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Economic Development office helps businesses grow, promotes energy efficiency

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

By SEAN DELANEY

According to Economic Development Manager Kasey Green, the city's Economic Development Department will continue to promote Sterling Heights as "a premier location to live, play, grow and prosper" through its support of the local business community in 2012.

"To do this, we will be looking to create new partnerships, stronger alliances, new programs and new approaches to serving customers, our businesses, in ways that help them to locate, grow and thrive in our area," Green said. "Through our efforts we aim to build our reputation as a leader and innovator in defense, homeland security, advanced manufacturing and the green economy."

According to an overview of the Sterling Heights Economic Development program provided to the City Council on Dec. 12, the program serves as the key point of contact for business support and needs. It also implements policies, programs and activities that seek to improve the economic well-being of the community by supporting the creation or retention of jobs, and facilitating investment and growth in the city.

Key activities include:

- * Serving as the point of contact for the business community, including existing companies and new prospects
- * Maintaining a targeted business retention and attraction program
- * Identifying customer needs, advocating for support, and connecting businesses to appropriate resources and assistance programs
- * Supporting the Velocity collaborative center that serves as a hub for business incubation, entrepreneurial support and economic development targeting defense, homeland security and advanced manufacturing

"A big part of our financial strategy has been economic development, or growing revenues to the extent that's possible," said City Manager Mark Vanderpool.

To accomplish this task, the Economic Development Department has developed a strategic plan that is intended to be a "living framework" that identifies goals, strategies and implementation actions for the city to pursue as it enacts business retention, growth, expansion and attraction efforts that create or retain jobs and contribute to quality of life in Sterling Heights.

"Through the strategic implementation of action steps designed to maximize our resources, we aim to continue the future success of the city as a premier location for businesses," Green said.

The strategic plan presented Dec. 12 establishes the following goals regarding the city's economic development priorities:

- * Maintain a solid foundation for a competitive economic development program that is high performing, targeted and efficient.

- * Implement and maintain a business retention strategy focused on existing employers, particularly in targeted clusters that represent growth opportunities for Sterling Heights.

- * Establish a targeted business attraction strategy for Sterling Heights by being "set up for success" and focused on target-rich mediums.

- * Establish a marketing and outreach plan that provides relevant and timely information to the business community in the way customers want to receive it.

- * Work in partnership with local communities, Macomb County, MEDC and other key stakeholders to identify and develop a defense corridor strategy.

- * Implement a meaningful retail business development strategy that achieves a high return for the public investment.

- * Work in partnership with Macomb County and Oakland University to support the Velocity collaborative center that serves as a hub for business incubation an economic development targeting defense, homeland security and advanced manufacturing.

- * Maintain and develop "green" economic development opportunities that can stimulate business activity and create jobs.

"It is the critical role of economic development to work with companies to identify their needs and provide credible counsel to guide companies efficiently to where they can receive support," Green said. "Each situation with a company is unique, and we act as facilitators and brokers to critical support that can include access to capital, site selection, workforce assistance, technical assistance, energy-efficiency programs and many other areas. We are also pursuing efforts to grow the business community by supporting innovative entrepreneurs and early stage companies."

One example of this is the Macomb-OU INCubator, which is located north of 18 Mile Road, east of Mound Road, in Sterling Heights.

"The Macomb-OU INCubator is our significant partner at Velocity and with the support of the city is working to assist entrepreneurs that hold the potential to be tomorrow's job creators," Green said. "Through the partnership at Velocity, we are creating an ecosystem to support entrepreneurs, collaborators and innovators at all levels."

According to Business Development Manager Denice Gerstenberg, Velocity is a partnership between Macomb County, Sterling Heights and Oakland University that officially launched and opened for business Oct. 17. It is home to the only business incubator in Macomb County, one of only 15 incubators in the state of Michigan. It is also a collaborative center that coordinates support for existing businesses targeting defense, homeland security and advanced manufacturing.

"We all want Sterling Heights to continue to be the community of innovation and choice in Southeastern Michigan," Gerstenberg said. "Velocity is the unique collaborative partnership that can create that culture by bringing people together, supporting new businesses with business incubation services, working to attract the best and brightest workers to the region, brokering public-private partnerships, clearing the way for the development of knowledge-based jobs, etc."

Gerstenberg said at least some of those jobs will likely be in the field of creating more energy-efficient homes and buildings.

"Buildings with lower energy costs are more valuable and more attractive, while higher energy use buildings are less desirable and less valuable," Gerstenberg said. "Lower energy costs for residents and businesses will be an attractive characteristic communities will be marketing as an asset in the near future, an emerging trend Sterling Heights wants to be at the forefront of."

According to Gerstenberg, the Better Buildings for Michigan program and the Property Assessed Clean Energy program are two energy-efficiency efforts that have already expressed interest in the city of Sterling Heights.

"The Better Buildings for Michigan program is a program Sterling Heights was selected for as one of seven southeast Michigan communities to work with the Southeast Michigan Regional Energy Office to develop an energy-efficiency program whose best practices could be implemented statewide," Gerstenberg said.

The project is currently in progress. According to Gerstenberg, there are 912 homes eligible in Sterling Heights for retrofits worth more than \$1,000 per household, plus access to additional rebate offers. The program uses local contractors to complete the work and support the local economy.

"As of Nov. 21, I'm pleased to say we've had a 31 percent response rate in the area," Gerstenberg said.

As for the PACE program, the City Council recently signed an interlocal agreement establishing a community alliance whose purpose is to develop and operate a joint PACE program, which provides financing mechanisms that promote energy improvements on privately owned or industrial properties.

That program is currently under development and should be ready to launch in 2012.

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