

FCDC 25 Years

by Rebecca Svec

Twenty-five years ago, people from across Fillmore County gathered at the Anchor Inn to kick off the newly incorporated Fillmore County Development Corporation (FCDC).

It was the tail end of the 80s Farm Crisis and the economy in Fillmore County was still righting itself. So the anticipation that night was both for the new group and the chance to take action.

For the first time, the development corporation had hired a fulltime director. Support reached every corner of the county. The Board of Directors and incorporators in early 1989 represented each Fillmore County town. They were excited to be doing something proactive together; to control their destiny in some measure, recalled Jim Steider, one of the original incorporators and a then-Geneva City Council member who addressed the crowd that night.

“I talked about FCDC becoming a marketing tool for the county to attract business and support the ones who were here. The concept was: As a county, we stand united. If one town gets something (business and development) we all benefit,” Steider recalled.

As FCDC celebrates its 25th anniversary – and the successes of local businesses and new businesses that have located in Fillmore County since its formation – Steider’s words remain fitting.

FCDC was one of the first truly county-wide development corporations in Nebraska and probably is one of the few again now, according to Norene Fitzgerald-Kidder, an early board member and 11-year director of FCDC. “We all worked well together and really understood the importance of success in one community as a success for the entire county, providing jobs and a tax base.”

At the broadest, most visible level, over the last 2+ decades, the corporation played a role in bringing such businesses as M-C Industries/ Sunflower Marketing, TMK IPSCO Tubulars, Metal Tech Partners, Bioiberica, Bio-Tee USA, O’Malley Grain/The Andersons, Advanced BioEnergy/Flint Hills Resources and CPI Lansing to the county, or assisting their transition.

Of the FCDC’s 80-acre industrial site on R Street, only three lots remain for sale. After Metal Tech Partners acquired the first 20 acres at the site in 2000, local and start-up businesses Theis Ag Services, Certified Truck and Trailer Repair and Stofer Enterprises populated the site, while Winfield Solutions is building at the site this year. Chaney Chemical plans to expand at the site in the future. FCDC also has 5 acres available for development west of the Fillmore County Fairgrounds.

But much of FCDC’s work is broader and behind-the-scenes, working with revolving loan funds, housing studies and development, financing, grants, labor studies, educational workshops and Homeowners Down Payment Assistance. Its staff responds to Requests for Information, often with tight deadlines, sending off facts and figures about Fillmore County, not knowing who is requesting the information or what they are seeking from a property. FCDC also connects businesses to funding sources and statewide agencies that help them maneuver through their industry and serves as the lead organization on housing, transportation and tourism.

Not many knew exactly what the development corporation would grow to be when Exeter native Charlie Trauger answered the *Omaha World-Herald* job ad to become the FCDC’s first director. He was leaving previous careers as commodities consultant and investment broker, but the opportunity to bring his wife and newborn son to his home county won out. He was tasked with convincing businesses in and out of Nebraska’s borders to make Fillmore County home.

“It was tough timing. We were so heavily dependent on agriculture, and the ag crisis’ effects had gone far beyond ag’s borders,” Trauger recalled. He and the board looked to successful development corporations in Nebraska and the successes of the Geneva Development Corporation, and other local development efforts and used them as a catalyst. Trauger delved into a business trade show and compiled a book of properties available for development in each county town. He tackled a big learning curve of what businesses needed to relocate. “Some cited a lack of power, lack of water, lack of infrastructure. But the exciting thing was that we had people looking and we were learning.”

About a year later, a job offer with the software industry lured him away. Norene Fitzgerald-Kidder, then of Exeter, filled the director role, leading FCDC through a very productive time in its history. M-C Industries built its plant in Geneva in 1991 through a connection to then-resident Don Wilkins. “We were able to have a success story fairly

early, which helped," she said. When M-C Industries repaid the Community Development Block Grant it used in its Geneva endeavor, the repaid funds established a Revolving Loan Fund, available to assist businesses throughout Fillmore County. Over the years 32 businesses utilized the Revolving Loan Funds.

