Tending the economic garden must be state’s No. 1 priority

One of the buzz words in business development these days is “economic gardening.”

Simply stated, it means nurturing your existing businesses, educational facilities and entrepreneurial centers so they continue to grow jobs in your community. And in my current role as executive director of the Lafayette County Development Corp., I can attest to it working. A co-op of farmers or a small cheese factory develops a product that catches the attention of Whole Foods or Trader Joe’s and soon they are hiring, expanding, and driving nicer cars (or in Lafayette County, trucks).

On the state level, we have seen companies like Harley-Davidson, Epic, Culver’s and Kohl’s start small and grow into national players. My concern is that, at some point, they will seek economic partnerships to continue to grow.

In some cases, those partnerships can absorb both the product and the jobs from the state; think Midwest Airlines, Lands’ End and any number of brewers.

Currently, there is a proposal to re-create the Commerce Department and spend $500 million to attract new businesses to the state. I believe before we do this, we need to develop a strategy to grow the businesses that are here now and keep them in Wisconsin as they expand. Wisconsin needs to partner with business to make the state stronger.

Also, before we spend $500 million to attract new businesses, shouldn’t we take an inventory of what we have now? We often are quick to jump on the hot new technology or the latest scientific breakthrough but spend little on the products or services that are the backbone of the Wisconsin economy.

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We spent tens of millions on ethanol and the next Botox injection, and those plants are now closed. Shouldn’t we have made the same investment in cheese and beer, not to mention the UW and Technical College systems, medical records, and literally thousands of other businesses that are currently growing Wisconsin?

I am not suggesting we have done nothing. In fact, we have done a great deal. The problem lies in the fact that we make investments but do not have enough skin in the game to keep a business here if another team comes along. If the Google Vikings come after the Epic Pack, what keeps the team in Wisconsin?

(I’m drifting from gardening to sports analogies here, but stick with me, I’ll come around.)

We need to tie our state investment in companies to long-term jobs in the state. We actually have the tools in place to do this now. The state can make forgivable loans based on sustained employment for example. Unfortunately, the funding is limited, unless of course you can turn lawn clippings into diesel fuel.

I also believe the state should work more closely with the local development professionals, self serving for sure, but I know that both Lactalis and Montchevre, Lafayette County cheese companies, have major contracts with Trader Joe’s and are hiring, and Commerce needs to know this, as well.

If we really want to grow a sustainable economy in Wisconsin, we need to work with the farmers and seeds that are already here. (See? I’m back to gardening.)

We need to partner with businesses large and small by providing incentives based on real jobs that stay in the Wisconsin. We need to work with local professionals and communities to identify the opportunities. We have our “Economic Garden” planted; now, we need to work hard to keep the harvest in Wisconsin.