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THE ROLE OF LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

10 Things You Should Know



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The Role of Local Elected Officials in Economic Development: 10 Things you Should Know was the result of a partnership between the National League of Cities Center for Research and Innovation and the International Economic Development Council (IEDC). IEDC staff were instrumental in facilitating a series of input sessions with economic development officials during their conferences in October 2009 and February 2010. IEDC staff also reviewed the guide and provided constructive feedback. NLC also recognizes the direct input and guidance provided by members of IEDC, members of NLC's CityFutures Panel on Community and Regional Development, and other local officials.

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The National League of Cities is the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for more than 1,600 member cities and the 49 state municipal leagues, representing 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans.

Through its **Center for Research and Innovation**, NLC provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues, and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences, and learn about innovative approaches in cities.

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The International Economic Development Council (IEDC) is the premier membership organization dedicated to helping economic development professionals create high-quality jobs, develop vibrant communities and improve the quality of life in their regions. Serving more than 4,600 members, IEDC represents the largest network of economic development professionals in the world. IEDC provides a diverse range of services, including conferences, certification, professional development, publications, research, advisory services and legislative tracking.

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Introduction

Economic development is the process of building strong, adaptive economies. Strategies driven by local assets and realities, a diverse industry base and a commitment to equality of opportunity and sustainable practices have emerged as those that will ensure a strong foundation for long-term stability and growth. Even within the parameters of these principles, what constitutes success in economic development and the specific strategies to accomplish it will look different from place to place. Despite these differences, leadership is consistently identified as a critical factor in effective economic development.

Dedicated leadership is needed to raise awareness, help develop and communicate a common vision, and motivate stakeholders into action. Although leadership can come from many places within the community, local elected officials are particularly well-positioned to take on this role. The political influence of elected leadership is critical to helping communities stay the course toward a vibrant economic future. From the bully pulpit to the design and coordination of public policies, mayors and councilmembers have opportunities every day to effect change and promote a strategic vision of economic growth for their community.

The goal of this guide is not to provide a one-size-fits-all solution to economic development or even to offer an Economic Development 101. Nor does this guide contend that elected officials should be economic development experts. The goal is instead to identify fundamental ways elected officials can become informed and strategic decision-makers who can connect the policy “dots,” be effective communicators and take a leadership role in economic development. The guide is based on the premise that elected officials can and should actively participate in and lead long-term development strategies that make sense for their community.

The format of the guide is a “top 10 list” of things elected officials should know about economic development in order to be effective leaders. These include:

- 1. Your local economic strengths and weaknesses.** A stronger understanding of your community’s economic profile will help you create a realistic vision and strategies for economic development.
- 2. Your community’s place in the broader regional economy.** With a firmer grasp of how your community fits into the broader region, you’re better prepared to work with other jurisdictions to share responsibility for regional economic success.
- 3. Your community’s economic development vision and goals.** Local elected officials can play a key role in building consensus for a vision and goals that provide clear direction for local economic development.
- 4. Your community’s strategy to attain its goals.** A strategic approach means linking economic development goals to specific activities, allocating a budget and staff to these activities and evaluating performance based on measurable outcomes.
- 5. Connections between economic development and other city policies.** When crafting economic development policies, it is essential to consider how other city policies (e.g., transportation or housing) affect your economic development goals.

- 6. Your regulatory environment.** Your community's regulatory process should allow for timely, reliable and transparent resolution of issues facing businesses, while still remaining true to your long-term economic development vision.
- 7. Your local economic development stakeholders and partners.** Local officials should think strategically on a project-by-project basis about who needs to be involved, the resources they bring to the table, and what it will take to get them engaged.
- 8. The needs of your local business community.** Local officials can help create an environment that supports the growth and expansion of local businesses, primarily by opening lines of communication.
- 9. Your community's economic development message.** You will want a clear, accurate and compelling message that reflects your local vision and that helps ensure broad support for economic development projects undertaken by the city and its partners.
- 10. Your economic development staff.** Local elected officials will be more effective in leading economic development activities to the extent that they forge strong relationships with staff members who work on these issues on a daily basis.

