

Q&A: New Economic Development Corp. of Elkhart County President Mark Dobson shares thoughts on area's collaboration, growth



Mark Dobson sits in his office at the Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce on Thursday afternoon. Dobson was named the new president and CEO of the Economic Development Corporation of Elkhart County. (Sharon Hernandez/The Elkhart Truth)



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WARSAW — After being named the new president of the [Economic Development Corporation of Elkhart County](#), Mark Dobson sat down with The Elkhart Truth to share his plans for the organization's future.

Dobson, 53, of Elkhart will take over the position Oct. 14. He's worked in economic and community development for more than 30 years and was most recently president of the [Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce](#). He was also named the Indiana Chamber Executive of the Year in 2014 for his implementation of the organization's strategic plan.

During his interview with the Truth, he talked about his professional experience, as well as the county's challenges and strengths.

- RELATED: [EDC of Elkhart County names Mark Dobson its new president](#), Sept. 9, 2015

Q: Can you tell me about your work before starting at the Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce?

Previously, I started my career in a family business, [B&R Oil Co.](#) When we were all involved, it became the largest [Phillips 66](#) distributor in the nation. Its headquarters were in Granger. It was a great operation; my father is a brilliant man and really drove a great organization. I transitioned out of that in the late '90s, was doing real estate, development and sales in St. Joe and Elkhart County. In 2000, I was asked to run for St. Joseph County Commissioner, so I was a two-term county commissioner, and then I transitioned from that to the chamber world.

Q: How did you transition from local government to community and economic development?

When I ran for office, I believe the issue was we needed to try to create jobs in St. Joe County to grow the economy. A whole lot of ills and problems can be solved when people are working good jobs. When you are in office, you do everything you can. Most elected

officials I know do the best job they can and try to always do the right thing, but you always feel like, given the nature of partisan politics, that there's an element that trusts everything you say because they're of the same flavor and there's an element who think, 'This guy is wacky,' because you're of the other flavor. And I felt like, if we really wanted to grow, I think that getting into the chamber world and economic and community development was a better way rather than politics. So that's really what brought me to the chamber world. I served for a year in St. Joe County and then transitioned to Kosciusko for the past six years. And I've had a great run; it's been phenomenal here.

Q: Do you have a plan for what you first want to focus on in your new position?

The EDC have been really great in working with businesses in Elkhart County for job retention, job expansions within the industries that are there. The board thinks that that direction has been great, but they also want to see Elkhart County get sold outside of the region. I call it selling Elkhart County to the world. I'll be traveling, meeting with site selectors, meeting with folks who could potentially bring new businesses to Elkhart County, so the staff is doing a phenomenal job on the retention piece. We can always improve. Any organization can improve what you do, but I don't see a need to turn that on its head. It will be this new focus of getting outside of the community with the opportunities that Elkhart County represents for new business.

Q: Elkhart County is basically considered the capital of the RV industry. But how much emphasis do you plan to put on diversification?

I think it's really both. It's the RV capital of the world for good reasons. They have the resources, they have the industries that support the ultimate end project. As an example, [Thor](#) is growing in Elkhart County, but there are many of their suppliers, many of the logistics companies there. So I think we need to continue to enhance that. We don't want to have a barrier to continuing success in that industry happen, and at the same time, identifying new industries that either complement the existing regional economic base or bring something entirely new that our workforce can excel at making well. I don't think it's just a matter of saying we're going to go try every new business and see if they want to come here. But let's be targeted, focused and try to determine what new industry might really succeed in the region.

Q: Have you identified any challenges in working in Elkhart County?

The biggest challenge is an able-body workforce. The unemployment rate is really low. Kosciusko and Elkhart County have some of the lowest unemployment rates in the Midwest region. So finding workforce is probably a countywide challenge, and we won't be able to solve it ourselves. It'll take a collaboration of government leaders, chambers of commerce, EDC, educational institutions. We've all got to work on this together. That's probably our biggest challenge upfront...I've watched how leadership in Elkhart collaborates and works for the betterment of the county first and worries about the other issues second.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?

I've heard comments saying this is the premiere of economic development entity, and I really believe that. I've seen the results since the 2008 market crash, and last year the EDC was ranked fourth in peer communities for job growth, so that says it gets things done. I'm excited to be part of a team that really gets that focus. I can't express enough what a great opportunity this is for somebody in our profession to move forward. It's an honor, it's a great team and I look forward to being a great teammate with them. Some people wonder whether the regional collaborations will stop, and I really believe that we grow as a region together. We have great partnerships with St. Joe County, with Kosciusko. People who go to work don't really care where the county line is. They want a job, they want to succeed, so we won't let county lines be our barrier.

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