



TIMES PHOTO BY SHER STONEMAN

One of the first triumphs of the St. Cloud Area Economic Development Partnership was the ME International steel plant. The part-

nership helped the company buy the plant from Brown Boveri in 1990. Grete Foundries has since bought ME International.

Group looks beyond jurisdictions to build economy

By Christine Hierlmaier
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Not more than a decade ago, the St. Cloud area was posting about 7 percent unemployment, counting the losses of a defunct manufacturer and trying to spur economic development among fragmented jurisdictions.

Following the strides by other regions to comprehensive economic plans for the retention and attraction of commerce, area business and government leaders met at a special retreat in January 1985.

What has resulted is a highly cooperative, regional partnership bringing together the efforts of business, finance,

ST. CLOUD AREA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

Established: September 1985 as a nonprofit public/private member organization.

Original partners: St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce, St. Cloud Downtown Development Corp., St. Cloud Housing and Redevelopment Authority, St. Cloud Opportunities, St. Cloud Township.

President 1985: Ron Klaphake
Revenues 1985: \$46,500

Current President: Tony Goddard
Projected 1996 Revenues: \$235,000

Current Volunteer Committees:

Finance and Technical Assistance, Human Resources (joint with chamber), Long Range Planning, Marketing/Public Relations, Project Review, Research and Planning, Retention and Expansion.

Number of Current Partners: 23

Mission: "The purpose of the organization is to generate new jobs and tax base in manufacturing and regional/national service sectors by promoting and facilitating the growth of existing businesses and development of new business."

Christine Hierlmaier

OPEN HOUSE

The St. Cloud Area Economic Development Partnership is hosting an open house from 5 to 7 p.m. tonight at the Radisson Suite Hotel in St. Cloud to celebrate 10 years in operation.

tutions to provide training programs for prospective employees has been an effective component for serving area labor needs.

"I see our role at the technical college as providing quality graduates first. And then through the Center for Innovation, working with the existing or incumbent

government and education — the St. Cloud Area Economic Development Partnership.

The partnership has grown from a five-partner entity to encompassing the efforts of 23 members. They include the cities of Becker, Cold Spring, St. Cloud, St. Joseph, Sartell and Sauk Rapids, as well as Stearns, Benton and Sherburne counties. Area utility and communications companies, educational institutions, governments and training groups make up the remainder.

In its first year, the partnership succeeded in retaining Weeres Industries and its 45 employees after the pontoon factory's owner talked of relocation to South Dakota. The partnership also was instrumental in convincing Burlington Northern to sell its closed car shop property to Waite Park — for \$1.

"We got them to donate the property so we could start putting businesses in

there," said Ron Klaphake, the original partnership president and chief executive officer who now works with economic development in Missoula, Mont.

As far as attracting employers, "there was a feeling that someone who was relocating had to go to so many different areas to find out about available sites, workforce stats and other information. We weren't making it easy," said Dorothy Simpson, vice president of university relations at St. Cloud State who became the partnership's first chairperson of public relations.

Simpson's interest in the partnership was to retain and attract viable employers for area college graduates. "We could see a lot of competition with other communities and states."

Of concern at the time was the area's relatively high unemployment rate and the fact that a major employer — Brown

Boveri Turbomachinery — had left the area. Through the partnership, a steel foundry, ME International, purchased the Brown Boveri plant in 1990. Under new owners Grede Foundries, the plant now employs about 100 people.

Other development successes have included expansions at Woodcraft, Webway and recent training partnerships for Liberty Paper in Becker.

Ironically, although unemployment may have been an issue for early partnership members, underemployment seems to be the issue for businesses today, said Tony Goddard, partnership president.

"There are many people in the community today who are not being used to their full potential." And 21 percent of the 94 companies the partnership visited last year said finding qualified workers was a major concern.

The cooperation of educational insti-

workforce to provide them with the skills to meet changing technologies," said Ken Maddux, vice president of the Center for Innovation and Economic Development at St. Cloud Technical College.

As a partnership member, the college can present its services to prospective and existing companies, Maddux said. These cooperative efforts have impressed granting agencies, which have provided financing for development projects.

Another evolving aspect of the partnership is its regional focus, Goddard said. It's a focus that will grow along with area business. "It builds in efficiencies if we do things collaboratively. The philosophy is we all benefit even if a project goes to Sartell or Becker. The economy goes up, housing improves, and citizens have employment opportunities. I think we're willing to see beyond jurisdictional lines."