

Great Plains: One step leads to the next

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Growth at the Great Plains Industrial Park (GPIP) is happening, step-by-step, with each step building upon the last and new leads being generated as the park's network grows.

GPIP director Brad Reams said they are starting a new round working on lead generation programs with some companies.

"We've actually put in for 14 different opportunities in the last two weeks," he said. "We'll see how that goes. We have some more coming in December that we'll apply for. What we're trying to do is be as efficient as possible with our blended marketing budget and limited staff. We're not able to go out nationwide and beat the pavement as much as we would like to. We have to be pretty savvy on social media ... to try to attract interest. This is going to be a tool we have that already has leads built up, so we did some financial investments to be able to access that now. We'll be able to take those leads that are national, and sometimes international, and say here is what we have to offer at Great Plains."

Other leads have percolated in a more organic way, reaching out to contacts of contacts, planning an outdoor event within the next 12 months that would get a lot of people who are in the industries they're trying to circulate in an eyes-on view of Great Plains and what the park is doing in 2021. He said they are working with a company to plan that event, though it is dependent on how the health statutes work out.

"We'll see how that goes," he said. "Just getting them here to be able to see that is a big deal, because it really starts to cement things in their mind that it's possible. Whether it's a start up, or someone who is expanding with a new manufacturing line, then it starts to become more real for them, 'We can do this here and it is possible.' That's the step we're at with several companies.

Whether they are able to get here or not mostly depends on their companies' policies. For some of them they are kind of in a holding pattern right now."

In addition to lead generation programs, Reams said Great Plains is reaching out to business recruiters in other parts of the United States who can direct business and industry to Parsons. This week they are hosting the Great Lakes recruiter and the West Coast recruiter from the Department of Commerce.

“We’ve got to get all those recruiters to know about us before we can get the lead generated to us. So that is ground work that’s got to get done,” Reams said. “I’ve been very excited in that Secretary David Toland (Kansas Department of Commerce) has been good about wanting southeast and south central Kansas to succeed. That’s helped us get some traction and then with the new deputy that’s helping also. We’re very happy about that progressing. That will really help us in our leads.”

Parsons really has to shine because it’s not in a region where larger cities may generate interest for business and industry, Reams said. And while the focus is on Great Plains with the current administration in the Department of Commerce, he said they need to take advantage of that. Building relationships with government representatives in the Kansas Legislature and Washington, D.C., has also been key. What has helped Great Plains in building relations at the local, state and federal level with government and agencies is familiarizing them with the park, its progress and its vision and keeping their word that investments through grants would reap rewards for the area.

Looking back over the past 14 months, when he first started the job at GPIIP, Reams said he would not have imagined Great Plains would be where it is because there had been a lot of development plans done for specific purposes, and there was a lot of historical knowledge he had to gain to start making steps.

“We wouldn’t be where we are if I didn’t have the great staff that I have to do all the environmental things. Tim (Peoples, property manager) was able to get things done physically. That was a huge help. So a lot of learning and a lot of listening happened in this first six months – what happened and failed, what happened and is successful, why was it successful and can we replicate that? And learning

my board and them learning me, that was huge. But really, the steps we took are ones I thought we could take, but everything had to hinge on some of the other steps. We couldn't jump steps and that was a little frustrating in the beginning," he said.

He said relationships with county and city leaders have been great, and Great Plains has been working to communicate effectively with them so there is better understanding of why they should invest in Great Plains and what Great Plains can do for them.

"To get anything done, everyone has to park their ego at the door, and that's not easy to do for anybody. You're hired to make sure you're successful. Is it going to be worth it? You give a little, we give a little, and we've had wins. That, I think, is a big part of where we are today. The wins we promised would come, have come, whether it was the state investment or it's been a company coming in, or 'Hey, the investment on the rail is going to lead to something else.' It did. Those things did play out, so the trust, the confidence built. And we've been kind of able to stair step off of that to what is going to happen next," Reams said.

He said with the growth that is going to happen at GPIIP, leaders will need courage for the next steps, which could include erecting spec buildings.

"We will de-risk everything we can as much as possible. I don't think we're ever going to put ourselves out there to where, if that doesn't play out we're not going to be here in six months. That's never going to happen. Sometimes for smaller communities, rural communities, the new is tough, and so that is our job as a staff, as a board, to communicate to the community that the new is going to be good. The positives are going to be there. If we don't do that right, it will go backwards."

Such vision coming to fruition will allow a greater profit that will boost improvements to the park to draw more business and industry. Presently, GPIIP, a quasi-municipality, does not get to realize all the profit for the hard work of the staff and board. There are two years left with revenue share with the U.S. Army,

as per the agreement, with the U.S. Army getting 50% of railroad revenue and 25% of lease revenue.

"It's still a good portion of revenue, but again, that's part of the agreement. You just work with building as much revenue as possible," Reams said. "Their share is their share."

As was the dream of a few so many years ago, Great Plains is prospering, one step at a time. Having land that is shovel ready helps. It is getting people that to see the benefit to the rural area while still having access to urban areas, trucking and shipping lanes and more.

Reams said his motivation is sustained by the feedback staff are hearing from groups. He said it is difficult to call what he is doing a job, though it requires a sustained effort every day to make this vision about development a reality.

"The feed back nationally is positive and it is possible and we're not just dedicated to bringing in outside companies. ... It is to see how much benefit we can bring to the local area is the ultimate message we want. We want to benefit you. We enjoy benefiting you. We enjoy being in the community and we enjoy seeing it thrive. That's what's at the root of everything. ... Our goal is to help everyone," Reams said.

"There are a lot of communities hurting right now. There are a lot of people hurting right now, and we're trying to do our part to make sure people can live the kind of life they want to live."