

Jobenomics Goal: 3,500 New Erie jobs

Programs aims to create new jobs in Erie, mostly through urban farming and so-called urban mining initiatives.

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By: Jim Martin

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Chuck Vollmer, founder and president of Jobenomics, not only wants to create 20 million new jobs by 2020, but he's written a book that lays out that goal in detail.

Now, Vollmer, a former Air Force fighter pilot-turned Virginia-based consultant, is focused on creating some of those jobs in Erie.

Vollmer, author of "Jobenomics: A Plan for America: 20 Million New Jobs by 2020," has made two public visits to Erie this year as he promotes a plan to create hundreds of small businesses that he hopes will create 3,500 new jobs in Erie over the next five years. Erie is one of a about a dozen cities where he's introducing Jobenomics.

His ideas for Erie are specific.

Plans include creating up to 150 vertical hydroponic microfarms that could be located on vacant lots of an acre or less. That plan also calls for the creation of a 100,000-square-foot agricultural complex. Erie City Council is considering proposed zoning changes that would allow urban farming in certain residential neighborhoods. A May 3 public hearing is scheduled.

A second concept is described by Vollmer as an urban mining initiative that would reclaim high-value components from electronic waste.

In both cases, Jobenomics is focused on creating jobs for minorities, veterans, women and new workforce entrants.

Vollmer refers to Jobenomics as a grass-roots movement. But it's structured as a for-profit business that might include a nonprofit component. Locally, he's formed partnerships with leaders of two local nonprofit organizations: Veterans Miracle Center and Climate Changers Inc., a group that develops re-entry programs for at-risk youth and former offenders and gang members.

While Vollmer said he's looking for people to invest in the venture, he said he already has money to spend. "We have about \$25 million we can put in the community so that we can lease these microfarms," he said.

In a community that has been conditioned to question what looks too good to be true, Vollmer said he's spent some time meeting with local leaders to share his plans.

Barbara Chaffee, CEO of the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, said Vollmer has met both with her team and leaders of other area business development organizations. Chaffee said Monday that she hasn't yet formed an opinion on the Jobenomics program, which had planned to hold a training session Tuesday in Erie.

"Everyone feels the need to do more homework," Chaffee said. "There hasn't been time to evaluate everything."

Others, however, are ready to vouch for Jobenomics, which says it offers 9,000 skills-based training programs.

Mike Chevalier, president of Preferred Systems Inc. in Erie, which provides drug and alcohol programs and continuous education services for business clients, said he met Vollmer eight or 10 years ago during a business trip to Las Vegas. "He (Vollmer) was an instructor out there, talking about his programs," Chevalier said. "I thought he had a good program. I never thought he would look at Erie."

James Martin, a principal in the Erie-based consulting firm of Bankable Consulting Corp., shares that enthusiasm. "This program would benefit Erie. It will help Erie be ahead of the curve," he said. "I like these kind of things that are going to help my hometown. These jobs would have wages of (\$40,000) to \$60,000 or more. It starts to allow a family to create wealth they can pass on."

Most importantly, he said, that transformation would take root at the center of some of Erie's most impoverished neighborhoods.

Martin allows that the goals seem optimistic. "I think it can get done," he said. "It's doable."

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