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Edwardsville promotes its small-town feel while attracting big business

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Edwardsville, with about 5,000 residents, quietly is becoming a business success in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

Since August 2000, the city has seen more than \$60 million in new business, including the addition of 750 jobs in July.

Edwardsville — located near the intersection of Interstate 70 and Interstate 435 in southern Wyandotte County — has seen an influx of industry since 1999.

In July 1999, American Dish Service relocated from Kansas City, Kan. In late 2000, Fastenal Co., a tool and construction supply distributor, left Kansas City for two new buildings in Edwardsville.

Last month, Quill Corp., based in Lincolnshire, Ill., opened a \$6 million regional distribution center in Edwardsville, and ground was broken for MidPoint Corporate Centre, a nine-building, \$36 million office park.

"Edwardsville offers a unique product offering when compared to the rest of the metro," said Tim Cowden, senior vice president of business development for the Kansas City Area Development Council. "It's a real attraction for traditional manufacturing and distribution operations. Now that they will have this park, now that they have established infrastructure support, we will continue to see success there."

However, success doesn't come easy, said Jim Thompson, executive director of Wyandotte Development Inc.

"Economic development is a highly competitive game," he said. "We compete with other communities in Wyandotte County and other communities in the metro area. Kansas City competes with Denver, Dallas, Indianapolis, Nashville and St. Louis."

Edwardsville has found success by using a two-part strategy that draws upon its natural assets: Its leaders tout a convenient location and foster an expediency not possible in the bureaucracy of a larger city.

"Locationally speaking, Edwardsville offers tremendous opportunities within the KC metro — access to Interstate 70, 435, access to rail," Cowden said.

Edwardsville City Administrator Doug Spangler said the convergence of those two highways, coupled with a location near the geographic center of the United States, made for a powerful draw.

"In 10 minutes, you can go from your dock to an interstate highway," Spangler said. "Your products are going to customers. That's just something that can't be overlooked."

When Mayor Luther Pickell took office in August 2000, he made economic development a priority, Spangler said. Part of Pickell's plan for the city called for it to become one of the fastest and easiest places to do business.

"We streamlined the economic development process to give people answers in days rather than months on projects," Spangler said. "We try to take the friendly approach. We sell the approach that we don't have a big planning division, we don't have a big development review process or a bunch of committees that have to meet.

"Most cities have a 90-day response period. Most times we do that in hours."

On economic development matters, the town partners with Wyandotte Development Inc. Thompson said the goal is to put a proposal in a prospect's hand within 10 days of the initial meeting.

"While you're waiting on a bigger city to respond in 90 days, here's your answer from us on everything, and here's your building permit in case you decide to come," Spangler said. "That's a real winner. We don't have all the amenities the big city has, but developers have been in awe with the pace we move."

The town's location and efficiency won it the Quill Corp. distribution center, said the KCADC's Cowden, who assisted with site selection.

"Quill was considering Kansas City along with several other Midwestern locations. Edwardsville had several advantages," Cowden said. "When they had to evaluate the metro itself, Edwardsville rose to the top fast."

Steve Coon, a principal with Rapid-Built LLC and a vice president with Colliers Turley Martin Tucker, also has been pleased with both sides of the town's strategy.

After an extensive search of the metropolitan area, Coon said he thought that Edwardsville was "the best we could find." He decided it would be the home of MidPoint Corporate Centre, the nine-building office park now under construction.

"The location is great. It's a half-mile to the Johnson County line," Coon said. "The land price was great, and city government has been more than cooperative."

MidPoint Corporate Centre, which will employ more than 700, should be completed within seven years, Coon said.

To accommodate developers, Spangler said the town has worked to improve its amenities and its infrastructure.

Two new restaurants have opened so far this year, and by the end of the summer, a \$2 million sewer expansion will be completed.

Surprisingly, Edwardsville has managed to grow and develop without incurring much debt. No bonds have even been proposed by the current administration.

Spangler said next year's budget would bear a short-term debt of just \$395,000, most of which will be paid before the end of the fiscal year.

"It's kind of remarkable," he said. "We've taken a surplus that we generated out of the expansion in town and paid down our debt. We think that's appropriate right now."

Meanwhile, the surge in new business has alleviated some of the town's tax burden. Edwardsville is poised to have the lowest property tax in Wyandotte County. Last year, taxes were cut by 7 percent; this year, Spangler said, a 10.5 percent decrease is planned.

Thompson said his long-term plans for the town include continuing balanced growth in industrial, residential and commercial areas and developing all available industrial and commercial land.

Spangler said he wants to see taxes reduced by 30 percent, full occupancy at the industrial park and more recreational facilities in town, such as a swimming pool. Although growth is a priority, he said, preserving Edwardsville's personality is equally important.

"Hopefully, we'll never lose its small-town character. That's important to residents here, and that's the charm and character we're able to provide," he said. "Hopefully, we'll just keep doing what we're doing here, and everybody will keep winning."