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Harvard EDC Celebrates 10th Anniversary Public/Private Partnership Still Strong

HARVARD, IL — The **Harvard Economic Development Corporation** (HEDC) is celebrating its tenth anniversary this month, as it prepares to begin its fourth strategic planning cycle.

The public/private economic development partnership was founded in 2001 when 12 local business leaders came together to plan for Harvard's economic future. The 300-acre, 1.5 million square foot Motorola campus had opened on the north side of town in 1996 and Harvard was becoming nationally known as the home of one very major employer.

After initialing putting nearly 5,000 people to work, Motorola was actively laying off workers by 2000 and rumors of even greater trouble were circulating. City officials and community leaders were concerned that Harvard's future had become too tied up in one big employer. "We thought it was important to have a number of strong companies in town to provide jobs and to keep the economy going so that the Harvard economy wouldn't be so tied to Motorola's ups and downs," noted current **Harvard Mayor Jay Nolan**, a long-time resident who worked for Meyer Material at the time and became the HEDC's first chairman. "No community wants to be completely tied up in one large employer, no matter who they are."

The HEDC was formed in the spring of 2001. A Board of Directors was recruited from leaders in the business community who each invested \$5,000 to help the organization get started. The **City of Harvard** came to the table as a partner, with matching funds to help build the organization's budget.

The strategy turned out to be well timed. In early 2002, Motorola announced that it would lay off 850 additional workers as the next step toward closing the Harvard facility in 2003. The HEDC kicked into gear, developing marketing materials and a recruitment campaign designed to put the community in front of expanding companies. The **Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity** provided grant funds to pay for workforce and recruitment studies and to fund marketing outreach. A part-time executive director was hired to handle leads and the entire Board of Directors — which included local bankers, developers, business and healthcare executives and school and city officials — rolled up their sleeves to get to work.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts were created for Arrowhead Industrial Park and for sections of downtown Harvard and Route 14. A business incubator was built and the space leased to small businesses that the HEDC hoped would grow and stay in Harvard. Community signing projects were developed, funded and installed, including an electronic information sign at 'Five Points' in downtown Harvard.

Ads were run in major newspapers and the HEDC won a major award from the International Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) for the quality and effectiveness of its marketing outreach materials.

The Motorola facility did shut down in 2003, but the community kept moving forward. Development at **Arrowhead Industrial Park** outpaced all projections and employers including **E. H. Wachs, Harvard Factory Automation, Aero Industries, Catty Corp., All World Machinery** and **The Pound Bakery** expanded into new facilities in Harvard. Phase III of Arrowhead opened two years ahead of schedule.

Retail activity also took off. A 150,000 square foot **WalMart SuperCenter** opened on McGuire Road in 2008. National retailers **Advance Auto, Walgreens** and **Tractor Supply Co.** followed on Route 14. The wave of construction and ribbon cuttings continued well into 2009, even as the national economy stumbled.

In 2008, the City of Harvard completed a \$1.8 million streetscape project in downtown Harvard and today the HEDC is actively recruiting retailers and a movie theater developer to keep Ayer Street alive with residents and visitors.

“Harvard has fared better than a lot of its neighbors,” noted **HEDC Chairman Roger Lehmann of The Harvard State Bank**. “Thanks to the efforts of the HEDC and the City of Harvard, we had good momentum going into what became a very bad economy. Plans that were made in 2007 and 2008 carried us through much of 2009.”

“We kept our car dealerships, which a lot of communities didn’t, and we are still seeing local companies investing and expanding in town,” he noted.

Ten years later, much of the HEDC’s charter Board of Directors remains in place and the mission continues. The former Motorola campus has changed ownership twice, but remains vacant in the still-challenging economy. Retail growth needs to be re-ignited along McGuire Road and Route 14. Industrial development continues, but has slowed to a fraction of its former pace.

Arrowhead Industrial Park developer and HEDC Treasurer Mark Stricker hopes that new projects in the park — **The Pound Bakery** is expanding its manufacturing facility for the fourth time in 15 years — signal the return of renewed confidence and activity. “Everything that we have been working on over the past few years has been done to prepare Harvard for returning growth,” he said. “The HEDC has always been about working to make things happen, instead of sitting around waiting for them to happen.”

Learn more about the HEDC by visiting the organization’s website at www.harvardedc.com.