

# Preble County embarks on mission to spark business

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**George Meaney** is ready to bring his thrift store concept to Preble County as officials there look to grow the area's economic base.

Already the owner of a three-year-old thrift business in Middletown, Meaney recently began looking to expand his reach. That spurred him to make visits to Eaton to get a feel for the area. It was good timing for Meaney and Preble County officials, who are actively ramping up economic development efforts.

From retailers such as the coming Cornerstone Thrift to large companies, Preble County is hustling to attract new business investment.

And companies such as Meaney's are likely to help boost the number of small-businesses in the county that still has a hometown feel.

"I went there several times and liked the community," Meaney said.

Meaney signed a three-year lease last month and is gearing up to put the Cornerstone Thrift store into a former **Dollar General** site near downtown Eaton.

For Preble County, the larger efforts to boost its employment base are just gearing up as well.

Late last year, the mostly rural county to the west of Dayton formed a development partnership, hired its first economic development director and launched an aggressive business retention and attraction effort.

This includes an economic development Web site, an inventory of available sites and buildings and a marketing effort to spread the word about Goose Creek Crossing, a 200-acre development along Interstate 70.

"We have decided it's time to prepare for the new economy," said **Shawnda Combs**, the county's economic development director. "We will be very active in the Dayton-Cincinnati region in regards to chasing projects."

While the development effort has yet to land any large projects — which typically take 12 to 18 months, or longer, to evolve — there have been smaller wins for Preble County.

In December, Eaton-based information technology company Opti-Vise LLC signed a deal to add space and workers. And now, Meaney is spending about \$30,000 to get the 9,000-square-foot store ready to open. He plans to hire four full-time workers — as well as a few part-timers at the store — and bring in plants, play music and make the store another place for people to hang out.

"I'm trying to create a festive atmosphere," he said.



The new thrift store brings jobs, takes a vacant building off the market and gives residents another option to buy clothes, keeping more retail dollars in town, Combs said.

A successful economic development effort could pay big dividends for Preble County, which, until recently, largely sat on the sidelines and watched companies locate to adjacent counties.

According to a recent report, the county has more than 2,200 business. However, many employ only a handful of people and only about two dozen have more than 100 workers. Eaton is home to **Henny Penny**, a manufacturer of industrial food products. With more than 500 employees, Henny Penny is among the largest employers in the county.

Combs also hopes to spur growth in Preble County's tourism industry.

Earlier this month, she proposed a county-wide transient tax of six percent to fund tourism marketing as a way to draw more dollars from outside the county.

"Preble County residents pay this tax in every community for which they travel but yet we don't get the same in return," she said.

Preble County is home of several annual festivals, including the world's largest pork festival, as well as **Hueston Woods State Park**, numerous covered bridges and historic sites.