

Economic interest in Will County is "extraordinarily high"

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Will County has seen an "extraordinarily high" level of prospective businesses this year, reported John Greuling, CEO of the Will County Center for Economic Development, in his mid-year report to county officials last week.

In the last six months, Greuling said he has been working with 54 companies that are considering setting up shop in the county, compared to 82 in all of 2015. These prospects include advanced manufacturing, transportation and logistics, food processing, energy, agri-business, information technology and business services.

Of the 54, he said he has closed the deal on five new businesses, totaling over \$200 million in investment and 2,300 new jobs.

Topping the list was Amazon, which announced plans to build a second fulfillment center, next to its current one in the Laraway Crossings business park at U.S. 53 and Laraway Road, and add 1,000 full-time jobs, he said.

Amazon offers starting wages of \$13.50 to \$15.50 per hour, plus insurance benefits and a tuition reimbursement program, which "sets the bar high" for other distribution centers, Greuling said.

The others were:

- Magenta LLC, one of the only certified woman-owned, plastic-injection molding manufacturers in the state, relocated to a 122,500 square foot building at 15160 New Ave., Lockport. Its plant uses advanced technologies and green initiatives and brings nearly 100 jobs to the community.
- Batory Foods broke ground on a new 678,000-square-foot warehouse and distribution operation on 36 acres at RidgePort Logistics Center in Wilmington, and has another 22 acres available for expansion. It is expected to open in October and provide 75 jobs.
- Black Dog Distillery, opened in Plainfield this spring, offering craft spirits.

- UPS leased a 273,640-square-foot building in Lockport, the first in the 355 Corporate Center.

Work is also underway on a IKEA's distribution center in the Laraway Crossings business park, the first of two warehouses it plans to build there; and on Blain's Farm Fleet in Romeoville, at the southeast corner of Weber and Airport roads.

Silver Cross Health System in New Lenox plans to build an \$11 million, free-standing surgery center on its campus to ease large patient loads and meet future demand. It will provide only ambulatory or outpatient surgical care and is expected to open in 2018.

Greuling noted that the Interstate 355 corridor has been "slow to develop," but there has been over 1 million square feet of projects in that corridor which should drive more commercial and retail.

In addition, he said, housing "continues to struggle."

In attracting economic development and making sure the county's workforce has access to jobs, Greuling also has a list of transportation improvements that he supports, including construction of the Illiana Toll Road, from Interstate 55 in Wilmington to Interstate 65 in Lowell, Ind.; the new Houbolt bridge from Interstate 80 over the Des Plaines River into the Center Pointe Intermodal Center, and additional lanes on I-80 west of US 30, and on Illinois Route 7 from I-355 to Will-Cook Road.

He is also working to identify improvements along U.S. Route 53, which is heavily used by trucks as an access to the intermodals.

Will County has received a grant to develop a freight mobility plan, which will not only address infrastructure needs and how to move traffic, but also will study impacts on the county's workforce, environment and communities, Greuling said.

Communities, such as Elwood, have struggled to cope with increasing volumes of truck traffic, and Greuling said they hope to avoid that in the future.

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