

Denver seen as model of regional cooperation by development group

By **Gloria Casas**

Elgin Courier-News

MARCH 1, 2016, 5:52 PM

The Magnificent Mile on Michigan Avenue in Chicago and the acres of corn fields in unincorporated Kane County may not seem to have anything in common, but the Chicago Regional Growth Initiative sees a connection and ways to build on it.

Officials with the project, that is a three-year-old collaboration between the city of Chicago and the seven collar counties, gathered last week at Wabunsee Community College in Sugar Grove for updates on current programs, like Metro Chicago Exports, and to discuss what direction to take in the future.

Kane County Board Chairman Chris Lauzen hosted the event. Lauzen said the Chicago Regional Growth Initiative came together at the right moment three years ago and it beneficial to everyone.

Lauzen's opponent in the March Republican primary, Ken Shepro, said he supports any effort that brings together the collar county leadership with the city of Chicago and Cook County as long as the results benefit everyone and does not become a debating forum.

"We are tiny right now," said Joseph Szabo, executive director of Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. "Our reach and potential reach exceeds our grasp a little bit."

Metro Chicago Exports is a program that assists small and mid-sized companies increase exports that can support regional job growth, according to its website. Last year, 11 Kane County companies applied to the program, whose funding is up for renewal next week.

The idea of using a regional approach to creating economic development was tried as long as 30 years ago by Denver and its collar counties when Forbes Magazine used the headline "How bad can you suck?" for a story about the city, said Tom Clark, chief executive officer of Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation, who spoke at Chicago Regional Growth Initiative's meeting. The Denver group consists of city offices, chambers of commerce and businesses using private funding, he said.

The situation at the time was competition between Denver and counties for businesses and a lack of communication that bred suspicion, Clark said. To turn that around, the group hosted trade shows and quarterly lunches to market the region, and established a code of conduct, believing it was imperative to

sell the region first, then individual communities, he said.

The Denver region is now a global competitor and is considered to have the best metro economy in the nation, Clark said. It also has built up its infrastructure and through a private-public effort has built and is testing a rapid transit line, he said.

"We are not nirvana," Clark said. "We just made it up as we went along. But good ideas come from anywhere."

There is a clear opportunity for Chicago and the collar counties to market the region better, Szabo said. The Chicago Regional Growth Initiative faces some questions, including how best to organize, whether to bring in businesses, and where to find funding, he said.

Kane County Commissioner Becky Gillam said getting businesses involved may be a good first step.

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle asked the steering committee to present ideas or options on how the group should proceed. The group meets again in July in McHenry County.

Gloria Casas is a freelance reporter.

Copyright © 2016, Elgin Courier-News