

Uniting for a Better Community – Group plans to shape Alex area’s destiny.

By Al Edenloff, Editor – Echo Press

Imagine the Alexandria area with:

A regional auditorium.

A new industrial park.

Twenty percent more volunteers.

Decreased poverty.

Better trail access.

More neighborhood block parties.

More walleyes swimming in its lakes.

Free early childhood programs for all 4 and 5-year-old children.

12 businesses starting up or expanding every year.

You don’t just have to imagine it. A new initiative is under way to make it all happen.

It’s called “Alex Area Stewards.” The goal: Working to unite our region for a vibrant future.

The new effort kicks off today, May 15.

“We’re moving from the planning stage to the doing stage,” said Jason Murray, director of the Alexandria Area Economic Development Commission (AAEDC) and a member of the Alex Area Stewards.

Although the goals may appear ambitious, this is no “pie in the sky” effort. Those behind it are convinced that real change can happen through a unified, regional approach.

The core group of the Alex Area Stewards involves about 40 members representing area businesses, civic organizations, service clubs, non-profits, social services, schools, public health and other sectors of the community.

The idea started about a year and a half ago when a local group of leaders from key segments of the community, including business and economic development, realized how much could be accomplished if the community – not just Alexandria but the surrounding towns as well – worked together toward a common cause.

The group, once known as “Advantage Alexandria,” drew their inspiration after listening to Dave Hengel, director of the Center for Community Stewardship, which organized a highly successful campaign in Bemidji called “Bemidji Leads!”

The effort there resulted in a \$50 million regional event center, new job programs, revitalization of a regional airport, and a massive tree planting effort that has resulted in 10,000 new trees planted every year.

Motivated by those very tangible results, local leaders have been working on a plan for the Alexandria area for months. They sent out thousands of surveys asking a wide cross-section of the community what should be the area’s priorities and how it should get there.

After tabulating the results of 1,050 surveys that were returned, the group identified common ground and developed 13 “destiny drivers” that are essential to the Alexandria area’s future.

They assigned “champions” to each of the destiny drivers who are responsible for achieving the goals, which have measurable outcomes (see graphic).

Organizers emphasize that this initiative stretches well beyond the city limits of Alexandria. They noted that a survey of seven or eight manufacturing companies in Alexandria revealed that only about 20 percent of their workforce actually lived in the city. The rest came from the surrounding areas, such as Brandon, Carlos, Osakis, Garfield, Kensington and Glenwood.

A key part of “Bemidji Leads!” success came from leveraging the cooperation and involvement of the smaller communities that surround Bemidji, such as Black Duck.

The Alexandria Area Stewards initiative is taking that same kind of regional approach and the results have been encouraging.

“It’s exciting to see how people are taking ownership of it,” said Corliss Stark, a member of the Alexandria Area Stewards.

“It’s not just Alexandria or just Osakis – we all have to work together,” said Murray.

Although the initiative is more about muscle than dollars, it has received about \$40,000 through the Otto Bremer Foundation to cover costs, such as printing and distributing the survey.

Other financial sponsors for the Advantage Alexandria Area/Alex Area Stewardship program are AAEDC, West Central Initiative, Bremer Bank, Alexandria Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Alexandria Light and Power, Glenwood State Bank, MidMinnesota Federal Credit Union, First State Bank of Alexandria, Alexandria Technical College, Runestone Electric Association, West Central Sanitation, and State Bank and Trust.

Those who want to get involved in the Alex Area Stewards effort, may contact (320) 763-4545.

Published in Echo Press – May 15, 2009
Author: Al Edenloff, Editor – Echo Press