

FROM
EVALUATING
DEALS TO
BUILDING
REGIONS

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Economic Development
Director,
Whiteside County



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For more than three decades, Gary Camarano evaluated commercial and investment opportunities by considering capital returns and financial exposure. The work helped banks and businesses determine whether a transaction presented an acceptable balance of risk and reward. Today, as Economic Development Director for Whiteside County, Illinois, he applies that discipline to decisions that affect an entire region. Every project must answer a broader question: Can it strengthen the workforce, prepare the region for what comes next and create lasting value for the community?

Creating Opportunities for Community Growth

Camarano places business retention at the center of his strategy. While business attraction makes headlines, he prioritizes understanding the needs of existing businesses, particularly around workforce development, and helping them expand.

When vetting prospective companies, he seeks partners whose goals align with the region's strengths and that are committed to growing alongside the community. He also considers their reputation, performance in other communities and potential demands on local utilities.

His approach extends beyond short-lived incentives to building long-term partnerships through workforce training, site preparation and infrastructure investment. The goal is not simply to attract a company but to establish a relationship that continues well beyond the incentive period and delivers lasting value to the region.

Turning Broadband into Economic Opportunity

That long-term perspective is evident in one of Whiteside County's most consequential regional initiatives. When the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the lack of reliable broadband across rural communities, Camarano recognized a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the region's economic future. He viewed broadband expansion as transformative infrastructure, comparable to rural electrification in 1939 and the development of the interstate highway system in the 1950s.

Recognizing that a regional approach would strengthen the funding application, Camarano and his partners brought Whiteside, Carroll and Jo Daviess counties together with longtime partner JCE Co-op, the rural cooperative that first brought electricity to the area decades earlier. Their coordinated effort secured \$91 million, approximately 28 percent of the \$320 million

available through that round of Illinois broadband funding. Combined with local investment, the initiative grew into a \$121 million project that will deploy more than 1,500 miles of fiber and make high-speed broadband available to more than 10,000 homes, businesses and institutions.

For Camarano, installing fiber is only the beginning. Its real value depends on how effectively the region uses it. Describing this as the “Now that the dog has caught the car, what’s he going to do with it?” phase, he has championed a broadband utilization initiative to help businesses, farmers and institutions turn connectivity into measurable gains.

With reliable broadband enabling farms to use connected equipment and real-time data, precision agriculture can help increase crop yields by 4 percent per year while reducing fertilizer, fuel and labor costs by 10 to 15 percent annually. Camarano also sees fiber supporting advanced manufacturing, telehealth and remote education, making it a catalyst for productivity, competitiveness and long-term regional prosperity. It has been estimated that for every \$1 invested in broadband fiber, the region could see a \$10 to \$20 return over the next 10 to 20 years.



Converting Regional Strengths into Investment

Broadband strengthens Whiteside County’s broader value proposition as an affordable, well-connected alternative to larger metropolitan markets. Although larger metropolitan markets may have greater name recognition, Camarano counters that advantage by identifying what each company needs and showing how Whiteside County’s specific strengths can meet those priorities. Lower land and operating costs, shorter commutes, an attainable cost of living and reliable broadband make Whiteside County an attractive business destination.

Three Interstate highways, two Class I railroads, inland waterways linking the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico, three international airports and a County airport with a 6,500-foot runway provide extensive connectivity. Nestled within North America’s Great Lakes manufacturing hub, the region also gives companies access to established suppliers, customers and supply chains across the U.S. and Canada. Its established capabilities in manufacturing, metal fabrication, electronics, agriculture and logistics support a regional economy built around growing, making and moving goods.

The county also builds workforce capacity through apprenticeship programs. An initiative originally designed for broadband fiber technicians now includes automation and process control, supported by Morrison Tech and community colleges offering customizable manufacturing training. Together, fiber connectivity, a regional workforce of roughly 736,000 and more than 120 higher education institutions within approximately 100 miles give businesses access to a strong talent pipeline and modern infrastructure.

A range of financing and incentive programs complements these advantages. Companies can benefit from an enterprise-zone program offering sales tax exemptions on building materials and five-year property tax abatements. Other available mechanisms include C-PACE (Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy) financing, tax credits and the Illinois Economic Development for a Growing Economy program. These resources support incoming companies and expansion projects undertaken by existing businesses.



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Investment Takes Root

The region’s ability to convert these advantages into investment is already visible. Jungbunzlauer, a Swiss food ingredients manufacturer, has acquired and is outfitting an existing facility for citric acid and other food additive production. HALO Branded Solutions, a global leader in branded merchandise, invested \$50 million in a new headquarters, distribution center and upgrades to its existing facility.

These investments reflect Camarano’s emphasis on building long-term relationships that align business priorities with regional needs. His advice to future economic development leaders draws on the broader approach behind this work. He encourages them to use the SOAR framework—strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results—to identify projects capable of delivering meaningful community outcomes. Applying it effectively requires interpersonal, analytical and presentation skills that help bring regional stakeholders together and turn shared priorities into action. This ability to unite disciplined evaluation with collective action reflects the evolution of Camarano’s career. Investment banking taught him to evaluate opportunities, while economic development has enabled him to shape them for generations to come. **GB**

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