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STATE OF THE CITY SPEECH

Lewis hopeful for city's economic future

BY ROD ROSE
The Lebanon Reporter

LEBANON - Mayor Huck Lewis is optimistic about Lebanon's economic future.

But the city needs to prepare now to seize opportunities as they arise, he said, at his first State of The City speech, given Friday to the Lebanon Rotary Club and guests.

"I feel Lebanon will weather the economic downturn better than other communities in Indiana," he said.

"We need to be an inviting community," he said, both in appearance and attitude.

Lebanon must continue to be "business-friendly" for existing firms as well as companies considering locations here, he said.

Duke Realty's Lebanon Business Park is an important factor in drawing new companies here, Lewis said. The MSI Windows and Doors building is the only vacant structure at the business park, and is drawing interest from several companies.

"I just had a call this morning from an overseas company that is very interested in this county," he said. It's the third time the firm has contacted him. "I've got my fingers crossed," he said. "It could potentially be a very good business for Lebanon."

A rail spur that will be built this year for the U.S. Cold Storage warehouse in the business park should also attract other firms that need access to rail shipment, he said.

There has also been "very, very preliminary" interest in development on the east side of Indiana 39, from companies that could construct buildings between 250,000 to 800,000 square feet, he said.

Both residential and commercial growth is possible this year, Lewis said.

First in a two-part series

"We are seeing some movement in residential markets," Lewis said.

"As revenues shrink, we need to think outside the box," he said.

The city is looking for grants that will cover the cost of rebuilding its "gateways" - the three main highway entrances to Lebanon - and to improve the look of downtown, he said.

Some of those funds are in the pipeline.

He expects \$2.2 million to be awarded "in the next month or so" for improvements along Indianapolis Avenue, adding to \$610,000 already allotted. "We've started to design the first phase of that," he said.

The Indianapolis Avenue project will begin at County Road 100 South, next to the Boone County Fairgrounds, and end at the intersection of Ind. 32, Lewis said. A roundabout could be part of that design, he said.

Construction could begin this spring on sidewalks along Hendricks Drive, a project funded by a \$245,000 grant from the federal Safe Routes To Schools program.

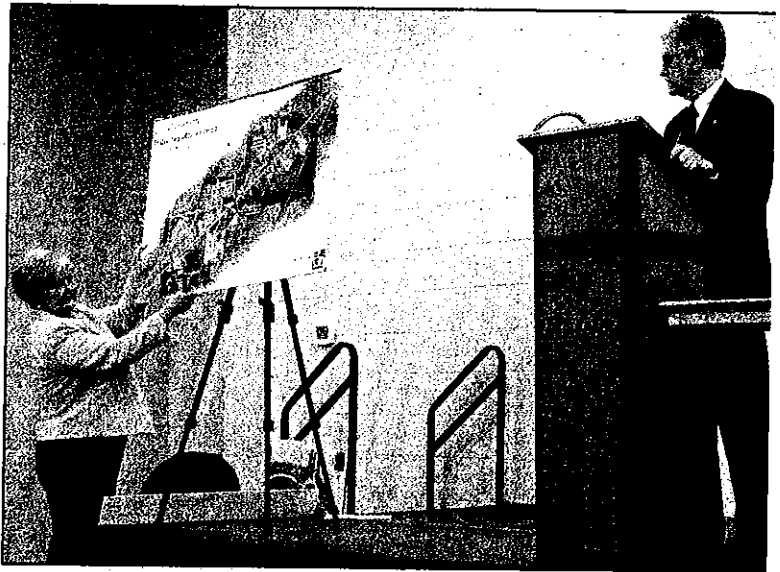
The biggest gateway expense will be participating in the construction of a new interchange at Ind. 39 and Interstate 65, Lewis said.

That project will cost between \$1.4 million and \$6.6 million, depending on what the city chooses to do - and how much of that money it can find.

The interchange will be rebuilt when the Indiana Department of Transportation adds two travel lanes to I-65.

Lewis said he will report to the city council Monday on plans to upgrade the three I-65 interchanges,

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REPORTER PHOTO

ABOVE: Debby Shubert places an artist's rendering of the Safe Route For Schools sidewalk project on an easel during Mayor Huck Lewis's state of the city speech Friday.



LEFT: Building inspector Charlie Campbell asks a question during Mayor Huck Lewis's state of the city speech Friday to the Lebanon Rotary Club.

"We need to be an inviting community."

— MAYOR HUCK LEWIS

Lewis

▲ Continued from Page 1 and the downtown area.

"There have been some very creative ideas to make our entrances and downtown very attractive," he said. But the next step is to find funding to execute those ideas.

"We're working with

INDOT to find creative ways to make this a reality," Lewis said. State highway officials were "very impressed" with Lebanon's Gateway study, he said; that study may help Lebanon obtain funding to make the project a reality.

Monday: Lebanon's plans for improving walking trails and fire protection.