1. Your Local Economic Strengths and Weaknesses

Your community's strengths and weaknesses, such as quality-of-life amenities, infrastructure and workforce skills, determine the potential of your local economy to support economic growth. This economic profile lays the foundation for creating a realistic vision and strategic direction for economic success that is unique to your community. Information about your local economy can also help engage and educate constituents and build community support for economic development decisions.

ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL ECONOMY

IMPORTANT FACTORS	KEY INDICATORS
Economic conditions	Unemployment, types and sizes of firms/industries, wages, income, new business starts, retail sales, housing prices, types of imports and exports, number of businesses closed
Population characteristics	Population size and growth, age, education level
Labor force characteristics	Labor force participation, occupations, skills, commuter characteristics, productivity
Physical conditions	Land use, zoning, land values, condition of buildings, vacancy rates, building activity, parking facilities, condition and capacity of infrastructure, air and water quality
Business climate	Community attitudes, labor relations, business taxes and regulations, level and quality of municipal services, workforce training, access to and cost of capital, public and private infrastructure
Knowledge-based resources	Federal labs, science and research parks, industry incubators, colleges and universities, technical training schools
Quality of life	Housing availability, public services, education system, crime rate, cultural and recreational activities, parks and other natural amenities

Source: *Economic Development Strategic Planning*, International Economic Development Council, Washington, D.C., 2006, pp. 44-48.

With the assistance of your economic development staff and input from stakeholders, you can identify factors within and outside of the control of local government that impact and shape your local economy. Identifying strengths and opportunities is crucial, but local officials also should pay attention to weaknesses and potential threats.

For example, what industries in your community and region are growing or struggling? What are the skills of your workforce, and are they sufficient to meet the needs of business? What barriers and sup-

port services exist for local entrepreneurs and small businesses? Is the local and regional housing stock diverse enough to provide for a wide range of housing needs?

All of these factors should be understood in comparison to other communities and in the context of broader economic trends. As a result of this process, you will have a stronger sense of your unique local assets, as well as what you can and should be doing to build on strengths and mitigate weaknesses.

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- What unique strengths can your community build on for economic development and growth?
- What weaknesses pose a barrier to economic development? To what extent can you mitigate these weaknesses – and how?
- How do your community's strengths and weaknesses compare to those in other communities?
- How are economic conditions changing in your city and region?

San Buenaventura, Calif. (Ventura) (population 109,000)

After many decades of slow economic growth, the traditionally blue-collar City of San Buenaventura began to realize that its anti-business reputation had actually been undermining its economic prosperity. The city had very few middle class jobs and a limited industrial base and service sector. Moreover, many high-tech firms were heavily concentrated in much of the city's surrounding area and seemed to bypass Ventura when making location decisions.

Through an analysis of the community's strengths and weaknesses, city leaders in Ventura determined that the city's location between two high-tech hubs, its pool of entrepreneurs and venture capitalists and significant quality of life amenities placed them in a unique position to expand high-growth technology sectors. The city developed and pursued a strategic plan for economic development, including new activities to increase the local tax base, diversify the economy and create high-value, high-wage jobs.

The city created a self-sustaining fund to support the new plan, specifically growth of businesses from within the community, by using a \$5 million loan payoff from the Redevelopment Agency. The Jobs Investment Fund (JIF) provides "mezzanine capital" to expansion projects or venture capital to new projects as either loans or direct investments. JIF, managed by a private investment partner, allows for a higher return potential to the city than is traditionally available with a standard investment portfolio.

Constituents have expressed concern that the city has too great a risk exposure in these investments. "There are requests that we redirect the money from the fund back to general government operations each time we face additional budget cuts, but due to political will and improved communications with our constituents, so far we have been able to maintain funding," said Council member Neal Andrews. City leaders have made a special effort to bring community opinion leaders into a position where they understand what JIF is about and why it's important.

JIF has allowed the city to engage in a number of business development activities, including capital raising conferences, entrepreneurship events and a business incubator. As of January 2010, 10 firms have located in the incubator, and in 2008, Forbes magazine ranked Ventura number 68 on the "Small Business list of 100 best places to live and launch a business."

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2. Your Community's Place In The Broader Regional Economy

Understanding your local economy also means knowing how your community fits into the broader region. Although increased competition for jobs, tax base and private investment can put political pressure on elected officials to go toe-to-toe with neighboring jurisdictions, the reality is that local economic success depends on regional economic success.

