

# Rotarians band together, search for solutions for local economic growth

By Ed Breen

Now here’s a thought. What if 25 or 30 Marion men and women, each with vested interest but none with territorial defense, got together around a lunch table, nothing fancy, sandwiches and salads. And what if they began speaking to one another about what each — or all — might do to assist in the shared goal of making this a better, more prosperous place to live?

Never mind, you might say. Forget it. We’ve done this before, time after time after time. Strategic planning 25 years ago. Wayne Seybold’s synergy sessions to reshape Marion. Post-It notes on walls. Brainstorming. Triangulating. To-do lists. Action plans. Decision makers. Facilitators.

Economic Growth Council does that. And the Chamber of Commerce. And those downtown roundtable gatherings that Jess Alumbaugh put together. And the Community Foundation and a whole lot of other not-for-profit organizations, each pledging in absolute good faith to make this a better place.

No, don’t bother. Go

*“What can we as Rotarians be doing to bring meaningful change to our community from an economic standpoint? I would love to get some dialogue around this topic today and to see what we can be doing to help spur our local economy in Grant County.”*

**Scott Miller**  
Owner - Bowman Construction Company

ahead, eat your lunch and talk about something more interesting.

Except. Except we’ve done all that and it hasn’t worked. Hasn’t made a dent. Town looks like a dump. Drive Boots Street from South Marion to downtown, or west on Second Street from the Bypass. Empty buildings abound. Derelict houses. Sometimes a full block of them. Try Nebraska Street between First and Second streets.

Why, we can’t find people to fill the jobs we have

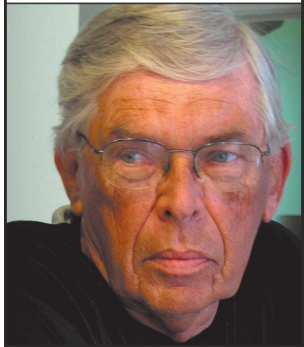
available right now, so why go looking for more jobs? All I want, says one business manager, is people who can pass the drug test and then show up on time every day.

So let’s come back to that table, that dining room at the Elks Lodge in northeast Marion. Those at the table are, in a time of declining civic pride, the party faithful of the only civic or cultural or religious group in town that is growing, bordering on thriving. They are Rotarians, the 35 or so members

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A MOMENT

Ed Breen



of two clubs that have recently merged, the old mainline Rotary Club from Downtown days and the upstart renegade Rotary Club that was formed 30 years ago by people who didn’t want to wear a coat and tie to lunch. Full disclosure here; I am a Rotarian, but not a good one. Lunch occasionally and avoid signing up for all work details.

But I’ve watched this renegade bunch from the beginning — which, not incidentally, included women from day one. You know

them as the bunch that grills pork chops at Mississinewa 1812 and the older club drops golf balls from helicopters to raise money.

For reasons that are pretty much unexplainable, it has become the service club of choice for the next generation of leadership in Marion and Grant County. That is, the men and women with the energy to make things happen in this town. Not many elected folks, but lots of management from the not-for-profit world and some from what we call the “private sector.” Retirement homes, insurance agents, that sort of job.

While all avoid election to the presidency of the club like the plague, somebody has to do it and the new leader is Scott Miller, who parachuted into town when he bought the Bowman Construction Co. a year or so ago.

And that sets the stage for this little discussion of what-can-we-do-to-fix-this-mess.

Miller bundled it nicely last week with this question: “What can we as Rotarians be doing to bring meaningful change to our community from an economic standpoint?”

Responding to bemused amazement, he added: “I would love to get some dialogue around this topic today and to see what we can be doing to help spur our local economy in Grant County.”

And that set things in motion. “I like to think we are in the center of everything, not in the middle of nowhere,” said one, paraphrasing from one of those “facilitator” presentations in town a few months ago. But it has meaning, nonetheless.

Others chimed in: “I’m not stuck here. I choose to live here. I’m tired of apologizing.”

“How can we help guide those economic development opportunities that we know are there.”

And another cliché with meaning: “If we help build it, they will come.” He spoke of a successful redevelopment up in South Bend.

“How do we pick our targets?” and “How do we find out if this group can help them?”

And by then it was 1 o’clock and Rotarians always adjourn at 1 o’clock. But they will be back again next week. Let’s see what happens then.

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