

Vision moves forward for Greater Des Moines Partnership

Written by Donnelle Eller

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Outgoing chairman praises Capital Crossroads work.

The Partnership's new chairman

Jim Wallace is president, CEO and chairman of GuideOne Insurance, the West Des Moines property-casualty company that specializes in insuring churches and schools. The company employs about 550 workers. Wallace joined the company in 2001 and has led it to 10 successive years of profitability, the company says. An actuary and CPA, Wallace also was CEO of National Travelers Life Co. in Des Moines. He says his family moved to Des Moines when he was 6 and he's never left, graduating from Drake University in 1977. Wallace and his wife, Mary Ann, have three children.

Achievements by the numbers

21

Local business expansions

11

New company locations

1,600

New and retained jobs, including 600 in downtown Des Moines

\$263B

New investment in plants, equipment and offices, including \$96 million in downtown Des Moines

100

Investors in Plains Angels, a group of Midwest angel investors the Partnership initiated

1 & 67

1 million people who attended 67 days of events in downtown Des Moines

Read a list of new companies or local companies that expanded in 2012 at DesMoinesRegister.com.

Buy Into the Circle

Look for a revitalized “Buy Into the Circle” this year, said Jim Wallace, the partnership board’s new chairman. The regional initiative to get businesses to buy products and services from other local businesses has “been successful. It just needs a shot in the arm,” said Wallace, who hopes to see boosted marketing and improved measures on its success.

125 years

The Greater Des Moines Partnership started in 1888 as the Commerce Exchange, made of up several business groups and chambers, much like the group is organized today, leaders say. The group plans to develop a book by year’s end, built on articles from David Elbert, a columnist for the Des Moines Business Record, over the next year.

After creating dozens of Capital Crossroads strategies, now comes the hard work of implementing them, says Larry Zimpleman, the outgoing chairman of the Greater Des Moines Partnership board.

Capital Crossroads didn’t “grab the headlines” last year like it did in 2011, when the long-term visioning plan set its five-year goals, Zimpleman said. But in 2012, 500 volunteers dug in to implement the goals of 11 broad initiatives. “Implementation is where the hard work is and where the real positive accomplishments come,” he said.

“If you look at Capital Crossroads, and look at the time and energy that people are spending on it, it’s very humbling. It’s a very caring community, and people are working hard to make it better,” said Zimpleman, who hands the partnership’s leadership to Jim Wallace, chief executive of GuideOne Insurance, tonight at the group’s annual dinner in downtown Des Moines.

Expect the work to continue this year with priorities like education reform and workforce readiness, continued downtown redevelopment, and developing a bioscience corridor between Ames and Des Moines, Zimpleman and Wallace said.

Holding it’s first-ever business education summit this month, central Iowa business leaders have pledged to push for initiatives to improve education. Wallace said an improving economy means workforce demands will climb.

“I think the economy is going to get a lot better,” Wallace said. “We have to be ready and prepared for the economic development opportunities ... and for the workforce needs.”

“We want to galvanize business leaders, educational leaders and community leaders toward a

bold, long-term common education agenda,” Wallace said.

Wallace led the partnership’s capital fund-raising campaign that so far has netted about \$29 million in pledges. The investment pledges, still being collected, set spending for the group for the next five years. Ninety-nine percent of current partnership contributors “re-upped” and 40 new businesses joined the effort, he said. The group’s commitments are 10 percent higher than the last five-year effort.

“Investors like what the partnership has been doing, that it’s worthwhile, and they’re voting with their dollars,” Wallace said.

Some of the partnership’s work over the past year that Zimpleman and Wallace noted:

Management team: Zimpleman said he is pleased with the seamless leadership transition Jay Byers, the group’s new CEO, and Gene Meyer, the group’s president, have made over the past year. The two executives replaced Martha Willits, the group’s CEO who retired after seven years at the helm. Wallace said he was on the selection team that interviewed the best economic development leaders in the nation. He believes Byers and Meyer were the strongest candidates.

“Jay and Gene are a great combination,” Wallace said. “They like each other and they work well together. I haven’t seen any clash or ego problem.

“They’re a great team,” he said.

Downtown redevelopment: In November, the Des Moines Redevelopment Co. purchased its first two pieces of property, a 228,000-square-foot building at 700 Fourth St. and a nearby parking lot, paving the way for possible development of an events center hotel. The nonprofit group paid \$2.7 million. Meyer said leaders are actively soliciting developers for a hotel on the property, a priority, he said. “I don’t know that will happen in 2013. These things tend to take time.”

The group also could be asked to assist with a three-way land swap between the YMCA, Polk County and Wellmark. “We’re working closely with all those parties involved to make sure that the exchange occurs,” Meyer said. YMCA looks to buy the now-shuttered Polk County Convention Complex from Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield after the county has swapped that property for a former J.C. Penney building at 222 Fifth Ave., where it would expand its cramped courthouse operations.

The deal would give Wellmark naming rights to a new YMCA and would clear the way for sale of the current Riverfront YMCA land.

Biosciences corridor: The partnership hired Flynn Wright to help the group create a marketing brand to advertise the Des Moines-Ames biosciences corridor. Leaders in the cities hope to capitalize on their agribusiness and Iowa State University strengths to attract new companies, jobs and research dollars. They plan to create a brand that has the cache of Silicon Valley or the Research Triangle. “It’s an exciting opportunity,” Zimpleman said.

“We want to create a branding campaign that markets the area to the world,” Wallace said. “But that won’t be at the cost of branding and advertising our other core businesses like insurance and financial services.”

Education/workforce readiness: The partnership is looking at workforce readiness across several perspectives, from working to reduce poverty in the Des Moines urban core to improving education for K-12 students.

“I think we’re having an honest discussion around what the community can do to help and support that urban neighborhood,” said Zimpleman, referring to about a dozen neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and unemployment.

With limited population growth, all workers in the Des Moines metro are important to growing businesses, he said.