

Weber County: A tale of two economies

American TV viewers have enjoyed a half-century love affair with quiz shows: “The \$64,000 Question,” “Password,” “Jeopardy,” “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire,” “Deal or No Deal.” It seems like at least one quiz show is always near the top of the TV ratings.

In the spirit of TV quiz shows, allow me to ask a couple of questions.

What Utah county recently had the highest closing price for newly constructed, single-family homes: a) Davis County b) Salt Lake County c) Utah County d) Weber County?

What Northern Utah county has average manufacturing wages significantly above the state average: a) Davis County b) Morgan County c) Weber County d) all the counties were below the state average?

It may surprise you to learn the answer to both questions is Weber County.

This flies in the face of the common perception that the Ogden and Weber economies are lagging far behind other regions of the state. Yet, these are the facts.

A December 2005 study by the University of Utah Bureau of Economic and Business Research reported that the median price of new single-family homes in Weber County was more than \$10,000 above those in Salt Lake County, \$30,000 higher than those in Davis County and \$36,000 above those in Utah County.

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Commentary

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Department of Workforce Services reported that average manufacturing wages in Weber County were significantly above the state average. The same report found that manufacturing wages in Morgan County were very close to the state average, while those in Davis County were significantly below the state average.

The key to resolving the contradiction between popular perceptions and hard economic data requires digging a little deeper into the findings. Consider housing prices. The average price of new construction in Weber County is higher than Davis, Salt Lake and Utah counties. However, the average price of all homes sold in Weber County is lower. Higher-income individuals are driving much of the new construction in Weber County, and the homes they are purchasing are among the best homes being built in the state. This

explains the high value attached to new home sales in Weber County. Nevertheless, there is a large stock of older housing in Weber County. In particular, the center of Ogden is dotted with older homes in poor condition. This inventory of older housing drives down the average price of all housing in Weber County.

Now consider wages. Manufacturing wages, which tend to be higher than those in other sectors, are even higher in Weber County. Also, Weber County has created more manufacturing jobs per resident than Davis, Salt Lake or Utah counties. The high-wage manufacturing jobs in Weber County are provided by employers like Adam Aircraft, Albion Advanced Nutrition, Autoliv, Barnes Aerospace, Fresenius, Goode Ski Technologies, Kimberly-Clark, Williams International and others. Together, Weber County manufacturers provide jobs for almost 14,000 employees.

Still, the average of all wages paid in Weber County is below the state average, and Weber County's unemployment rate is above the state average. This is because much of the workforce in Weber County lacks the necessary skills for employment in the manufacturing sector. If low-skilled individuals find employment, it is most likely to be in the service sector where wages are lower. Not coincidentally, many of these individuals also live in dilapidated housing in inner-city Ogden.

What this all means is that Weber County has a two-tiered economy. We have a lot of folks at the top of the economic pecking order; people living in the Top of Utah work in high-wage jobs and buy upscale homes being constructed in Weber County. The top of the economy in Weber County surpasses that of other regions in Utah.

Unfortunately, it is the bottom end of the economic order that tends to draw the most attention when people consider economic conditions in Ogden and Weber County.

Given the two-tiered nature of the Weber economy, what strategies should guide future economic development efforts?

First, Weber County should build on its past success. This means creating even more high-end manufacturing jobs. It involves fostering a business climate that rewards economic prosperity. It also means furnishing artistic, cultural and recreational opportunities for present and future residents.

Second, efforts must be directed toward improving the prospects for those at the bottom of the economic ladder. It is ironic that Weber County has an unemployment rate above the state average, yet many of Weber's manufacturers cannot find enough skilled workers. The way to remedy the situation is through education. Fortunately, Ogden/Weber Applied Technology College and Weber State University

provide Weber County the necessary tools. However, it is essential to make sure that students are successful in the secondary-school system, so they can take advantage of the higher education opportunities in Weber County.

The third part of the strategy is critically important. Residents of Weber County need to spend more time promoting the positive and less time decrying the negative. I am pretty sure that residents in neighboring communities to the south could give you a long list of the economic problems in Ogden.

I will also bet that most folks living in the cities to the south are largely unaware of the economic success stories in Weber County. They probably don't know that manufacturing wages in Weber County are significantly above the state average. They probably don't know that Weber County has created more manufacturing jobs per resident than other counties in the state. They may not know that Weber County is home to some of the leading aerospace, composite, medical equipment and nutrition companies in the world.

Regrettably, one reason they don't know is because the citizens of Weber County don't tell them. It is time for that situation to change. Much like a correct response on a game show, sharing positive messages about Weber County's economy can pay dividends. And the potential stakes far exceed any game show prize.