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## Wise to update development focus

The Greater Wichita Economic Development Coalition commissioned a study five years ago that identified industries to target for growth and to help diversify the local economy. Given new economic and market conditions (including the emergence of the green-energy sector), GWEDC is wise to update that study and re-examine the region's competitiveness.

To that end, GWEDC hired Dallas-based Site Selection Group to assess the community's current work force, business and economic conditions; develop a strategy for leveraging and attracting resources; update the list of target industries; and report on how comparable communities have moved from being "good to great."

The consultant has completed its review of peer communities but won't release its full report until Jan. 18. But David Brandon, a senior vice president with Site Selection Group, told The Eagle editorial board this week that the top priority for economic development should be nurturing and supporting existing local businesses.

That makes sense, given how difficult it can be to recruit new companies and the commitment that local businesses already have demonstrated to invest here. And to its credit, GWEDC has greatly improved efforts to retain and support local businesses, though GWEDC president Vicki Pratt Gerbino told the editorial board that her team still lacks some economic development tools needed to help businesses. Local governments also have made smart investments to support local industry, such as the new National Center for Aviation Training.

The region needs to improve on Brandon's next two priorities: assisting with the formation and development of new companies, and placing the community in a competitive place to attract new companies.

Wichita City Manager Robert Layton told the editorial board that the community needs to better support entrepreneurs. And Brandon said the lack of shovel-ready development sites recently kept the area from landing a large factory.

Sedgwick County staff tried to address the site issue earlier this year by proposing the county acquire and develop industrial park land owned by the city of Bel Aire. But the County Commission put that decision on hold.

Brandon also said that communities must recognize threats to their well-being going forward and commit to a long-term plan of action. That's often been a challenge for Wichita, which has a history of agreeing that it needs to diversify its economy when aircraft manufacturing is experiencing a downturn but then losing urgency when the plants start hiring again.

It's encouraging that the GWEDC and local leaders are trying to stay focused on building on the Wichita area's existing strengths while also broadening the economic base where it makes sense.

As County Manager William Buchanan summarized the effort, this is a disciplined pursuit, and we're "not going to get trapped in failure."

— For the editorial board, Phillip Brownlee

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