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Willoughby Hills taps Steve Roszczyk to be first economic development director

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Willoughby Hills has hired former Lake County United Way Chairman Steve Roszczyk as the city's first economic development director.

Mayor Robert Weger said he and City Council decided there was a need to create the position in order to place more focus on economic planning for the city.

"We really have to develop the business area and it's always something that's the last thing to do if you don't have someone doing it," said Weger.

Before his position at the United Way, Roszczyk was the publisher for the News-Herald for several years.

"I think Steve is an excellent fit for it because he knows the area," Weger said. "He's been involved in Lake County for a long time."

Roszczyk said when he saw an ad for the position of economic development director he felt his background could benefit the city.

"I've got a lot of learning to do because I've never been an economic development director, but I've seen it from the other side," he said. "Over the years, as a publisher, I've seen good economic development departments, I've seen bad ones ... I've seen what worked and what didn't work."

Roszczyk said the first order of business will be working to develop the Loehmann's Plaza area.

Earlier this month there was a robbery at the Marc's store in the plaza, and Roszczyk acknowledged there are challenges with developing that part of the city.

"There is a perception in certain parts of the city that the crime is high, but when you look at the numbers it's not," he said. "So we've got to overcome a slight perception problem."

Weger agrees.

"That's a wrong perception because that area is probably more safe than other areas that have shopping," he said. "When you look at the statistics there's no more crime than there is at (the) Mentor mall."

Recent crime rate indexes show that crime occurring in Willoughby Hills is lower than the state and national averages.

Outside of focusing on the Loehmann's area, Roszczyk said it's still early and the city will have to take inventory of land and figure out what type of businesses it is able to attract. A variety of projects could be explored.

"We're not going to attract a steel mill, we're not going to attract a casino, we've got to look at retail development, commercial development, residential," he said. "You name it we're looking at it."

Roszczyk says Willoughby Hills has attributes that could work in its favor when attracting and maintaining businesses.

"When you look at Willoughby Hills, the population has grown over the last 10 years by about 10 percent which is one of the highest, if not the highest in Lake County," he said. "Property values tend to be at least 50 percent higher than they are in the rest of the county."

He also points out that changes will not be seen overnight.

"People don't see what's going on and how long it takes for things to come to fruition," Roszczyk said. "But it's

something you've got to keep pushing at, keep pursuing, and eventually something will happen.”

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