

New CEO Takes Reins of Montana West Economic Development - Flathead Beacon



After a 35-year career managing several large and small technology companies across North America, Jerry Meerkatz returned to the Flathead Valley, where he grew up working blue-collar jobs and hoped to raise his own family.

A 1976 graduate of Flathead High School, Meerkatz developed his work ethic at automotive shops in downtown Kalispell and spent a summer working at the aluminum plant in Columbia Falls. An older mentor at the aluminum plant convinced Meerkatz to attend college, which sent the young man on the path he would eventually follow, studying engineering and working at tech giants such as Compaq and Hewlett-Packard over the next three decades.

Last month, Meerkatz was hired as the president and CEO of Montana West Economic Development, and his focus is now centered on stimulating business opportunities and attracting employees and employers in Kalispell, Columbia Falls and the surrounding Flathead Valley, where it all started for him.

"I'm excited for everything here in the greater valley," he said recently.

"I really enjoy leadership roles and I really enjoy interacting with the community. And I want to see things happen."

Meerkatz is stepping in as the leader of the local nonprofit economic development group that was established nearly 20 years ago. As a not-for-profit economic development organization, MWED works to nourish a diversified, sustainable business base through loan and grant programs, consulting, market analyses and regional marketing campaigns. Meerkatz replaced Kellie Danielson, who stepped down after seven years.

“I think he’s going to take us to a new level. Every person that’s been there in his position has done that and I’m absolutely confident that Jerry will do that as well,” said Turner Askew, a board member with the Flathead County Economic Development Authority, a separate but connected entity that Meerkatz will oversee.

“He has enthusiasm and his background (stands out). It’s great to be optimistic, but it’s even better to work on things that will work. And he will work on things that will work. We will spend more time on what’s possible.”

Among the projects that MWED and FCEDA are spearheading is the industrial rail park in Kalispell, which is moving along with the city’s core area redevelopment plan. As both projects take shape over the next few years, Meerkatz hopes to help expand the opportunities for economic growth.

“Clearly the rail park program is the most exciting thing in the public eye right now,” he said. “There is no doubt that it is going to make a big difference in this valley.”

Along with revitalization in the core area of Kalispell, Meerkatz said helping the economy stabilize in Columbia Falls is one of his initial priorities. The town has undergone sizeable changes with the closure of the aluminum plant and the recent closures of two former Plum Creek timber mills.

“I don’t know what the opportunities are exactly going to be. The biggest thing that I need to do in this job is be completely open-minded and be ready to take on anything. I’m really excited and I’m passionate about it,” Meerkatz said.

Meerkatz said he plans to spend the first few months meeting with anyone and everyone, getting to know the valley and its vast opportunities. He brings an impressive resume in the tech sector, which he hopes to help establish in the Flathead. He graduated from DeVry University in Arizona with an engineering degree. He previously worked for Compaq Computer Corporation, Hewlett Packard Company and Infowave Software, Inc.

MWED’s 2016 strategic plan lays out a few immediate goals that Meerkatz and his staff will oversee, including continuing to offer gap financing loans to local business and entrepreneurs and providing business counseling and connections to help businesses expand. In recent years, MWED has dished out roughly \$4.4 million through a revolving loan fund, helping local businesses make improvements or expand.

“Our role here is to connect the dots and make these things happen,” Meerkatz said.