This is particularly true in the context of the global economy, where economic competition may not be with your neighbor, but with a city in China, India or Ireland. Firms engaged in global economic activity rely on a breadth of resources available in a region, including workers, transportation, housing, and amenities. In nearly all cases, one community does not have full capacity needed to support these activities. Cities that focus on competition within the region, instead of collaborating for economic development, are placing their economic future at risk.

With a firmer grasp of your community's place in the region, you're better prepared to work with other jurisdictions to share responsibility for promoting regional economic success. Cities in the Denver region, for example, work together to draw businesses and other economic activity to the region while agreeing not to compete or offer incentives to firms to locate in their specific communities. Similarly, many cities work together on regional marketing efforts, typically via participation in a regional council. These collaborative efforts attract firms, investment, and employment that benefit the entire region.

Participating in regional activities may present some political difficulties if the local economic benefits are not well understood by your constituents. Local elected officials should be prepared with the facts about how regional economic success translates into improved employment opportunities, tax base, or amenities for your city and the people who live there. Local officials can work with their staff to craft a clear, accurate message about their involvement in regional activities, and communicate this message to community through the media, neighborhood meetings or other public venues. It can serve as a starting point for a community dialogue about the importance of regional collaboration to local success.

"Too many local governments still act as if they have the luxury of merely competing with each other for tax base, especially within their region. But economically this is a sideshow or a delusion. The real economic competition is global and competing effectively requires regional collaboration."

William Barnes, The Economic Development Game Has Changed, Nation's Cities Weekly, 1/11/2010

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- How do you define your economic region?
- How does the economic strength of your city depend on what happens in other cities and towns in the region? How does regional economic activity provide direct or indirect benefits to your community?
- What assets does your community contribute to the regional economy (e.g., workers, housing, amenities, transportation)?
- What regional organizations, partnerships and/or activities already exist? To what extent is your community involved?

3. Your Community's Economic Development Vision and Goals

A primary challenge in the practice of economic development is choosing among many competing priorities and various activities. A clear economic vision and goals are needed to provide a framework for strategically assessing and coordinating these efforts. The vision stems from the community's values, its collective sense of local economic strengths and weaknesses, and consensus on a desired future. Goals are more tangible expressions of the vision and provide specific direction for actions.

For example, the City of Albuquerque, New Mexico's economic development initiative "thrive!ABQ" identifies the city's economic vision as a city with a vibrant business climate that's accessible, user-friendly and welcoming to all. The three primary goals of "thrive!ABQ" are:

- Albuquerque First: Retain existing businesses and industries by fostering partnerships with local businesses and increasing spending in the community.
- Albuquerque Easy: Remove barriers to conducting business within the city.
- Albuquerque Recruits: Make the city an attractive place for businesses to locate.

According to the American Planning Association's *Economic Development Toolbox* (2006), a sound economic vision and goals should:

1. Balance what the jurisdiction would like to achieve with what resources and public support the jurisdiction can realistically expect to muster in support of that vision.
2. Be consistent with the role of the jurisdiction's economy in the larger regional and state economies.
3. Be understandable to citizens without technical training or experience in economic development.
4. Be produced in a way that makes it possible to incorporate it in the jurisdiction's comprehensive plan.

If your city already has an economic development vision, make sure your policy decisions reflect the principles in the vision. In cities that do not have an economic vision, local elected officials can help initiate a community visioning effort. A well-designed visioning process will surface an array of ideas, opinions and objectives from a diverse group of stakeholders. An important role for elected officials is to help bring people to consensus and agreement on a common purpose.

"There are many possible economic futures for any given jurisdiction, there are some impossible ones as well. The challenge is to decide on a future that is not only desirable, but also possible given the factors that constrain it."

Terry Moore, Stuart Meck, and James Ebenhoh. *An Economic Development Toolbox*. American Planning Association, Washington, D.C. October 2006, p. 34

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- Does your community have a clearly stated vision and goals for economic development? If so, what are they?
- Does the vision reflect the community's values as well as its strengths and weaknesses?
- Do your constituents and key stakeholders understand and agree upon the community's vision and goals?
- To what extent do local government policies support the vision and goals?

