



Downbound Ohio (part 2)

The Greater Akron Chamber has ambition. And focus, too?

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It is the best of times and worst of times for the Greater Akron Chamber to launch a five-year plan to boost the economy in Summit, Portage and Medina counties. No question, the broad goals enjoy support. At the same time, the plan would increase the chamber's budget, from \$3.2 million a year to \$5.3 million. Spending on economic development would climb from \$2 million to \$3.8 million.

During the next six months, the same difficult economic times that stimulate thinking about turning around the local economy will create a tough climate in which to ask new and existing members to increase their contributions.

A driving aspect of "Advance Akron. Our Region. Our Future." is that the area lags in investing in economic development. Still, some communities elsewhere with modest spending have been successful, while others, with larger budgets, have not. Thriving Indianapolis spends about \$3.1 million, while Dayton spends \$5.7 million. *How* money is spent matters.

Where would the Advance Akron money go? The biggest share (\$1.1 million a year) would be devoted to increasing overall capital investment by \$1 billion, creating or retaining 10,000 jobs. These are ambitious goals and difficult to track to one organization. An expanded marketing effort would be triggered; so would committees to work with existing businesses.

The plan does envision closer ties (through dollars and in-kind contributions) to regional economic organizations, such as Team NEO and NorTech. Much care must be taken not to duplicate efforts. Still, the emergence of groups covering a dozen or more counties in Northeast Ohio reflects the sound conclusion that the entire region must work together.

Another critical priority is work force development (\$625,000). Here, Advance Akron envisions working with area universities to develop necessary apprenticeship programs. The chamber also contemplates ties with a new math and science school at the Inventors Hall of Fame and with Mayor Don Plusquellic's efforts to provide city students with scholarships to the University of Akron.

Advance Akron is ambitious in terms of fund-raising goals and projected results. The wide array of priorities and methods reflect traditional chamber thinking. What members and members-to-be must develop, besides money, is a sharp focus on what's new and what works best.