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Mansfield's economic development director sees room to grow

By ROBERT CADWALLADER

Special to the Star-Telegram

Mansfield can be a Wild West frontier for a prospecting economic development director.

That's how Scott Welmaker saw it when he left his job as economic development director in Colleyville, a city he said had only a few decent-sized open tracts remaining to build on.

About 46 percent of Mansfield's 39 square miles is undeveloped, and much of it is under scrutiny by area developers, officials have said.

"I had seen the success Mansfield was having, the available land, the spirit of the [economic development] board and the citizens and the staff, the interest in aggressively pursuing quality development," said Welmaker, who started his job in Mansfield on Tuesday. "All of those things added up to a real attractive package for me."

Welmaker was among 30 applicants and three who were interviewed for the job, which had been vacant for a year after Melissa Woodall left for a job at Methodist Mansfield Medical Center. Welmaker will earn \$109,000 a year in his new post.

"He's got the type of experience and education we were looking for," Assistant City Manager Cathy Anderson said. "We want him to focus on the strengths of Mansfield and market those strengths."

Raised in Midland, Welmaker worked at his parents' carpet and wallpaper business then for related businesses before going to college.

He headed economic development efforts for cities and chambers of commerce in Texas and Tennessee before coming to Mansfield.

How has the economic development field changed over the years?

As recently as 20 years ago, industrial recruitment was all it was. A lot of it was done by the railroads and utilities, because they had land or power or gas or water to sell to industries. But as inner cities started to decline in the 1970s and 1980s, a lot of cities realized they needed to have a little better handle on their fate and not just leave it to pure market forces.

How is it different now?

Now economic development embodies business retention and expansion, retail recruitment, tourism and hospitality recruitment to some degree. Quality-of-life issues -- being close to work, closer to home, closer to the kids' soccer game -- have become more important. I think Mansfield is very well-situated to take advantage of all of these.

What are Mansfield's marketable strengths?

The first and most obvious is location and a cooperative municipal government. I think those are probably tied for first place. And we have available land, which some of these cities are running out. Most of those Northeast Tarrant County towns are pretty much built out.

You said cities need an economic development vision. Does Mansfield have one?

The city already has a progressive vision where they want to go. What I can do to enhance this is to get on the train and help guide it. The city has done a good job of capitalizing on their position geographically and economically.

What's your philosophy?

Sustainable growth is very important to me. In other words, not just growing for the sake of growing, but growing for the long term.

Why did you wait so long between getting your bachelor's degree at the University of Texas at Arlington in 1978 and your master's degree in 1992?

I got my bachelor's degree in real estate. Like a lot of kids, I was going to get rich in the real estate business. That didn't work out so well.

When you went back to UTA for your master's, you started off studying city planning. What made you switch to economic development?

I realized I could utilize my marketing and sales background [from the family carpet and wallpaper business] in my new career. It was a more logical transition than it might first have appeared.

You say you like to hike and play the guitar.

I did a month of backpacking in Chile. I've hiked in Peru. When I lived in Tennessee, I was fortunate to have the Appalachian Trail wrap around.

How seriously do you take playing guitar?

I've played guitar all my life. I haven't played in any bands since I got back to Texas. But in Tennessee, I was quite actively involved in playing music. And I set up 38 concerts in the four years I was out there. I set up local bands mostly in the vacant, large downtown buildings to show the potential uses of those buildings. When I was 14, I was in *Guitar Player* magazine as one of the 100 top guitar teachers in the nation.

Scott Welmaker

Age: 53

Occupation: Economic development director

Experience: Colleyville economic development director, 2004-08; executive director of the Kingsport, Tenn., economic development partnership between the city and Chamber of Commerce, 2000-04; Haltom City economic development director, 1997-2000; Arlington Chamber of Commerce marketing and research director, 1996; North Richland Hills marketing and research coordinator, 1993-96; commercial carpet and wallpaper sales, 1978-92.

Education: Bachelor of business administration in real estate from the University of Texas at Arlington in 1978; master of public administration from UTA in 1992

Family: Wife, Stacy, and son, Alex, 10

Hobbies: Hiking, fly-fishing and playing guitar