Mission, Kan. (population 9,727)

Mission, a community less than three square miles in area, was at a crossroads when many large parcels of land became available for redevelopment. In response, the city began a planning process that involved all facets of the community, including residents, businesses and shoppers, to create a vision that would serve as the framework for future development. The vision, which ultimately called for more compact, walkable, and sustainable development, was challenged when Mission was offered a lucrative deal by a big-box developer.

With a strong commitment to the vision, Mission denied the big-box store and has accepted an offer for a new mall from a developer who has embraced the city's vision for a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use destination. Although the developer typically works on retail projects only, his collaboration with the city and understanding of the community vision has led him to include residential, hotel, office and entertainment as potential project components.

The city's resolve to stick with its vision also resulted in overwhelming community support for the project. Instead of Not in My Back Yard opposition, city officials received acclamation from those attending its Planning and Zoning hearings. Among the most common questions the city received from residents: "When will the project be complete?"

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4. Your Community's Strategy To Attain Its Goals

Once the economic development vision and goals are defined, it is important that they not be shelved, but that they guide and determine your community's economic development strategy. If the community has been involved in the process and believes in the vision and goals, residents will hold political leadership accountable for putting them into practice. Strategic implementation of the economic development vision involves linking economic development goals to specific activities, allocating a budget and staff to these activities, and evaluating performance based on specific, measurable, agreed-upon outcomes.

There are many local activities that can be used to accomplish your city's long-term economic vision. The types of economic development policies and tools pursued by your community will depend on those permitted by your state, as well as how your local government perceives its role in stimulating private sector economic activity.

The traditional local government role in economic development is to facilitate economic activity by offsetting the cost of doing business in your community (in terms of time, opportunity and money). Strategies include land assembly, modifying the permitting process and providing job training. More entrepreneurial roles, as well as strategies that more directly address the demand for local products, may include seeding and investing in local small businesses, matching gaps in supplier/buyer linkages and international trade promotion. Local elected officials can work with city staff, businesses and other stakeholders in the community to educate themselves about the types of programs and tools that are available to them and to decide which economic development role is best for their city.

You can also look to "best practices" in other communities; however, it is important to remember that economic development activities that work in one place will not necessarily work in another. Following economic development fads or strictly replicating another city's approach without putting it in the context of your community is a recipe for failure. Instead, elected officials can learn how and why another city was successful and adapt those practices to local realities.

Elected officials should also work with their staff to determine a set of expected outcomes, the necessary level of resources (staff and budget) needed to achieve these outcomes and performance metrics to evaluate and measure them. In the context of short-term political cycles, it may be tempting to stray from the strategy and only consider economic development in terms of traditional, more tangible successes, such as attracting a new, large employer. For this reason, it is important that elected officials and staff agree upon, are committed to and accurately measure even *incremental* economic achievements. This will allow political leaders to demonstrate success and champion all various ways the community is supporting economic activity.

Strategic implementation of economic development, from selecting activities that support the vision to accurately measuring progress, enables local governments to be more responsive in an increasingly complex and uncertain economic environment. It allows the community, staff and elected officials to be part of a "continuum" of leadership and to make more deliberate progress toward long-term economic success.

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- How do your goals drive everyday actions to develop and grow your local economy? Can you develop better strategies, if needed, which make sense for your community?
- What is the general orientation of your local government toward supporting private sector economic activity? What tools is your city willing to and able to use?
- Is your city's budget and staffing aligned with its strategies for economic development?
- How will you measure and evaluate your city's economic development efforts over time?
- What can you do to celebrate incremental successes?

Littleton, Colo. (population 43,055)

In 1987, the City of Littleton pioneered an entrepreneurial alternative to the traditional economic development practice of recruiting industries. The "economic gardening" program, developed in conjunction with the Center for the New West, is an effort to grow local jobs through entrepreneurial activity.

The approach is based on research that indicates the great majority of all new jobs in any local economy are produced by small, local businesses already in the community. According to Chris Gibbons, Littleton's director of business/industry, an entrepreneurial approach to economic development has several advantages over attraction strategies. First, the cost per job is much less than the \$250,000 to \$300,000 incentives typical in major relocations. Second, the investment is in the community and its infrastructure; should a business choose to leave, it does not take that investment with it. Third, it is a healthier approach in that a community's future is no longer tied to the whims of an out-of-state company. Its future is entirely a function of its own efforts and investments.

