

IN MY OPINION**Caroline Porter****Economic development: as Dr. Phil would ask, "How's it working for you?"**

The 1967 Comprehensive Plan for Galesburg and Knox County predicted that by this time the Galesburg population would have doubled and tripled. This was based on the prospering times at hand, the belief that manufacturing would always be strong in Galesburg, that the Galesburg State Mental Hospital was a permanent fixture and the downtown would always be our retail center. Business was booming and supposedly, even though our political and civil rights leaders were being gunned down at a frightening rate, economy-wise, everything was looking pretty hopeful.

No one expected the energy crunch that began in the middle 1970s, which really was the beginning of the end for many manufacturers, including Butler, where I was working in quality control in 1979. The shipping of manufactured goods became

almost prohibitively expensive. In 1980, when there were close to 1,200 employees at Butler Manufacturing, the lay-offs started, including mine in May. In the next 25 years, the company never came close to that number of employees again. Finally, the doors were closed on that long-time Galesburg business this year.

The 1980s brought further disasters. OMC-Gale Products, which employed thousands of area citizens, left town. The State Hospital, another huge employer, closed down. In its place came Henry Hill Correctional Center, the hiring for which in 1986 were purely Republican patronage jobs, mostly from Warren County. Working to have the prison located here was a poor economic development decision if there ever was one, since it seems to have caused prisoners' families, friends and co-conspirators in the drug and other crime-related businesses to settle right here in River City.

This decade, of course, has seen the departure of a business that once employed 3,200 people — Maytag Refrigeration.

My husband and I tried to list the downtown businesses that were in existence in 1975, the year Sandburg Mall opened, and when we got to the number 40, we gave up. This does not include the businesses that have since moved in and out of the downtown. The Sandburg Mall, incidentally, has never been completely occupied. It may be out of fashion now, but in the middle 1970s it was the real deal, and it still was not the regional shopping center it was expected to be.

Several weeks ago the Galesburg Planning Commission recommended to the city council that 140 acres be annexed by the city so it can be developed into a huge shopping center on North Seminary Street and U.S. 34. The representative from Horne Properties of Knoxville, Tenn. told the commission that this shopping center would serve the region. "What region," someone asked. "Oh, Kewanee, Monmouth, small towns in the area," he said. What we should have learned from the Sandburg Mall experiment is that we are not a regional center. People in Kewanee, Galesburg and Monmouth live the same distance from Peoria and the Quad-Cities and that's where they are going to shop.

Now I know the city fathers would love to have that chunk of land added to the property tax base of the city, but we must ask them, and ourselves, "Is this proposed shopping center really good economic development?" I see some huge negatives.

1) We don't need a bunch of part-time, minimum wage jobs with no benefits added to this community. We have too many of those. We want jobs that pay a living wage. We also don't want to just move minimum wage jobs from one side of town to another.

2) Correct me if I'm wrong, but the purpose of zoning is that we don't want to plop a great big noisy traffic-producing shopping center into the middle of an area that includes residences, nursing homes, retirement community, and a hospital.

3) Seminary Street contains the two hospitals and the ambulance service. The street is only two-lane and increased traffic would hamper the ability of the ambulance service to get out of their location and to the hospitals.

4) Other businesses may fail because of the new center.

5) Horne Properties, at this juncture, has no idea what is going into the center, except for Menards.

I am pleased that Maytag has apparently sold their existing facilities to a company interested in establishing industrial projects. The buildings are there, the zoning is correct, the sewer and utilities are intact. Now that's good economic development, where we, the taxpayers, don't have to spend a mint in order for them to come to town and hopefully the jobs will pay a living wage.

The city's efforts to create a city-wide broadband telecommunications system are forwarding-looking and commendable. We will get no high-tech businesses without it.

It's time we stopped believing that land and roads and buildings are the only road to good economic development. Has anyone wondered what the retrained and newly educated former Maytag employees are going to do once their education is complete? Will there be good jobs here for them? Will they want jobs in Menards or a Wal-Mart Supercenter? If a high-tech company wants to come to Galesburg, will there be a pool of well-educated, creative people as possible employees?

On both counts, I think not. We need to be prepared to invest more in people — to reward creativity and those willing to take the risk of starting their own businesses. The last thing we need is more minimum wage jobs.

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