John Groh May 2011 Voice Article

**Investing in Transformation, Working Toward Change**

Could Dubuque’s Model Work for Us?

Dubuque, Iowa learned in 2009 that IBM had selected it for its new technology services center. This created 1,300 new high-tech jobs by 2010 with the possibility of more. Think of the economic and civic activity these new employees are generating for Dubuque.

Among the happiest at the news were the public-private partnership leaders who developed a plan for community transformation, and worked together over a period of nearly 20 years to advance the community. Key to their success was their work on the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium and the America’s River at the Port of Dubuque, signature projects funded in part by Vision Iowa grants that helped transform Dubuque.

I wanted to write about Vision Iowa to let you know about their unique partnership model that had much to do with IBM’s decision, for Iowa ranking the second most livable state in the country in 2009 according to the Congressional Quarterly Press, and a dramatic resurgence in Iowa’s quality of life.

IBM cited these reasons for selecting Dubuque:

* public-private partnerships
* competitive business climate, and
* talented workforce.

**Dubuque’s Unique Partnerships**

Why did IBM like their public-private partnerships so much? They were deep and long-term, with proven track records. These partnerships are also the foundation for Vision Iowa’s success.

When Governor Tom Vilsack was elected governor of Iowa in 1998, he made “quality of life” a priority. He proposed and the Iowa General Assembly approved the Vision Iowa Program in 2000. This is a long-term program to assist communities develop and create permanent cultural, recreational, entertainment and educational attractions for the general public. In turn, it was hoped that these attractions would position communities to take advantage of economic development opportunities in tourism and strengthen a community’s competitiveness as a place to work and live.

Guess what? It worked because Vision Iowa has requirements that assure success and leave lasting benefits. For communities to receive a grant, they must have strong, local public-private partnerships; leveraged financial resources (private investment); and strong, local leadership. A minimum of 50 percent of project funding must come from local sources; often more is required.

Sometimes the state supported only 10 to 20 percent because time was taken to identify more local participation. So public funds seed projects but leveraged finances by the private sector assure local buy-in and thus, success. This is in contrast to some other public-private partnerships where public funds can account for the majority of a project or seed a project with the hope that private investment will follow.

**Partnerships Benefited Iowa**

Vision Iowa has awarded about $350 million in funding to 94 of its 99 counties, helping develop new libraries in small towns and convention complexes in larger cities.

One example of a Vision Iowa investment is the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium established in Dubuque. It attracts more than 250,000 visitors annually. The area received a second major award for the America’s River at the Port of Dubuque for a Mississippi River Discovery, the Mississippi River National Education Center and Conference Center, the River Walk and amenities and the Riverfront Hotel and Indoor Water Park.

Leaders in Dubuque trace their success in attracting IBM to their public-private partnerships and investing in transformative initiatives like the Port of Dubuque. It makes me wonder what would happen if, like Dubuque, we had a regional master plan that we supported and worked to implement?

With our region's brain power and resources, the results would be impressive, and transformative, for sure.

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580 words

*photo caption*

 “America’s River at the Port of Dubuque” was created as a result of a strong public-private partnership in Dubuque. It was funded in part by Vision Iowa which required strong, local leadership and leveraging of financial resources before state funds were committed. PHOTO CREDIT MARK HIRSCH PHOTOGRAPHY