Littleton's economic strategy focuses on creating a nurturing environment for entrepreneurs and "second-stage" companies—those with 10-99 employees and/or \$750,000-\$50 million in receipts. In a typical engagement, the city's Economic Gardening team will assist a company with core strategy, market analysis, competitor intelligence, and other priority tasks. Since the start of the program, Littleton's job base has grown from 15,000 to 30,000, the retail sales tax has tripled from \$6 million to \$21 million, and the population has grown by 23 percent.

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5. Connections Between Economic Development and Other City Policies

It would be nearly impossible to list all of the various ways in which local government policies interact and overlap. When crafting economic development policies, it is essential to consider how other city policies support or discourage your economic development goals. For example, are your transportation initiatives supporting local retail? Are your local workforce training programs aligned with your sustainability plans? Is the regional housing stock adequate to meet the needs of workers in your community? By thinking about policies holistically, you can avoid detrimental policy interactions and create an environment for different policies to support and enhance each other.

Policy integration has become even more important over the past 30 years as the drivers of economic growth have broadened significantly. Today, the scope of economic development and the interests and needs of the business community extend well beyond market access and transportation networks. Social and professional networks, educational institutions, quality-of-life amenities, talent and workforce skills and housing are important assets that contribute to your community's economic profile. Additionally, there is increased recognition that improvements in economic equity and the natural environment are critically important to a strong local economy.

For example, the City of Portland, Ore., has created a Sustainable City Partnership to foster a collaborative, citywide effort to integrate sustainable practices and resource efficiency into municipal operations and to strengthen existing policies and efforts. A primary partnership role for city officials and staff is to develop connections between environmental quality and economic vitality. The city has encouraged sustainable business practices and has leveraged sustainability as a key economic sector.

One strategy to ensure that all of the various sources of economic growth and the key elements impacting economic development are coordinated is to develop your economic development activities in conjunction with your community's comprehensive planning process. Some communities have formalized this process through implementation of an Economic Prosperity Element (page 14).

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- How do other city policies — in areas from transportation and housing to public safety — affect your goals for economic development?
- To what extent does your city need to change existing policies so they are aligned with and support the economic development vision and goals?
- How often do various city departments communicate? To what extent is there a shared understanding of and commitment to successful economic development across city government?
- Are your city's economic development strategies and goals reflected in the comprehensive plan? Can you add an Economic Prosperity Element to the plan?

Economic Prosperity Element

by William Anderson, Director, City Planning & Community Investment Department, City of San Diego (*American Planning Association Economic Development Blog 5/17/2010*)

Many cities and counties are adding Economic Prosperity or similar elements to their General Plans. These elements help strengthen the link between a jurisdiction's comprehensive plan and economic development. While most factors that influence economic development are beyond a local area's control, such as macro-economic trends, international competition, interest rates, financial markets, local jurisdictions do have control of factors that can make them more or less competitive in the region, nation, or world.

Some of these local factors are traditionally addressed in General Plans, such as land use capacity for industries and targeted sectors, infrastructure efficiency and cost, quality-of-life, housing affordability for the workforce, and environmental quality. Other local factors are not as directly related to land use policies, such as workforce training, education, and access to capital. These factors may be the purview of other organizations and agencies, but are also critical.

An Economic Prosperity Element, especially one tied to a regional economic development strategy, can bridge and coordinate these factors and take the General Plan beyond the role of just land use policy. It can also serve as the element that connects a region's economic development strategy focused on the needs of export-oriented base sectors, to the opportunities for community-level economic development.

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6. Your Regulatory Environment

Your regulatory environment directly impacts the ease of doing business in your city. For business leaders, time is money; they want to know that the regulatory process provides for timely, reliable and transparent resolution of key issues. If your city's regulatory policies are riddled with delays, confusing and redundant steps and multiple approval processes, a prospective business may very well choose to locate or expand in another community.

