

# Communities collaborate without losing identities

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Call it what you will: the Corridor. The Metroplex. CinDay.

The communities along Interstate 75 between Cincinnati and Dayton see themselves as great assets to one another and their larger metropolitan brothers – even if they don't have a cohesive way to brand themselves.

"We're not looking for one image unless it all fits together in a positive growth pattern," said **Bill Triick**, who leads the Chamber of Commerce serving Middletown, Monroe and Trenton.

Counted as one, the 19-county Cincinnati-Dayton metropolitan area is home to more than 3 million people, making it the 15th largest in the nation.

Triick said each entity sees itself as part of "one big complex," believing it can have a domino effect on its neighbors.

That sentiment is echoed by many with a stake in the corridor's ground. Interviews with more than a dozen community and business leaders illustrate a strong desire to work together while understanding the need to retain autonomy in a way that complements the entire market.

## 'Take care of the core'

"It's a balancing act of maximizing what we have but also sharing with the major markets so we all reap the benefits," said **Joe Hinson**, West Chester Chamber Alliance CEO.

There is collaboration, "but first you take care of the core," he said.

West Chester leads the pack in population, infrastructure, business and household growth. The city counts more than 3,000 businesses, says the West Chester Development Council.

And 1.7 million professional, technical and manufacturing employees live just 30 minutes away.

Exit 19, for Union Centre Boulevard, kicked off a decade of robust development from West Chester going north, said **Craig Rambo**. The chairman of architecture and planning firm **McGill Smith Punshon** has been involved since the beginning.

Each new I-75 exit brings access to more land. Exit 41, for Austin Boulevard, is a prime example. As the mixed-use Austin Landing project gets under way, many see it as the Union Centre of the north.

The Butler-Warren region shouldn't wait until major development is complete to begin sharing its narrative, said **Greg Sample**, former Franklin mayor and CEO of real estate consulting firm the Paladin Co.

"We would be better off from a global market perspective and (we would) present a better story to some unique users if we would present it as one metropolitan area right now," Sample said.

What's needed is a leadership council that represents all entities and their great attractions, Rambo said. "The area could be marketed more aggressively."

### **'A region that works'**

Everything is tied to the I-75 spine, said **Mark Policinski**, executive director of the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments.

It's no accident.

A decade ago, the Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission and OKI mapped out more than \$1 billion in I-75 corridor improvements. The projects are meant to integrate Cincinnati and Dayton, said **Don Spang**, commission executive director.

"We see it as a partnership," Spang said. "We are already linked together."

There is a definite blending of geographic borders. Carlisle, Franklin and Springboro in Warren County now are part of Spang's commission. Businesses from both ends and places in between are co-populating chamber groups as they expand networking.

The I-75 corridor will continue to grow in importance, Policinski said. "It is located on the No. 1 surface transport corridor in the country."

Those selling the region and its individual parts champion that fact. The corridor has great connectivity in all directions: highways, rail lines, ports and two international airports. It is within a day's drive of 60 percent of the U.S. population. Its residents are educated (100,000 college graduates live within a 200-mile radius) and earn high incomes.

The quality of life is enviable, the climate is moderate, labor costs are manageable and the annual economic growth rate of about 1 percent is sustainable.

"Our brand should be, 'this is a region that works,'" Policinski said.

### 'A clearly identified region'

A label from the U.S. Census Bureau recognizing Cincinnati and Dayton as one entity "would officially create the mindset that this is one area," Hinson said.

The challenge is that the point of reference for most CEOs and site selection executives is the larger city, said **Andy Levine**, president of New York City-based place marketing firm Development Counsellors International.

"There is a barrier there," Levine said. "From a branding perspective they have to start from scratch."

The region must decide what role it wants to play, said **Jeff Rexhausen**, associate research director at the University of Cincinnati's Economics Center.

"We are talking about an area that is a piece of a clearly identified region," Rexhausen said. "When they are trying to brand themselves or attract things, it has to be in a way that builds on that."

Dayton Development Coalition CEO **Jeff Hoagland** said all of the region's assets, from abundant water and transportation to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, should draw people in.

"The metroplex is a great asset for selling the state and the region," Hoagland said. "If Cincinnati or Dayton benefit, at the end of the day Ohio is benefiting and that is the ultimate goal."