Working closely with the Nebraska Department of Economic Development and Nebraska Public Power District, Fitzgerald learned early on to find out what a company really needed to operate and then worked hard to fulfill it, she said of FCDC's success during her tenure. The formula of matching the county's resources to a company's needs – be it a building, land, or labor – landed major industrial businesses that were a coup for the county. And not only for choosing Fillmore County, but for picking it over more populated areas of the state. "Generally we were competing with 10 or more communities in Nebraska, communities on the interstate, with larger populations...But we had what they needed and we could do it better."

The cooperation across the county was a selling point, she said. One example was the prison recruitment process in 1997. Although the state correctional institution eventually was built near Tecumseh, Fillmore County narrowly missed the short list of candidate areas. "We surprised a lot of people. We had tremendous support," she said, recalling how volunteers arrived at her office to help compile the paper proposal and presentation to the Selection Committee. "The city, county and schools were huge supporters and contributors of talents, time and resources, in addition to other volunteers too numerous to mention. We even had a celebration of our efforts where everyone was recognized, even though we weren't chosen."

Fitzgerald counts the recruitment of Bioiberica, headquartered in Spain, in 2000 as another highpoint for the county during her tenure. The company researches, develops and manufactures biomolecules for the pharmaceutical, veterinarian and agricultural industry. "That was exciting. At the time, they were the first Spanish company to invest in a place in Nebraska." The recruitment process included understanding another culture and assisting plant officials on their visit to the U.S. "At the time, their cell phones quit working at the Atlanta airport. It must have been a culture shock to come to us."

Other FCDC accomplishments included working with committee members to assist each municipality with their initial Web sites through NPPD, sponsoring numerous regional Farm & Home shows and spearheading scattered site duplexes and affordable and elderly housing in seven communities. It also developed the county leadership program ODEGEO, now in its 20th year. Its goal to educate and develop young leaders has now reached more than 200 graduates and placed many in county leadership roles.

To judge the impact of FCDC after 25 years is as much about looking as what would not be here without it as what is here because of it, in Fitzgerald's opinion.

"...Without those businesses those jobs and other opportunities would be lost; that tax revenue, those kids in our school districts, would be lost...There has to be some entity, working in cooperation with all the other entities out there, to make things happen. There is no one else – there are others where it is within their scope, but it's not their primary interest to actually recruit and help sustain or expand existing businesses and help market existing businesses to all the residents here," she said.

FCDC is in its third location and fourth director with Patt Lentfer, who has led FCDC since 2005. Her job is much different today than the one Trauger stepped into in 1989. Social media dominance adds marketing and protecting the county's image to the list of priorities. The development corporation continues to adapt. This year, under the leadership of President Karla Jacobson, FCDC has adopted a new logo, and restated vision and mission statements, which include "achieving the most dynamic business climate in Fillmore County by pursuing all avenues of growth for new and existing businesses, toward the goal of maximizing employment opportunities, tax base and quality of life." FCDC strives to increase its 90-member roster and seeks development opportunities large and small.

Trauger sees opportunity in connectivity and telecommuting. He works with a software company in downtown Chicago, but recently moved back to Fillmore County. He sees prospects in "people like him, who don't want to live in the city, but want that city paycheck."

FCDC will enter its next 25 years evolving while staying true to its purpose, officials said.

"What is the FCDC about? It's the keeper, the marketer, the champion for the county and what it offers," Trauger said.

"It's not only for the out-in-front recruiting, but walking beside a company helping along the way or walking behind as a resource for companies new or expanding in our area," Jacobsen said.

"FCDC is about keeping the county healthy and growing wealth; adding to the tax base, to the community infrastructure, the downtown business districts, school districts, and to pockets, so that people can have the communities they want," Fitzgerald said.