Local officials can improve the regulatory environment for businesses by ensuring that the development review process and other policies are streamlined and transparent. The key to success is ensuring consistency and clarity about expectations, timelines, regulations, and costs. This will alleviate much of the uncertainty involved in economic development projects by allowing businesses to accurately anticipate the timing of the process and to build their plans accordingly. In addition, a better regulatory environment can promote information-sharing and better communication with local businesses so you can work together to identify potential challenges or problems.

As a local elected official, your first step is to ensure that you have an understanding of the current regulatory system and where there may be problems. This will require you to gather input from the business community about their frustrations and experiences. Working with your local chamber of commerce or other local business organizations may be helpful in this process. To gain additional perspective, you may want to consider going through the process yourself, as if you were a developer or a new business. This will allow you to have firsthand knowledge of the time, costs, hassles and clarity of the process.

When examining your regulatory process, be mindful not to throw the good out with the bad. Not all development is good development, and it is important that your regulatory processes reflect your long-term economic development vision so you can safeguard against detrimental projects. The key for your city is to find a balance and remove unnecessary delays and hurdles, while still preserving the integrity of the community's economic development vision and goals.

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- Are your local agencies charged with regulatory processes attuned to the needs of businesses, particularly efficiency and transparency concerns?
- Are there one-stop approvals or other ways to expedite review processes?
- How long does it take to get a new development proposal in front of a local planning board?
- Do businesses have access to clear information about local regulations from one source?
- Is there a designated city staff person who helps facilitate the process to ensure that things go smoothly?

7. Your Local Economic Development Stakeholders and Partners

A group of diverse stakeholders within and outside local government contribute to economic development. These include both large and small businesses, nonprofit organizations, workforce and training organizations, universities, department staff and many others. Economic development partnerships will likely change depending on the activity, so it is important to think strategically on a project-by-project basis about who needs to be involved and the resources they bring to the table.

Collaborative partnerships are especially important given the increased complexity and diversity of interests in economic development. Harnessing the breadth of resources, knowledge, leadership, and skills of stakeholders that may not typically interact is essential for effective implementation of your city's economic development strategies. By facilitating broader and deeper interaction among local government, business, the community, and economic development activities, local elected officials can ensure that policy decisions will be in tune with all of the other work that is happening in the community to advance the city's economic development goals.

Your local government may not always be the lead organization for an economic development project. Sometimes, the chamber of commerce might lead the way. In other instances, it might be a different community organization or business leader. But even if the city is just one stakeholder among many, local elected officials can make themselves available to help bring the right people and organizations to the table. Important roles for municipal leaders include: reaching out to the various parties; working to break down communication barriers; helping to facilitate consensus; and ultimately, coordinating and leveraging action.

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- Who are the key stakeholders (individuals, organizations, businesses, city staff) that can help strengthen your city's local economic development efforts?
- To what extent are stakeholders already communicating and working together on these issues?
- What will it take to break down any barriers that exist among key stakeholders and to get them to do more collaborative work?
- What resources do various stakeholders bring to the table in terms of financial support, people, skills, contacts and more?

Garland, Texas (population 238,651)

A critical objective of the Garland Economic Development Partnership (GEDP), in collaboration of government, school and business leaders, is the retention of key businesses in the local community. A suburb of Dallas, Garland has been characterized as a major manufacturing city since the 1950s and is home to numerous Fortune 500 corporations such as Kraft Foods, General Dynamics and Raytheon.

In 2006, the city recognized the "Garland Top 100" businesses based on their tax value, number of employees and electric usage. The city estimates that the "Garland Top 100" represent 13 percent of the local tax base and employ 17 percent of the total workforce. City of Garland Mayor Ronald Jones and GEDP staff has visited nearly all of the top 100 manufacturing companies in Garland to hear their concerns and challenges directly.

According to Jones, these visits were intended to make sure that elected officials understand and recognize business needs, and that the businesses understand that the city appreciates they are part of our community. During the meetings, the mayor and GEDP staff discussed a variety of key issues, including workforce training needs, utility costs, and public safety. As a result, the city developed the Dallas County Manufacturers' Association in collaboration with Richland College to provide specialized workforce training.

