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Vicky Rad: Time is right to reinvent Macomb County

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Vicky Radd

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Vicky Rad took a nontraditional series of steps to becoming Macomb County's top economic development official. A graduate of Baker College with a degree in computer information systems, Rad started her career at Southfield-based Lear Corp. and then moved on to Regal Prototypes Inc. in Sterling Heights, where she worked in data administration. It was there that she got involved in Macomb's substantial defense industry, leading her eventually to becoming a senior procurement specialist for the Procurement Technical Assistance Center through Macomb Community College. After nearly four years there, she took about a year and worked as a program manager for the Detroit Regional Chamber's Connection Point program. But, the Chippewa Valley High School graduate says, her heart has always been in Macomb County.

So when a position in Mark Hackel's administration opened, she jumped at the chance, eventually becoming deputy director of the Planning & Economic Development Department, a position she held until the board of commissioners approved her selection as director to replace John Paul Rea earlier this month when he was named deputy county executive.

Rad, 40, spoke with *Crain's* real estate reporter Kirk Pinho in her seventh-floor office in the Macomb County headquarters in Mount Clemens earlier this month. What follows is an edited transcript.

Pinho: With regards to land use and planning, how do Opportunity Zones fit in to your entire equation?

Rad: From an economic development perspective, when word hit the streets last year there was a lot of buzz around it. It is the new shiny tool in the toolbox. It is very different than a lot of incentives offered at the state or local level. We end up becoming a facilitator for pretty much all of the deals we work through the county, and this is another example of that.

If we can connect to the right investors for them to see where the Opportunity Zone is, what is happening in that area and really help them understand the demographics and what is happening in that community, that is ultimately where we see our role. It is marketing, getting out there and making the connections, because the program is very complicated. So it's making sure we've got the right parties involved so that when we do get that phone call from an investor, we are ready to respond.

Not all the regs have been developed either, so I think the first batch came out in October and they were saying there might be another batch to come, so it's this evolving program. Do you have to temper people's expectations, just given the fact that these things aren't fully baked yet?

Yeah, for sure. We've got six communities in Macomb County, 17 different census tracts that fall within Opportunity Zones. We were getting phone calls. So we needed to educate ourselves on this because we were all learning about them together. Then also, watching to see what are some best models out there to look at and say, 'They were able to deploy it in this community this way, so how are we able to bring that to the county?'

We've also used technology. We have a really nice GIS where we can map out not only where the Opportunity Zone is at, but we can add layers to that. When we look at what's important to an investor, they want to know who is living in that community, what is the traffic if it's a commercial building and the number of investments. All of those things we are able to layer in GIS so they are able to go online and they can really get a nice snapshot model within the Opportunity Zones.

If I remember right, it was the governor who actually designated these zones, right?

The governor was involved. This was an initiative that actually came out of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act under Trump. Each of the governors in the states were given authorization. I think I heard all but three counties have Opportunity Zones.

They weren't just marketed or bandied about for urban areas, they were also targeted for more rural communities that have not seen as much investment. But there's nothing north of M-59 in Macomb County.

They sought out distressed communities, so when we looked at where our population is at, we weren't seeing that kind of population up there.

There are some unique properties in here, the Gibraltar Trade Center and the courthouse fall in the Opportunity Zones. Warren Truck, they fall within an Opportunity Zone and the GM Transmission, which GM has slated for closure. You're looking at a building that has been there since the 1940s. That could definitely change what that footprint looks like in the Warren portion.

In what other ways are these being utilized? Are you targeting a specific type of investor or specific type of project?

We've dedicated one person on our economic development staff to be our Opportunity Zone guru, so he's the point person. There is so much happening in this space where, for us to attend every single event, we are spread a little thin in that regard.

There are still a lot of unknowns, but we are moving together.

What about what appears to be an ongoing trend among younger people to cluster in urban cores? Mount Clemens has that feel. I'm not aware of many others in Macomb that lend themselves very well to something like that. Are there others that you're attempting to create or attract?

So much is happening in that space. That's from listening to the millennial generation. We are going to hit the silver tsunami with the retirees who live in Macomb County, but then you have this upward trajectory of millennials who want to live in Macomb County and they want walkable communities and the outdoors. Their needs are very different from the baby boomers'.

You've got communities like New Baltimore, which is right on the water. They've got a huge effort underway to make that really more water accessible, where you're bringing in more of your boating population to the downtown area, as well as those who will commute or bike to

get there. That's a growing community, one of our faster growing ones. It's a very family friendly community. The schools are very good up in that area, and you have the amenities of Lake St. Clair right next door.

Mount Clemens also has some very similar initiatives looking at the waterways, looking at a kayak launch, really getting more people downtown for recreation and then keeping them downtown so they stick around for dinner or happy hour. I grew up in this community, I grew up in Clinton Township. At one time, Mount Clemens was the night life. It was where things happened, and things have definitely changed. But you've got a lot of people within Mount Clemens that are really trying to champion and bring it back to what it was.

It's a lot slower growth than what it has been in Detroit with the big renaissance downtown. Some of the challenges Mount Clemens has, and some of our older communities have, are legacy decisions, legacy planning issues that we have to work around and figure out how we can be creative around it. You've got great property in downtown Mount Clemens, but you also have land and building owners that are not moving on those. You just want that true champion that comes in and says, "OK, we are going to take that corner property and grow it and make it viable so you have more people in the downtown."

Oakland University, they are right across the street (in Mount Clemens). They are kind of creating a campus environment. When you look at the housing right around Mount Clemens, they are some beautiful homes, very historic. I'm looking in Mount Clemens for a house. You can't find that type of home elsewhere, one of a kind.

St. Clair Shores is also another interesting community because it's so close to Detroit, so you have a lot of individuals who commute, who leave the county, go work in Detroit. That I-94 corridor is a perfect commute for them. We saw last year that one of our hottest housing markets was in St. Clair Shores, especially for first-time homebuyers of a younger generation. It's a traditional bedroom community. You've got the Nautical Mile and a lot happening with their planning department to make it really a destination, not only for those who live there but also those who want to spend the day in St. Clair Shores.

It's unique. We've got Sterling Heights, they are in a position where they are running out of land.

I forgot to mention Utica and its little downtown.

We love Utica. It's just a tiny little dot on the map, but with the ballpark there, it definitely brings in more foot traffic.

Sterling Heights has Lakeside Mall and they have a really great vision for how to repurpose an old, big-box mall, and how you make it more multi-use or multi-functional where it is a destination where people can live and shop there. Sterling Heights doesn't have a traditional downtown. Most of those date back to 100 or 150 years ago, so could this be an opportunity for us now to create a new downtown in Macomb County?

Inline Play

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