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GUEST COMMENTARY

Economic development at New Kansas Panasonic battery plant boosts our quality of life | Opinion

BY RICK WALKER SPECIAL TO THE KANSAS CITY STAR
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De Soto's mayor invites everyone in the community to embrace this new exiting chapter in their history. TAMMY LJUNGBLAD tjungblad@kcstar.com

Growing up in De Soto, I saw our community's economy fluctuate with the ups and downs of the Sunflower Army Ammunition plant. Oddly, when our country was in conflict, our community was flush. So when the plant closed, opportunity dwindled as well.

But that's all changing.

As the mayor of De Soto, I'm proud of the foresight our City Council had to know that eventually the land around the plant would be developed. Thousands of acres in Johnson County? Near transit, water and a talented workforce? Development was a given. That's why our leaders annexed the area's 9,000-plus acres: to ensure our community would reap the benefits — *and* have a say in the plans.

And that's what happened. Panasonic's \$4 billion facility, on 300 acres, is only halfway complete and our community is already seeing tremendous benefits. Still, because De Soto is a rural area, residents sometimes ask: Why develop? What's the purpose behind making concessions for a company to build?

My answer is not unique, but it's true: quality of life. While the construction phase can be a headache, inviting economic development is the surest way to enhance a community's quality of life. Beyond the 4,000 jobs it will bring, here are other benefits:

- **Diversified income:** A city's budget relies heavily on property taxes. Successful economic development initiatives bring in diverse income streams, lessening the burden on residents. Plus a healthier city budget translates into enhanced services for residents.
- **New infrastructure:** A tremendous amount of infrastructure is needed to support the development, so residents are getting much-needed upgrades — without footing the bill. In fact, we're overseeing \$249 million in infrastructure projects, including enhancements along Kansas Highway 10, as well as a new fire station, water treatment plant, water tower, wastewater treatment plant and sewage lift. Our portion of the bill is only \$2 million, and that's money we already had budgeted for road enhancements.
- **Tax reductions:** Despite the 20-year, 100% tax increment financing provided to offset development costs, the city stands to gain significantly from this investment. Increased sales tax activity and franchise fees on power consumption will generate substantial new revenue. This financial boost allows us to propose the largest tax cut in our city's history, reducing the mill rate from 19.8 to 14.4. This reduction translates to an average savings of \$150 per year for the average homeowner, while still adding funding to our capital improvement program for important community projects.
- **School funding:** The factory will generate funds for the De Soto school district as well — close to \$14 million over the next 20 years.
- **Small-town feel:** One common worry we hear is that development will ruin our small-town feel. The truth is, the munitions plant employed far more than 4,000 people — and we still maintained that community closeness. Our predecessors successfully balanced growth and community spirit then, and there is no reason why we can't also have balance now. As I always say, small-town is a state of mind. It's knowing your neighbors and getting involved in your community.

The economic development initiatives we are undertaking are about more than just new buildings and infrastructure — they are about building a brighter future for De Soto. This investment marks a significant step forward, positioning our city as a hub for innovation and growth. It brings with it the promise of a stronger economy, better infrastructure and an improved quality of life for all residents.

I invite all members of our community to join me in embracing this exciting new chapter in De Soto's history. Together, we can look forward to a future filled with opportunity and prosperity.

Rick Walker is mayor of De Soto.