

## **St. Louis Business Journal State of St. Louis Questions and Answers**

### **What are your budget expectations for 2014?**

We expect a 1% growth in sales tax collections, and to maintain revenues for building permit and recording fees.

### **What are some positives for the county heading into 2014?**

St. Charles County will have a big year in 2014 with the completion of two huge projects.

First, the county's new Emergency Radio Communications System will launch in late summer 2014. First responders across the county will be able to communicate with each other for the first time ever. This means their response to accidents, natural disasters and other emergencies will be faster and more efficient, which will help save lives. Our system is also part of a larger system being implemented in St. Louis and Jefferson Counties, increasing the emergency communications capability of the entire metropolitan St. Louis area.

Next, Phase 3 of the Route 364 Page Avenue Extension will open by November 2014. This includes construction of a four-lane divided highway from Mid Rivers Mall Drive in St. Peters to I-64 and Highway N in Lake St. Louis. When it's complete, travel between these two points will take just 7 minutes. This will make commutes easier and create more opportunities for growth in the area.

For both these projects, I am so proud of the teamwork and efforts that took place. It demonstrates the great things that can happen when everyone works together.

The economy is also bouncing back, and areas where this is apparent in St. Charles County are in our housing, unemployment, and development numbers. January to November 2013 produced the highest number of housing units permitted county-wide since 2007. Also, as of October 2013 St. Charles County's unemployment rate was at 4.9%, compared to 5.7% for Missouri and 7% for the country. In addition, new home construction hit a five-year high, and new commercial and industrial development totaled more than 3.5 million-square-feet in 2013. We look forward to these trends continuing in 2014.

### **Where does the county need to improve?**

With a population of about 100,000 millennials, we need to do all we can to retain this generation in St. Charles County. A study by Partners for Progress of Greater St. Charles found that over 70% of millennials think our county is a good place for young professionals to live and 69% plan on living in the county in the next 10 years. This is great news, so the more we can do to meet the needs of our citizens age 18-31 by creating opportunities for jobs and housing, and even entertainment, the better our county will be.

Maximizing the potential of the I-70 corridor is also of major importance to the continued development of the county. This infrastructure was designed in the 1950's and there have only been spot improvements. A study to do a comprehensive review and plan was approved in East-West Gateway and MoDOT Transportation Improvement Plans and will start next year. Within a mile of I-70 in St. Charles County, 48% of sales tax revenues are collected, 46% of jobs are located, and 27% of residents live. Along that same corridor, there is 5% vacant and 25% undeveloped land. These are significant figures that demonstrate how valuable this corridor is to our community, so we need to properly plan for the future.

We also need to continue to promote tourism and recreation opportunities and destinations, such as downtown St. Charles and Wine Country, and our County parks. Trails alone in St. Charles County total a half mile per 1,000 residents – nearly 190 miles for the whole county and more per capita than St. Louis City and St. Louis County. We have so much for everyone, from individuals to families, to enjoy.

**What local industries will see the biggest growth next year?**

The \$380 million expansion of the General Motors (GM) Assembly Plant is nearing completion in Wentzville. GM also has a \$133 million stamping plant addition under construction, and the press is expected to be operational in early 2015. In the near future there will be a ribbon cutting to open a new \$22 million, 80,000-square-foot auto supplier plant that was built this year right across the street from the GM plant.

Another area of growth in St. Charles County is in the sector of plastics manufacturing. According to the Economic Development Center of St. Charles County (EDC), the Austrian-based firm Alpla opened their first Midwestern plant in 2010 in St. Peters, added a 65,000-square-foot expansion in 2011 and purchased a second building 2012. In 2013, they purchased a third building with 105,000-square-feet and have already proposed a 61,000-square-foot expansion to be built in 2014.

Beyond automotive and plastics manufacturing, aerospace defense contractors are going strong with recent expansions by LMI Aerospace and Seyer Industries. We also look forward to new defense projects coming to Boeing in St. Charles.

