

“What is your position in supporting economic development and business in Crystal Lake. Please be specific regarding any proposals you might have.”

Economic development (and redevelopment) in Crystal Lake is crucial to the continued quality of life we still enjoy even in these hard times. It is the heart of the successful operation of the City in serving its residents. It is the essential element that strikes the balance between excellent city services and reduced taxes.

We need to be concerned with all three legs of the economic development stool, industry, office/service and retail. All three legs are equally important for the health of the community. We tend to focus on retail development due to the transparency of the income stream to the City’s general fund, i.e. sales tax dollars. However, we have to focus on the other two legs in equal portion as they provide good jobs and services we need to be a somewhat self sustaining community. I believe the City has been very proactive in its approach to all three components.

That said, here’s what we doing now. Vulcan Lakes TIF District promises huge potential redevelopment opportunities. It is crucial that we complete the project as quickly as possible for the benefit of the surrounding properties. I expect rapid, quality redevelopment around this attraction, making the potential for increment funding available sooner rather than later. Some have said the home rule sales tax, which flows to the general fund directly, was necessary to jump start the project. Through this, the general fund could then “lend” the TIF the money to begin the project. Some may not realize that when the TIF provides enough increment to bond out, the general fund will be repaid. I have been consistent in my opinion the tax increase was unnecessary for this project.

The Main Street rail yard relocation is critical to redevelopment of the Main Street corridor. This corridor is the link between Downtown and the Rt. 14 corridor. The current configuration of the UP rail yard rendered most of the western portion of Main Street inaccessible and functionally obsolete. I admire Ralph Dawson’s vision that led us to begin discussion and negotiation to realign the yard. I look forward to the day when access at Congress will be opened and the vacant lumberyard will be much more attractive to redevelopment.

Downtown Crystal Lake has proven a successful example of what the TIF mechanism can do. When I was in high school, Downtown was Ghost Town. Never had a problem finding a place to park. Three decades later, the reverse is true. While many communities throughout the state and country have had their old downtowns lose out in favor of the more traveled strips like Rt. 14, our biggest problem here is the need for much more parking. I am happy to say that the City is aggressively working to satisfy this need and there are short and long term solutions soon to come.

The northwest corridor of Rt. 14 will eventually experience commercial and residential development in and around the lake's watershed. With the Barton Stream project, already approved west of the watershed, the question is no longer "if" but is "when". We need to be extremely careful in our approach. The revised watershed ordinance and its technical supplement do go a long way to ensuring responsible conservation development as does the Northwest Sub-Area Plan. However, I believe the ordinance does not go far enough. Everyone in the community is a stakeholder in the development of this area. A mistake in development could have drastic consequences for the park district, the lake, and for the residents north as well as south of the lake. We all had the opportunity to witness the fragility of this area in 2007. The City is continuing to work in the direction of finding solutions. There is constant pressure pushing contrary to this diligent approach. We need to stand firmly committed to responsible development.

We need to consider the comprehensive impact of the actions that we take and the ordinances that we pass as they relate to the attractiveness of our community to business. Some have pointed out to me time and again that a small increase in the Home Rule Tax won't have a measurable negative impact on the health of our retail businesses. Taken alone this may be so. However, it remains a straw on the proverbial camel's back.

Jeff Thorsen