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Ryan Abbott, new Wellington assistant town administrator, says the path to economic growth means “going through this assessment pretty comprehensively with the town trustees and seeing what we can bite off here and take these recommended steps one at a time.” Joel Blocker/for BizWest

Wellington mulls economic development plan

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by **Curt MacDougall** on April 29, 2016

WELLINGTON — Managing growth can prove difficult, not only for businesses but municipalities as well. Just ask Wellington’s new assistant town administrator, Ryan Abbott.

“There are a lot of people here who want to maintain our small-town feel but also grow responsibly at the same time,” he said, “so you have to learn how to find that balance.”

Toward that end, the town recently commissioned Silverlode Consulting to perform an economic-development strategic study that Abbott hopes will serve as a road map for the community.

“I think it’s a great place for us to start from and gives us a really nice action plan to begin implementing some of the economic development strategies that we want to do here in Wellington,” he said.

As small towns go, Wellington has its share of challenges. Jobs, services, a thriving downtown — all make the list.

“It’s like many towns that are at the far edges of what might be considered a ‘labor-shed’ area for a very large (metropolitan statistical area) like Denver,” said Steve Weitzner, president of Silverlode Consulting. One of the keys to success is learning to play what he called the “attraction game.”

“Wellington has to get on the radar of more of those new, competitive site-location projects where you have a company that’s looking for a location. ... It has to become a place that people are familiar with.”

But according to one of the study’s findings, that hasn’t happened yet.

Metro Denver Economic Development Corp. is responsible for sending attraction leads to Wellington. However, there has been no attraction activity in Wellington over the last several years and it may be that the town is perceived to lack available land or buildings to meet any of Metro Denver’s recent requirements.

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Steve Weitzner, president, Silverlode Consulting

Nor will it occur overnight, Weitzner admitted. “They’re very much at the beginning of the process. ... Economic development is a very long-term prospect. It takes decades to shift an economy and really see significant change.”

As the point person for Wellington's economic-development program, Abbott is ready to get that process rolling.

"I think the first step is going through this assessment pretty comprehensively with the town trustees and seeing what we can bite off here and take these recommended steps one at a time."

There is plenty to be upbeat about. An evaluation of Wellington as a potential location for companies looking to open a new facility was mostly positive. It ranked eight different factors including the local labor market, business climate, quality of life and access to transportation. The town placed well across the board, with scores that put it at a "competitive advantage" in half the categories and "sufficient" in the other half. None was rated as "needing improvement."

Still, Abbott needs to coordinate with the Chamber of Commerce, which has its own economic development committee, as well as the Wellington Colorado Main Streets Program. "I think everybody working in concert with each other will be a real positive for the town of Wellington," he said. "I think everyone is getting to be on the same page, within the same book at this point."

"The bottom line is, this whole study, in no place does it mention probably the greatest asset of Wellington is related to agriculture. You're not in Longmont; this is an agricultural community. Businesses that are agriculturally related are what we should be looking at bringing here."

Curtis Bridges, vice chairman, Wellington Area Chamber of Commerce

The study has its detractors, however.

Curtis Bridges raises Clydesdales and owns several horse farms in the area. He's also a vice chairman of the Chamber and in charge of its economic development committee.

"The bottom line is, this whole study, in no place does it mention probably the greatest asset of Wellington is related to agriculture," Bridges said. "You're not in Longmont; this is an agricultural community."

Bridges said he believes Wellington already may be missing out on several opportunities. As examples, he pointed to Simplot, a fertilizer and soil-building firm in Timnath, as well as Ranch-Way Feeds and Team Petroleum in Fort Collins, firms Bridges feels are being squeezed out by local development.

"Businesses that are agriculturally related are what we should be looking at bringing here," he said, "an agriculturally friendly community where they have room to relocate and survive and be close to the highway."

Even though the study doesn't specify the agricultural sector, Abbott said it won't be ignored.

"If it's something that can bring business to your area and can potentially bring jobs and people and revenue, you look at everything," he said, "and if it's an agricultural endeavor, that's great."