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Former county board chairman helping opportunity return

A former Vermilion County Board chairman hopes opportunity returns to the area and is working to make it happen.

Todd Lee, now East Central region manager for Gov. Blagojevich' Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, was the featured speaker at Monday's Hoopeston Neighborhood Watch meeting.

One of the initiatives of what was the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs is the Opportunity Returns program, designed to retain and create jobs in Illinois. Under Blagojevich' plan, the state was divided into regions. As East Central manager, Lee works with government and economic development leaders in Vermilion, Iroquois, Champaign, Ford, Piatt and Douglas counties.

With Opportunity Returns, Lee said, Blagojevich put economic development and job creation/retention into the hands of local people who know the communities. Instead of decisions being made in Springfield and Chicago, regional managers work with people in the local area and act as a liaison between communities and state government.

Lee cited the example of the Kodiak project, involving a company that would provide 600 jobs. Illinois and Indiana were being considered by the company and a total of 36 sites were put before the company for consideration. In early February, half the sites in the east central region were eliminated, leaving Danville and Rantoul as finalists, along with two Indiana locations.

After further consideration, Danville and one Indiana site were chosen as the final two possibilities and now officials are waiting for a final word. To meet specifications for the project, Danville spent \$54,000 and the state has signed off on \$7 million in incentives.



LEE

"We're waiting, we're hopeful but we also know it's a 50-50 chance" Lee said.

Manufacturing is still an important part of Illinois' economy but new manufacturing jobs are less labor intensive and require new skills, including those in computers and robotic machinery. "It requires more than a high school education," he said.

To meet the challenge, some high schools in Lee's region are part of pilot programs. Danville High School has Project Lead the Way, a pre-engineering program that allows students to "explore studies in an engineering curriculum," Lee said. In Cham-

paign, an information technology program is being piloted by a high school. "It's more than just hands-on learning," Lee said "They're actually doing projects." This year's class project is improving technology in the former Best Buy building in Urbana.

Another component of increasing education is the expected announcement of Critical Skills Shortage Initiative which will provide a grant to train workers in the East Central region. "Stay tuned," Lee said. "It should be announced shortly."

Besides worker training, Illinois must also compete with Indiana, which is often seen as a more business-friendly state. Companies that choose Indiana based on lower tax rates are sometimes surprised to find the state has a manufacturing inventory tax. "It's a very competitive business—economic development," Lee said, adding Illinois must improve in touting its assets, including geographic location and work ethic of its residents. "In the East Central region, I think we're up to the task," he said.

While it is important to attract new jobs, the key to ec-

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