevant clusters as a result of growing concentration and employment growth include:

- Biomedical/Biotech cluster,
- Education cluster,
- And Arts and Entertainment cluster.

Further research and analysis into these benchmark clusters can help clarify and contribute to the development of

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unique clusters in this region, Delano explained.

One step, she said, is to develop a methodology to identify and target detailed clusters, track them over time, and forecast future growth. Targeting specific clusters and tracking them can help determine if they are emerging clusters, established or maturing clusters or declining clusters.

A second step involves addressing clusters at smaller geographies. Different parts of the region have specialized in different types of industries, leading to the formation of a variety of clusters. Identifying clusters at the county level or at even smaller geographies can help to understand what the needs of each cluster are, informing the development of strategies to support them.

Another helpful tool in the cluster development strategy is an asset map. An asset map can provide an inventory of firms connected to a particular cluster and identify the educational, research and workforce requirements as well as possible infrastructure needs.

CMAP was created to integrate planning for land use and transportation in the seven counties of northeastern Illinois. The web site is www.cmap.illinois.gov

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