



Guest editorial
Charlotte Zietlow writing on economic development

Who Are We?

For years, economic development in this community and state has been pretty much the same: Hire a consultant from someplace else, charge him with finding a national corporation to set up shop here, and offer incentives to make us look tantalizing.

Fifty years ago that was the norm, and it was successful. Over time, we benefitted from the 400-plus jobs at Otis, the 500-plus at Westinghouse, and the 2,000 or so at GE, which joined RCA and Sarkes Tarzian to form an electronic critical mass.

We also used outside consultants to advise us on what might be successful new businesses here—life sciences, IT, health care—the same mix that is recommended to communities all over the country. We have, in other words, continuously sought to compete with other Hoosier and national communities for the same prizes.

What we have NOT ever done is try to inventory our chief resource—our people. We have not gotten together our very capable social scientists, financial specialists, or even our businesspeople to imagine a different strategy.

We haven't determined who we are.

We continue to choose to compete with other communities offering the same incentives—tax breaks, zoning variances, etc. We have not focused our wooing on the specific characteristics of our community and our workforce.

We haven't, as economic development policy, looked at those seeking employment and tried to tailor our development to provide good jobs for them. This varied group includes highly educated women, high school dropouts, single parents, and a plethora of people with special talents and skills. We haven't even catalogued what those talents and skills are.

No doubt the norm is easier to pursue. It wouldn't be easy to learn how many musicians live here, their genres, and their entrepreneurial skills. It wouldn't be easy to figure out if there is a critical mass of visual or graphic artists and at what level they might function as a bloc.

It would be less difficult to determine how many would-be businesspeople there are who have passionate interests in manufacturing, processing, logistics, and the hundreds of traditional businesses that could be nurtured. It is also not impossible for our local leaders and business gurus to focus on encouraging retail businesses to re-energize our downtown Square.

Forty-five years ago, several of us decided to open businesses downtown. We believed that locally owned, customer-friendly stores would make the downtown an attractive place to be. Marilyn Schultz and I started Goods, Inc.; Gene and Sally Walker opened Argentum Jewelry; J. L. Waters eventually opened its sporting goods store. Over the years, numerous excellent retail stores have followed suit.

Of course, there are much grander successes than those on the Square—Cook Group, Griner Engineering, One World Enterprises, Textillery Weavers, to name a few. These have all been created out of whole cloth by committed local owners with energy and persistence. Many of them were barely noticed as economic development when they first appeared, but they are just that.

We have a lot of smart and creative people in this community. Why should we not bring them together, laying out the complex issues of employment, building a human community, and encouraging and supporting entrepreneurs together?

What it comes down to is this: As a community we have the mix of people, common sense, talents, and skills to improve our economy with resources we already have here. Why don't we try? It makes sense—and will make dollars, too.

Charlotte Zietlow has served the Bloomington community in a variety of capacities for 46 years. In 2012, the Monroe County Justice Building was re-named the Charlotte T. Zietlow Justice Center in her honor.