

Economic future remains key

Mayor, UWSP professor say diversity can bring stability

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This year, the city's economic future has been a recurrent theme in candidate platforms, with several candidates parading their intentions to bring living wage jobs to the city and stem the flow of businesses to Plover and other surrounding municipalities.

Mayor Gary Wescott said, however, the city's recent economic development has been positive.

"I would argue that the city has had a lot of successes," Wescott said, citing the construction of two new convention centers and the recent arrival of the Aspirus and Klasinski clinics.

Wescott insists economic upkeep happens in little steps, with city hall providing business districts a leg up when it becomes necessary through incentives such as bridge loans and incremental financing districts. A key to regional success, however, is keeping the economy diverse.

"We don't put all our economic eggs in one basket," Wescott said, listing various financial pillars, including Sentry Insurance, Ministry Health Care, Stora Enso and smaller regional affiliates such as Land's End.

In a February interview, University of Wisconsin- Stevens Point economist Randy Cray affirmed the importance of an economy that can wear many hats. He also said Portage County development sometimes is slowed by regional dependence on manufacturing, a market that has been hurt by international competition.

As a result, "We have been growing at a slow and steady pace, but we've been growing less than the United States as a whole," Cray said.

Cray emphasized the challenges a smaller city faces when it tries to bring in what he called high value service jobs, including consulting and information technology, which tend to cluster around large urban areas such as Chicago and Minneapolis.

Many Stevens Point businesses agree the business climate is temperate.

"I don't want to say it's booming... but it seems like every time we lose a few (businesses), we gain a few back, so it's holding its own," said Al Koerten, owner of Koersten Galleries and a member of the Southside Businesses Association.

Koerten described a steady wax and wane of business success in his district, with the Church Street Shopko leaving, before being divided into smaller stores during the past few years. Now, a Walgreens is being built on Church Street just as Furniture and Appliance Mart, 3264 Church Street, is moving to Plover.

"It's an average area right now," Koerten said, "but there's definitely room for improvement here."