

# Fremont's Economic Development

## Year-In-Review

### 2014

Allow me to let you in on a well-known secret: Downtown Fremont is reinventing itself.

The old Woolworth store, for example, that once sold us everything from sewing needles, to hamburgers and fries, has more than a new coat of paint. The Sandusky County Chamber of Commerce recently moved into new office space, complete with a state-of-the-art conference room where the Woolworth lunch counter once fed the city.

In the front part of the building, workers are putting in the finishing touches on a new store front that could be the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of the old five-and-dime. By the way, if you're looking for retail space with a bright future, give us a call.

But upstairs is where the real change is taking place. Until recently, it was one big room that collected more dust than anything else. There was absolutely no sign that anybody ever lived or worked upstairs. At best, it was a storage area that never served as a profit generator.

This forgotten part of Fremont will soon feature apartment living designed to attract a new generation of students and young workers. The apartments will offer the closest thing you can come to in a rural town for experiencing an urban lifestyle; exposed brick walls, a short walk to restaurants, shopping and banking.

The revitalization of downtown Fremont is well under way.

Residents are returning to downtown, taking in musical acts at the Strand Theater, or bringing their children to express their creativity at a store featuring paint-your-own ceramics. In fact, over a few day stretch this past winter holiday season, nearly 600 people lined up to make their case to Santa about whether they had been naughty or nice.

Oh, yes. Many of those people stayed to shop. A few stores reported record months in November and December. Even the candy store ran out of chocolate right before Christmas.

These are all the early signs that a recent concerted effort by merchants, residents and the City of Fremont is producing a new renaissance of Historic Downtown Fremont. The new owners of long-vacant property are beginning to design new structures and plans are being made to designate the downtown area as a Revitalization District that features restaurants, art galleries, and the grand old anchor of the District, The Paramount Cinema.

Efforts to attract new businesses and strengthen the ones already rooted here have produced a vibrant economy. A new retail area north of the city attracts shoppers and workers from across the region. To keep the economy moving forward, taxpayers have committed to major investments in our water supply, sewer utilities and other infrastructure vital to local businesses and residents.

As those investments began to take shape, Fremont area residents joined in a community conversation to answer the proverbial question: what's next?

For more than 18 months, area residents meet to develop a consensus answer to that question. This community visioning effort became known as BIG Fremont, with BIG serving as an acronym for Building Innovation for Growth.

Eighteen months of committee meetings, surveys, focus groups and interviews produced a community view that Fremont needs to create more jobs; more well-paying jobs that will rejuvenate the local economy and encourage our children and grandchildren to return to pursue their careers and raise their families.

City residents also made it clear that industry and manufacturing will serve the same prominent role in our economy in the future, as it has done in our past. They called for efforts to ensure that employers have the infrastructure they need, as well as a well-educated workforce to ensure that new and existing business have the employees that will allow companies to remain competitive.

Noteworthy, was the community's call to return to this area's entrepreneurial past. Fremont is the birth place of such things as the safety razor and the collapsible paper shopping bag. Maybe the world has enough multi-blade razors, but what residents would like to see is an enhanced effort to instill the entrepreneurial spirit through the schools, the community and our way of financing business start-ups.

The City of Fremont also used the new activity as the kickoff of a community development initiative called HOMETOWN FREMONT. This is a direct result of the BIG Fremont planning process and incorporates a nationally tested approach to community development, focusing on the integration of four "pillars" of sustainable growth: engaging youth and young adults, energizing entrepreneurs, building local leadership, and expanding community philanthropy.

This approach, known generically as Hometown Competitiveness (HTC), was developed in Nebraska by a collaborative of nonprofit organizations including the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, and the Nebraska Community Foundation. These organizations, staffed by people living in rural, farming communities, got together to address critical issues facing their hometowns, including youth outmigration; loss of jobs, industry, and small businesses; access to capital and wealth transfer; and reduced and aging leadership populations.

HTC is a "Come-Back, Give-Back" approach designed to rekindle residents' belief in the future of their hometown, leading them to locally driven strategies that build capacity from within for development that can be sustained with local resources.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing businesses in Sandusky County is finding the workers needed to staff everything from the factory floor, to the corporate suites. In fact, this is not just a problem in Fremont, but across the country and around the world, as well.

Simply put, the Baby Boom generation is waging one of the largest exoduses from the workplace in U.S. history, and there are not enough younger workers to replace these retirees. The retirement induced shortage is compounded by what some people say is a misalignment of skills; a shortage, really, of the skills that employers need.

Economists predict the regions of the country that will have thriving economies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be those that attract the workers and families necessary to staff the local economy. But saying that it's

simply a goal of workforce attraction, is understating the challenge: these workers will require hard and soft skills that were unheard of just a generation ago.

The Sandusky County Workforce Alliance was created to foster a community conversation to address current and future workforce needs. The Alliance was initiated by the City of Fremont office of Economic Development, the Sandusky County Jobs and Family Services office of OhioMeansJobs, and Terra State Community College's Center for Business and Industry Training.

On May 5, 2015 the Workforce Alliance will hold a half-day conference bringing together some of the region's leading experts on workforce issues, as well as business leaders from across the area who are developing novel ways to address the issues related to employee attraction and high skilled training.

Some experts say the shortage of workers will change economic development forever. Gone is the singular focus of providing the roads, buildings and utilities necessary for attracting new or moving companies. Today, the responsibility of economic development professionals also includes ensuring that a community has the quality of life standards families and individuals say is important to them when choosing where to live and work.

The City of Fremont also was the lucky recipient of a grant in 2014 that will allow for the creation of two programs that will allow the City to stay in touch with the needs of both businesses and residents. The one program will be a Business Retention and Expansion Survey that will a regular communication channel with businesses of all sizes to help ensure that the City is doing all it can to ensure that local businesses will thrive and expand.

The second effort will result in an online forum to encourage civic conversation with area residents, discussing everything from the direction of community and economic development efforts, to gauging how will the City delivers services to the families and residents of the area.

The City of Fremont has also created a forum for promoting conversation among community and business leaders. The Fremont Area Economic Development Council is designed to provide an open line of communication on issues affecting the city's future.

Perhaps most promising of all the recent activity has been the increased community involvement. Hundreds of people participated in the BIG Fremont visioning process, dozens of people from a younger generation of leaders are serving on committees for our HomeTown Fremont effort, and a new group of investors are setting up shop in our commercial areas. All of this bodes well for both our economy and our community.