

Economic development projects are regional priorities, but funding gaps remain

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It's not putting a planned purchase on layaway, or accepting your customer's bill in installments, but as another flood of Consolidation Funding Application awards is being assembled in Albany for regionally-developed plans a sizable gap exists between what's coming and what's desired.

In Orleans County, economic development officials were excited last week to see the full \$600,000 requested for infrastructure development in the Medina Business Park was included in the short-list of priority projects assembled by the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council for this year's funding.

Even more so because they had originally went in for only \$300,000, Orleans EDA Vice President Gabrielle Barone told the EDA's board, before working with the regional economic development council to merge a well-received proposal to construct a 40,000 spec building to tangentially-related site work to build out roadways and other infrastructure across the park.

"There was a lot of back and forth going on ... they were creative, and with \$600,000 we could use it (beyond the building)," Barone said. "Our first request for the park infrastructure was turned down, but it's a process, you have to be in it and work the phones."

Some 36 projects were in the Finger Lakes REDC's priority list, including six

sought by municipalities, economic development agencies, businesses and community groups in the GLOW region — three in Genesee County, two in Orleans and one in Wyoming.

Locally they range from agricultural production and distribution sites to infrastructure at industrial parks and even the continuing restoration of the Bent's Opera House in Medina, but at the regional level the list goes from a \$190,000 veterans outreach center in Monroe County to a \$73 million mixed-use mega-site in Rochester.

In all, the documented plans for what the FLREDC would recommend for parsing out \$30 million or \$15 million in Empire State Development funding pales in the \$394 million total cost estimated for the three dozen projects. With only so many millions coming back, the \$76 million sought by the priority projects' developers leaves major holes to be filled elsewhere.

A starting point

Despite the good response, the Orleans EDA anticipates needing \$2 million to complete the Medina Business Park project receiving \$600,000.

That's above and beyond the money the EDA has sought in block grant funding for Pride Pak, a

Canadian food processing company, to build its American hub at the park; National Grid incentives for a shovel-ready certification, hydropower proceeds approved for Pride Pak and private investment in a proposed hotel at the site.

It's an uphill climb that shows both the benefits and challenges that come with an increased interest in developing and finishing projects in upstate New York

"All of us are struggling with balances, these are not fully-funded projects," Jim Whipple, the OEDA's CEO, said in briefing his board about projects in neighboring counties. "We have to put the rest of the money together."

"We'll talk with (U.S. Department of Agriculture) Rural Development, and our building partners, and look into borrowing over the next six months," Whipple added later.

It's not just the business-specific projects like Pride Pak that will have to be financed in pieces.

The Town of Alabama sought \$3.4 million for a \$8 million water line project to support the Science Technology and Advanced Manufacturing Park in Alabama and is charted to receive \$1.5 million in Empire State Development funding.

Water lines aren't the type of thing that can produce the pride that new jobs and gleaming new facilities bring, but the project backs up the \$33 million investment made in this year's state budget and one of the key areas in the Finger Lakes REDC's vision for their own "Buffalo Billion."

The same scenario exists for the Le Roy Food and Technology Park, which would get \$1 million in the draft of FLREDC's best case scenario and half that if triage is needed to get from \$30 million to \$15 million at the regional level.

At the Gateway Corporate Park, the Genesee County Economic Development Center estimates a \$1.9 million total cost to complete infrastructure projects. They requested \$881,000 and are received a half-million or \$300,000 depending the region's award.

In all, Genesee County was tapped for 10 percent of the region's priority project budget, which is part of the formula used by the state to determine the final awards. There's \$2.9 million outstanding between the recommendation and the ask, but the county's applicants are still up \$3 million in the bargain.

"We're thrilled our strategy in Genesee County aligns with priority industry clusters (in the region) to help three initiatives here," said GCEDC Marketing and Communications Director Rachel Tabelski.

In the \$30 and \$15 million recommendations, The Orleans Renaissance Group would be \$73,000 ahead toward stabilizing their 1865 structure's roof trusses and windows, money that wasn't awarded in the past cycles. A potato chip plant and starch recovery system in Wyoming County would have 10 percent of its \$14 million project cost checked off in the best case scenario, and \$1 million up in

the less-sunny version.

More to be revealed

The important date has not been announced, but the template has been ingrained by past years.

Sometime in December, Gov. Andrew Cuomo will be joined onstage by a television hostess or anchor before a crowd of developers, planners and legislative leaders. He will praise the growth of the state's economy, a trend that will only be improved by the hundreds of millions about to be announced.

The Finger Lakes' spotlight will follow soon after, with somewhere between \$80 and \$100 million announced amid praise for Rochester's research universities, agriculture and technology along the Genesee River, the Erie Canal and the Thruway.

But for all the attention, details will be scarce until later that afternoon, when the funding lists and final word on projects large and small are delivered. Hoped-for grants for a rent subsidy program sought by the Orleans EDA, a Main Street building renovation program in Medina and dozens of other sewer studies, business expansion incentives and cultural projects across the GLOW region will be among them, or left in the cold.

As much as the priority projects announcement tells about the coming awards, another draft released in the past month is even more tantalizing.

The Upstate Revitalization Initiative, modeled on Cuomo's Buffalo Billion initiative, is a competition between the Finger Lakes and seven other regions for three \$500 million awards to the council's with the best five-year plans for economic growth.

The public comment period expired Friday for the Finger Lakes' draft plan, which is anchored on three areas of focus — optics, photonics and imaging; agriculture and food production; and next generation manufacturing and technology.

STAMP is among the target sites, with the draft mentioning "Project Eagle" — a \$705 million private investment for a "confidential photovoltaics manufacturing site" that would create 1,000 direct jobs as the Alabama park's first major employer.

According to the Finger Lakes' URI draft, four additional companies are actively discussing locating at STAMP, with private "in the pipeline" investments of up to \$3 billion.

It's a side note in a draft plan for uncertain funding, but that's the kind of investment that makes any gap in a \$8 million water line project seem almost trivial.