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Dakota Future launches project to become 'Intelligent Community'

Initiative aims for job creation and industry innovation

by Kara Hildreth
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Dakota Future's Intelligent Community Initiative wants to plant seeds of prosperity so innovative people and companies will be motivated to plant roots in Dakota County.

A crowd of about 75 people gathered Friday, Oct. 9, at Dakota County Technical College in Rosemount for the launch of the Dakota Future initiative.

The group's vision is to lay the groundwork for improving five areas in Dakota County: broadband communication, knowledge of workers, innovation in business and government, digital inclusion and marketing.

The goal is to make strategic economic development easier, and to put Dakota County in a better position to attract companies and bring jobs.

Last year, 400 communities across the globe competed in the Intelligent Community of the Year ranking; Stockholm, Sweden was recognized as the Intelligent Community of the Year. Dakota Future has adopted the lofty goal to be named one of the top-seven Intelligent Communities by 2012.

Dakota Future is a county-wide economic development organization funded primarily by the private sector with a board of directors that carries a mission of linking business, education and government.

"We want to create an environment where people are interested in inventing things and we want to see a place (where) workforce and infrastructure has a support system for businesses," said Bill Coleman, executive director of Dakota Future in Apple Valley.

To become an Intelligent Community, Dakota Future completed a benchmarking exercise designed to reveal areas the county needs to work on to meet the standards.

In his keynote speech, Robert Bell, co-founder of the Intelligent Community Forum, presented his Dakota County analysis report.

In a community metrics ranking system from one to five with five being given



Robert Bell, co-founder of the Intelligent Community Forum, was the keynote speaker at Dakota Future's Intelligent Community Initiative launch event on Oct. 9 at Dakota County Technical College.

as the best ranking, Dakota County scored highest in the area of digital inclusion with a 4.5. Dakota County earned its lowest score in marketing and advocacy, getting a 1.25 against the average of 3.95.

The county earned a 3.0 in innovation, a 3.2 in knowledge workforce, and a 3.5 in broadband infrastructure compared to the average of 2.70.

"Broadband is the new essential utility, as vital to economic growth as clean water and good roads," Bell said.

An intelligent community exhibits the ability to develop a workforce qualified to perform knowledge work from the factory floor to the research lab, from the construction site to the call center or Web design studio, Bell said.

"Intelligent communities promote digital inclusion by creating policies and funding programs that provide 'haves-nots' with access to digital technology and broadband, by providing skills training and by promoting a compelling vision of the benefits that the broadband economy can bring to their lives," he said.

Following the keynote address, implementation teams held roundtable discussions. The teams were: the broadband team, the innovation team, the marketing and advocacy team, the knowledge workers team and the digital inclusion team.

Each team committed to meeting at least four more times until May 2010 to work on the target issues.

The leadership team includes elected and appointed public officials, college presidents and top business leaders.

"In today's fast-changing world, it is imperative to keep pace and to move ahead of other areas," said LaDonna Boyd, chair of Dakota Futures and economic development manager for Dakota Electric Association. "Cutting-edge technology will keep our area out in front."

For years, new business development and job creation have not come easily to the Midwest, even though the state and county are home to some top companies, Coleman said.

"First off, the natural

growth is on the East and West coast, and Minnesota is considered flyover country," Coleman said.

In the benchmarking analysis, Dakota County ranked low on the marketing side, Coleman said.

"We do not understand the real benefits and the advantages we have," Coleman said. "So working to attract traditional businesses to come

into the county is low on the list of economic development goals."

"The southern part of the United States and their cities' economic efforts spend more on marketing than our whole state government," Coleman said.

Traditionally, the northern states have boasted more manufacturing, forcing the southern states to do more

marketing to attract those businesses, Coleman said.

"So now over time, they (the southern United States) have shared in the economic growth," said Coleman. "I think we have never had much of a marketing budget at the county or state level, and not that we will have a big one any time soon," Coleman said.

But Coleman added that Dakota County can spend more time on its message and look for creative ways to do marketing that will not necessarily cost a lot, but still be valuable and effective.

Both small and large businesses will benefit from the Intelligent Community initiative, Coleman said, but the benefits will be different for the two types of businesses.

"Large companies need large numbers of workers and talent, and small companies need to target either their financial or technical to be at an innovative level," Coleman said.

Does Dakota County have a chance of becoming a top Intelligent Community?

"After today, people expect it will happen," Coleman said. "If we work on it, it is definitely within our grasp and we did well on a number of items."

"The test is: Are people still willing to participate together as a county-wide team?" Coleman said.

To become involved in Dakota Future's Intelligent Community Initiative, visit www.dakotafuture.com or call Dakota Future at (651) 491-2551.

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The leadership team of Dakota Future's Intelligent Community Initiative includes education leaders, mayors and CEOs of large companies and local banks.



