

County got early start on economic job

By Patty Decker

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Economic development in Thomas County has evolved from private development groups of business people to a full-scale public effort.

"Some of their most notable accomplishments were the development of two industrial parks, development of Lincoln Grain (now Cornerstone Ag) and Red River Commodities," said Gerry Fulwider, executive director of the Thomas County Economic Development Alliance.

In 1995, he said, recognizing the need for a full-time economic development effort, city and county leaders joined together to form the Thomas County Economic Development Alliance with Vic Van Camp, a retired veterinarian and former mayor of Colby, as the first director.

After Van Camp's retirement in 1999, Mr. Fulwider took over the job. The organization is governed by a board of five, he said, three appointed by the county and two by the city. The mayor serves as an ex-officio member. The board members are Junelle Hills, Larry Barrett, Paul Steele, Steve Richards and Steve Ziegelmeier.

At the time the office was created, he said, only larger cities staffed full-time economic development departments.

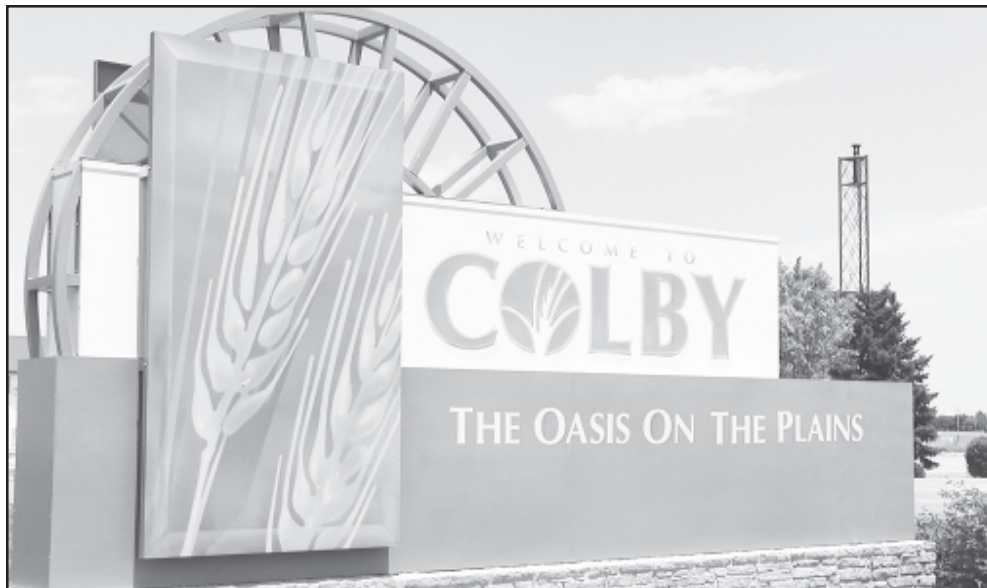
"Today, almost every county in western Kansas has created a full-time economic development department," Mr. Fulwider said.

The Thomas County office continues to welcome new businesses into the area. Mr. Fulwider talked about many improvements in the county, including road construction off I-70, a new state office complex, the new Wal-Mart and Truck Town, a business that refurbishes and sells semi-trucks.

Construction projects, he said, included Horton Avenue, which parallels the south side of I-70 and links the two Colby exits.

Another road job is the improvement on Willow Avenue, which parallels the north side of I-70 and serves as a primary route to the Prairie Museum of Art and History, Bourquin's Campground and the new Wal-Mart.

The construction of these roads, coupled with the construction of new water and sewer lines to service the south side of I-70, have created prime retail and commercial building sites, the



COLBY, THE OASIS ON THE PLAINS, has many services available to visitors and residents.

— Photo by Michelle Myers/The Colby Free Press

director said.

Both projects have required significant public investment but have already resulted in large scale private development, he said.

"This investment paves the way for a bright future in this region," he said, "and the Thomas County Economic Development Alliance commends the Colby City Council, Thomas County commissioners and staff for their foresight," he said.

Another economic boost to Thomas County and the area is Truck Town, located along I-70. The business, owned by Kirk and Holly Young, adds to Colby's strong transportation support industry, he said.

An additional shot in the arm for Colby and the county is the new state office complex on Country Club Drive east of town, housing the Department of Commerce Job Service, Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services and KETCH (the Kansas Elks Training Center for the Handicapped).

"This new facility is owned locally and built by local contractors, resulting in the creation of many new jobs," he said.

"Our Thomas County Economic Development board strives to maintain three targeted strategies," the director said.

The first focuses on business retention and expansion. The second recognizes entrepreneurs and start-up businesses. The third is to prepare the county for the recruiting of large-scale industry that will create jobs, repopulate northwest Kansas and create economic opportunity.

For business retention and expansion, as well as start-up businesses, the alliance offers small loans from grants received from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Administration and the Kansas Department of Commerce.

These loans are used to supplement money from banks and the U.S. Small Business Administration.

"Our most successful projects focus on helping coordinate resources with Pioneer Country Development and other public and private entities," Mr. Fulwider said. "We are working with several entrepreneurs with products, ideas and dreams that we have faith in. It is our job to work with these people, using the resources we have to make it happen in Thomas County."

The director said he wanted to thank the voters of Colby for their approval of the economic development sales tax initiative.

Thus far, he said, the alliance has been able to

Thomas County

• **Money spent** for economic development in Thomas County in 2006 — \$112,950.

• **Population** today 8,080, in 2000 8,180, in 1990 8,258, in 1980, 8,586.

• **People working** today 4,198, in 2000 6,521, in 1990 5,480, in 1980 5,087.

• **Economic Development Director** — Gerry Fulwider, eight years service.

• **EDC office** at 350 S. Range Ave., Colby. Phone (785) 460-4511.

• **Median family income** in 2000 — \$37,034.

secure options on large prime development sites on more than 100 acres, with that money.

"We are now prepared to offer "shovel-ready sites" to companies who will make a long term positive difference to our community.

"Economic development work can be humbling," he said. "For every successful project, it seems that five fail to materialize."

A year ago at this time, the alliance was confident an ethanol plant would be under construction in Colby. Today, he said, that project is doubtful.

"Yet, we remain confident that the future of Thomas County is good," he said. "Currently, Colby has Vision Source, Petro Lube and the new waste water treatment plant under construction."

A Bosselman's Truck Center is on the drawing board and Colby's food and lodging industries continue to flourish, he said, and for the first time recent history, the agricultural sector promises a banner year.

Colby's central location along I-70, Colby Community College and the area's agricultural assets will provide significant opportunities in the near future, Mr. Fulwider said.

"Thanks to growth-minded leadership and supportive residents, the economic development alliance is enjoying slow, but steady growth," he said, "and we have a plan in place for the future."

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