The EDC anticipates financial services, healthcare, and information technology growth, as well. In the healthcare sector, Mercy opened several new medical offices in 2013, local hospitals are expanding, and the recent Pharma Medica Research project is bringing a \$30.8 million investment and about 300 plus new jobs to St. Charles. The EDC is also actively working with the Regional Chamber and local officials to pursue data center facilities and employees. The I-64/Highway 40 high tech corridor in St. Charles County is home to eight data centers, the largest concentration of its type in metro St. Louis.

**What efforts are being made to lower unemployment in the area?**

We are fortunate to have a low unemployment rate in St. Charles County, but this can always improve. The growth I addressed in the previous question will certainly help us maintain our low unemployment rate. In addition, St. Charles County's Workforce Development Department runs our branch of the Missouri Career Center and works to keep our rate low. The department works with area businesses to promote job opportunities and offers skill-building classes in a variety of topics, from computers to networking. It is a great resource for the community.

**What is the one concern that keeps you up at night?**

As a former educator and legislator, I know that quality education is important to the success of any community. The Missouri Supreme Court's recent decision upholding the statute allowing students in unaccredited schools to transfer, with the home district paying tuition to the receiving school, has elevated failing schools from a neighborhood problem to a regional problem in Missouri. I am concerned about the future of the St. Louis Metropolitan Area as a whole if other school districts in the area fail. For St. Charles County in particular, I am concerned about our schools in terms of resources and space if more and more students transfer.

Not only school boards, administrators and teachers are to blame. A review of attendance figures from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education indicates that only 70.1 percent of Normandy students, 69.6 percent of Riverview students, and 77.9 percent of St. Louis City students attend school 90 percent of the time. Francis Howell, Kirkwood and Mehlville have over 90 percent of students attending 90 percent of the time. While some parents in failing schools make great sacrifices to get a good education for their children, other parents cannot even get their kid to school.

I hope we can develop a culture that understands and values the importance of education to the success of individuals and the region. Every student deserves a quality education and we need to do more within our families, communities, and school districts, as well as the legislature, to make that happen.

### **What infrastructure improvements are planned in 2014?**

In addition to the new Emergency Radio Communications System and Phase 3 of the Page Extension, construction of the new Daniel Boone Bridge is underway and will continue into 2014. A new bridge will replace the 80-year old westbound bridge by the end of 2015.

Ongoing planning efforts will also continue for:

- Upgrading the I-70 corridor: This includes proposed improvements at the I-70 and Fifth Street interchange needed to support additional development in Mark Twain Village; make the St. Charles Convention Center more accessible; and accommodate growth in the Streets of St. Charles.
- Safety improvements for U.S. 61: The County will continue to work with MoDOT and the city of Wentzville on this project, which is anticipated to start in 2015.

Construction will also continue on Lindenwood Commons, which will allow the St. Charles Post Office on Fifth Street to relocate there and enable SSM St. Joseph Health Center to expand where the post office is currently located.

### **What is one advancement in the county that many don't know about?**

Gateway Green Light, which is a joint effort between the county, its municipalities and MoDOT. The County-wide traffic signal coordination plan will enable signals to operate in a seamless manner to expedite travel, and will allow for real-time traffic monitoring for motorists. The system is to be fully operational in late summer 2014.

### **Where does the China Hub Initiative stand?**

The initiative to bring foreign goods in and to export Missouri's goods was wrapped up in the tax credit debate in Jefferson City; however, interest remains in passing this incentive for freight forwarders that produce flights to help Missouri businesses expand markets overseas.

The most recent addition to the toolkit of programs to support economic development and job creation in region is the Gateway to the Midwest Investment Center, or GMIC. This program offers entrepreneurs from around the world the opportunity to earn permanent residency in the United States by investing a minimum of \$500,000 in a business that creates at least 10 full-time permanent jobs. The GMIC is a joint venture of St. Louis County, the City of St. Louis and St. Charles County. It is administered by the staff of the World Trade Center of St. Louis, a program of the St. Louis Economic Development Partnership. In 2013, the GMIC program received its final approvals from the federal government and is beginning to receive extremely high interest from local and global business owners, developers and investors. At my request, Greg Prestemon, President & CEO of the Economic Development Center of St. Charles County, serves as the representative on the 5-member regional board.

### **Is there any concern over community action groups hindering development, and future tax revenue, in the county?**

There is no concern at this time.