

Jobs key to the future

Colin Read: Everybody's Business

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— Successful politicians know the importance of job creation. Is that a sound bite, or is it an imperative for our very survival?

For the past year and a half, a group of dedicated Plattsburgh residents have been bent on developing a comprehensive plan for our town over the next decade, and well beyond. At first we thought we were focusing primarily in the quality of life for town residents. Bigger is not always better, and few believe in the folly of growth for growth's sake. While our future is an issue of quality over quantity, this quality of life depends crucially on economics.

The reasons may surprise you and perhaps scare you.

You see, failure to grow may challenge our very survival and push us beyond a tipping point that leads to community decline.

My analysis of 50 years of actual and projected Clinton County demographics to the year 2040 has given me grave concern that we, as a community, may be dying, quite literally. In the span of just 50 years from 1990 to 2040, the median age in Clinton County will have risen from under 25 to over 50 years old. Our aging population is losing its young adults. Since 1990, our county population has fallen by about 5,000, and is projected to further fall by almost twice that amount in the next 30 years. Half of these losses will be in those career age individuals that pay the bulk of our local taxes and provide almost all of our local production.

I believe it is imperative that we create a high quality of life in our community. But, as the population and tax base shrinks because we fail to replace the young adults we lose, we must also ensure that new blood is attracted to this community. We do this through the creation of sustainable and well-paying jobs upon which young professionals can build a career, a family and a legacy. While residents are the lifeblood of the community today, young professionals not yet here will be the lifeblood of tomorrow.

Yes, we all want to define communities that remain attractive long after we are gone. But, we also must ensure that our communities are sustainable. And that requires us to consider how we can create the economic base that will feed families and permit our town to continue to support an affordable tax base that can attract and retain residents.

Life, sustainability and economic livelihood all go hand in hand. Ultimately, production keeps our lights on and our taxes affordable, unless we become a retirement community or a home for the independently wealthy, like Lake Placid, fueled by investment savings or old money.

It is likely that well-paying and high-quality jobs and production is the path that will allow our community to flourish.

Are high-quality jobs part of a high quality of life? Of a 168-hour week, we spend almost 60 hours asleep. Almost half of our waking hours are spent at work or commuting to work. If we are to live a happy life, we must enjoy our productive life. How can we better integrate quality of life and career?

First, we can create an environment where fulfilling and sustainable jobs are brought to our region. We must elect leaders that will focus on fostering high quality jobs that will attract newcomers to our towns. We must strive for new jobs and residents that will enhance the long-term sustainability of our region.

Second, we must recognize our role in creating healthy and attractive work environments. College campuses are designed to be attractive. Our hospital has an attractive campus. Now, the corporate world is following this example. Campuses at Microsoft, Google and Yahoo are designed to attract and retain workers that value quality of work life. These campuses are truly pleasant and humanistic places to work.

We have, through The Development Corporation and other entities, developed ideal locations for leading-edge companies to set up shop. The types of companies we are most proud of are engaged in the high technologies of the future. These companies are staffed precisely with the types of individuals who will allow us to forge a sustainable county that is otherwise on the population decline.

We can do more. Taking the cue from corporate campuses, we can integrate recreation on our work campuses. Imagine park-like settings surrounding these campuses that allow workers to enjoy lunch, a walk or a run, in the summer, or a bit of cross-country skiing in the winter. It would add a whole new meaning to the term "industrial park."

Imagine the eye-popping effect we would have on potential employers if we could show them a location for their businesses that their employees would love. Perhaps more than any of us, employers know the importance, in recruiting and retention, of a contented and fulfilled workforce.

This is truly a community effort. People move to our region, not necessarily to our town. Where the jobs are and where their homes are may differ. We all have a stake in attracting young professionals, and we must all work together to ensure their commuting path from home to work and back is pleasant and offers choices like bicycling and walking. And there is more we can do to make their workplace less industrial and more livable.

As long as work and production of some sort is necessary to sustain our quality of life, let us see if we can integrate work into our lives in a truly holistic and humanistic way. And let us think about what a region can do with that important dimension of life.

This dimension of economic livelihood is the other side of the livable and sustainable community coin. I applaud our leaders who recognize a looming crisis and are acting to create high-quality jobs. Our very existence depends upon their success. And I implore us all to think about ways we can make our communities and our workplaces more attractive and desirable to those that may well be our economic salvation.

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