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By Joe Hosey

Crest Hill -- The city wanted a plan to leap forward in the next decade, and one of the first steps was hiring an architect to draw it up.

That man, Bryan Gay, came on board in January and already sees big things for Crest Hill's future.

"This is an opportunity, really" said Gay, 29. "The downturn is an opportunity. It allows you to take a step back and take inventory of everything. Not to be too clichéd, but to get your ducks in a row."

It was the economic downturn that actually allowed Crest Hill to snap Gay up. He had been Mokena's economic development coordinator when he was laid off, spending his last day there less than two weeks before heading to Crest Hill to be the city's first economic development director.

"They were struggling with some budget issues," he said of the circumstances leading to his leaving Mokena. But that town's loss turned out to be Crest Hill's gain.

Mayor Ray Soliman said Gay landed the job with his extensive knowledge and contacts in the economic development arena.

"He gave me a very impressive interview with a lot of creativity," Soliman said.

And the mayor figured Gay was a good fit for developing the role of economic development director for a city that had never had one before.

"We were looking for someone to build this position from the ground up," Soliman said.

Economic role

Gay, who lives in Alsip with his wife Pamela, and their daughter, Natalie, is a graduate of Drake University. After college, the Chicago native starred in a marketing role for Home Depot, then took a job as the assistant director of economic development with the Naperville Development Partnership.

"It just kind of turned into an ambition and something I really enjoyed, and it's something that's grown from there," Gay said of his exposure to economic development while working in Naperville.

And the time he spent there helped him form ideas he hopes to bring to Crest Hill.

"A lot of things they've done are just his model for other communities," he said.

Sports complex

Gay started with Crest Hill in January and is already immersed in a pivotal project – the creation of a state-of-the-art sports complex on land along Weber Road.

"It's not whether or not it's going to happen," Gay said of the proposed sports complex. "It's when it's going to happen and who its gong to bring in.

"It will be a huge shot in the arm for the area, especially for that corridor," he said.

And talk of the coming sports complex has kick-started even more business buzz in Crest Hill.

"In the last two weeks we've been getting a lot of phone calls," Gay said. "A lot of businesses are interested in getting into us."