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### Consultant: Cedar Valley's assets are numerous in quest for new businesses

An Atlanta-based consulting firm involved in the international business site-selection process had some advice Tuesday for economic development in the Cedar Valley: Play to your strengths.

And they are many, despite the outdated perception of a two-horse town dependent on traditional manufacturing and agriculture. That may be the foundation, but significant diversification has occurred after lessons learned from the 1980s Farm Depression.

The Lockwood Greene Consulting study --- commissioned by the Greater Cedar Valley Alliance to target potential industries for recruitment --- took note of that while assessing pertinent data on 17 economic development factors used by corporate decision-makers. It recommends focusing on 27 industries in six clusters, all of which have a foothold in the four-county region (Black Hawk, Buchanan, Bremer and Grundy):

--- Nontraditional agriculture and life sciences: bio-based lubricants and fuels, orthopedic boots and medical devices and genetically modified seeds and crops.

--- Advanced fabrication: agricultural and metalworking machinery and equipment, industrial gears, corn- and soy-based polymers and binders.

--- Electronics: production of noise reduction devices, electromedical equipment and measuring devices.

--- Third-party logistics, distribution, wholesale trade.

--- Information and finance.

--- Research and development/scientific and technical services.

Newer ventures often lack the sprawling campuses of John Deere or Tyson's Foods, but they have been in the forefront of local development: agricultural-based lubricants, metalworking, prosthetics, and medical equipment; a niche in information technology; an expanded presence in the financial sector and new warehouse distribution centers.

The Cedar Valley TechWorks is the catalyst to grow bio-products. Said GCVA chief executive officer Steve Dust, "Bio-products is huge; biotech is huge. It's our job to find a place ... we can make our own."

Lockwood Greene has experience here in the economic development mating game. It helped bring the ConAgra pudding plant to Waterloo and knows the area's assets:

--- The geographic location and transportation infrastructure: A crossroads in the Upper Midwest with a new highway system and a renovated airport.

--- Work force and labor cost: Iowa's work ethic comes to the fore.

--- Education: Iowa's highly ranked schools provide the fundamentals. The University of Northern Iowa and Wartburg College have received national recognition as "best buys" and are involved in economic development. Hawkeye Community College is a leader in technical training and providing a low-cost liberal arts education.

--- Utilities and telecommunications: Abundant water and a wide-ranging fiber-optics system are advantages.

--- Real estate, cost of living, and quality of life: Land is readily available, homes are comparatively affordable, and quality of life is on the upswing now and into the foreseeable future (the Cedar Falls Parkade, Waterloo's Riverfront Renaissance, the Gallagher-Bluedorn Performing Arts, the McLeod Center, community arts, youth sports, recreation trails and more good restaurants).

--- Business climate. Lockwood Greene and local economic developers cite Iowa's "right to work" labor law as critical in getting corporate attention.

Weaknesses were cited as well, including air service, although improving with jets; the lack of readily available industrial buildings, and the labor-management image and the image of the area.

But, said Robert Pittman, a senior principal at Lockwood Greene, "Image lags reality. The reality is you don't have a labor problem here. ... But the image they have is of problems."

If an area image problem does exist, it's rooted in a tendency to dwell on the Cedar Valley of the 1980s and not recognize the metamorphosis under way. The foundation has been laid for economic growth. The Lockwood Greene study affirms that and provides a guide to build on it.