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Former county board chairman helping opportunity return

LEE

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, Blago-jevich 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.

"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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See OPPORTUNITY on other side

Opportunity continued from other side

onomic growth is to retain existing jobs, Lee said. "Sometimes it seems sexier to focus on new companies but the majority of jobs come from existing businesses," he said. "Well over 50 percent of new job growth comes from companies existing in the community."

To foster a better business climate in Illinois, companies can take advantage of state loan and grant programs and other offerings which are tied to jobs. Illinois has such programs "that would fit almost every business opportunity," Lee said.

Hoopeston businesses have taken advantage of state opportunities, including Silgan Containers, which last year received state money. Silgan put money into its Hoopeston plant "because they're happy with the workforce and the work ethic," Lee said. "I think that says a lot about the community."

A railroad spur project is also in the works for the former Stokely building and Lee said his office has been involved in showing the former FMC building to interested parties. Lee admitted selling the building may take some time "That is a huge building," he said. "Folks who need that kind of space don't come along everyday."

As Illinois and its communities retain and attract jobs, Lee said it is important that those jobs are diversified. In the early 20s, he said, the conventional wisdom was to let businesses run their course.

well was arrested at 1:36 a.m. Tuesday in the 200

felony warrant for failure to appear for arraignment

for violation and an Iroquois County warrant for

failure to appear, was taken to the Public Safety

Building, Danville, in lieu of \$35,000 bond.

Abbbott, wanted on a Vermilion County

In communities like Hoopeston, where jobs were tied on a particular industry—in Hoopeston's case, canning—shifts in the economy have proven devastating as companies close. "We don't want to make the same mistake again," he said.

Different areas in Lee's region handle economic development differently. Vermilion Advantage is the main economic development group in Vermilion County while in Iroquois and Ford counties, economic groups are driven by local financial institutions. Piatt County does not have an economic development group but Monticello does. Douglass County also does not have one group that works on economic development. In Champaign County, Champaign, Urbana and Rantoul have separate economic development groups as does the county.

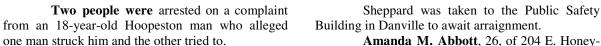
Champaign County, in particular Champaign-Urbana, is enjoying an economic boom and experienced "one of its greatest years," Lee said. "That kind of optimism hasn't occurred everywhere."

The next Neighborhood Watch meeting will be May 6 when Mayor Bill DeWitt will discuss his

\star

charged with disorderly conduct.

Police News



block of East Honeywell.

one man struck him and the other tried to.

The incident occurred at 9:55 p.m. Monday in the 300 block of West Penn. Aaron M. Linares, 22, of 321 W. Penn was charged with battery and Douglas J. Brookwalter, 23, of the same address, was

Each was released on a notice to appear.

Toby D. Sheppard, 36, of 506 Cedar, was arrested at 12:37 a.m. Tuesday in the 500 block of Cedar. He was charged with domestic battery and interference with reporting of domestic battery on a complaint from a 38-year-old Hoopeston woman who alleged Sheppard grabbed her by the neck and smashed her cell phone when she tried to call police.

Weather



Chance of thunderstorms today, tonight. High 79, low 57. Tomorrow, partly cloudy. High 76, low 57.

For current weather conditions, call Hoopeston Weather Service. (217) 283-6221.

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