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8. The Needs of Your Local Business Community

Local businesses are essential to a stable and diverse local economy. In recent years, many cities have shifted their primary economic development focus away from attracting large firms from outside the community to growing new businesses from within and helping existing businesses survive and thrive. Local officials can help create an environment that supports the growth and expansion of local businesses.

In the case of entrepreneurs and small businesses, many fail not for lack of ideas, but on planning and management. By allocating resources for entrepreneurial and new business support services, local governments can help these businesses overcome critical barriers to success. Such services include small business development centers, entrepreneurship training, market information, networking opportunities, marketing assistance, business incubators and even financing opportunities.

Running a business is a full-time job, and even if local services are available, business leaders may be unaware of the assistance available to them. Even more likely, they may not automatically view the city as a resource or an ally. By making the effort to reach out and communicate with your local business community, whether through your local chamber of commerce, organized events or visiting businesses individually, local officials can gather input to help improve local business policies and demonstrate that the community cares about the success of their business.

It is important for local elected officials to bring the same commitment and enthusiasm to existing business as they do to new business prospects. The city often creates incentives or other policy packages to attract new employers, and celebrates a new, large company with ribbon cuttings and stories in the local media. By similarly celebrating local business accomplishments, you can show the city's support, increase the business's profile and draw attention to economic development success stories that often go unnoticed.

Additionally, by publicly highlighting the achievements of your local companies, you will build your city's reputation as a business friendly community. This, in turn, may encourage outside businesses to take a second look at your community as a desirable location, while providing existing businesses with even more reasons to stay in your jurisdiction.

When making policy decisions focused on business retention and expansion, including small business and entrepreneurial development, it is important to remember that many local businesses need time to mature and grow. Although this form of business support may not deliver an overwhelming, immediate economic impact, the benefits of staying the course with your local businesses can provide greater long-term pay-offs. These include a more diversified, stable economy, a business community with stronger local ties and maybe even the next, great Fortune 500 company.

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- What does your local government do to find out the needs of your business community?
- Who in government regularly communicates with individual businesses and the business community at large? How does this happen?
- To what extent do you celebrate milestones achieved by existing businesses in your community?
- What support services does your city offer to entrepreneurs and small businesses? What more could you do?

New York (population 8,308,163)

New York City provides an example of a successful, city-led effort to directly link workforce development and economic development. In 2003, Mayor Michael Bloomberg eliminated the NYC Department of Employment and consolidated the city's adult workforce programs with the Department of Small Business Services (SBS). The resulting program provides employment and training services for individuals and seeks to meet specific workforce needs of local businesses.

Much of the program's success has been due to a dual customer approach — focusing on meeting the needs of job seekers, as well as local businesses. In fact, SBS has developed two distinct brands associated with both customers: Workforce 1 provides individuals with job placement, training and advancement services and NYC Business Solutions provides a suite of services to support local businesses, including employee recruitment services from the pool of screened job candidates from the Workforce 1 program.

The effort has shown real results in New York City. In 2003, prior to the consolidation of the two programs, the workforce system only achieved 500 job placements. In 2009 the workforce system achieved 25,000 placements.

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9. Your Community's Economic Development Message

Strong communications and a compelling message are vital to successful economic development and a primary responsibility for local elected officials. An economic development message that is based on your community's collective vision and is conveyed by all key stakeholders will establish a consistent community "brand" and competitive identity to the outside world.

Local elected officials can use public speeches, interviews and other communications to rally the community around their economic development message. In addition to publicly promoting the message, local elected officials can work with their staff to ensure that all economic development partners have the information that they need to support the message or to accurately convey the message to others. This may be data about the economic role they play in the community, or marketing materials that they can use to engage others outside the community. These small steps go a long way in generating a positive reputation of your community.

Sometimes, cities let politics and minor disagreements about the direction of economic development affect their city's public image. This can detrimentally impact the confidence investors have in your community as a place to do business. Developers, business owners and others want to be assured that their investment in your community will have broad support among local leaders, residents and key partners. If those who impact the success of a business or economic development project are not unified, the confidence of the investor will falter. Local elected officials can help manage internal disputes and ensure that all stakeholders remain committed to the message and the vision it conveys.

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- How do you currently communicate about your city's economic development activities? To what extent are you using speeches, media interviews and other forums to highlight an economic development vision and goals?
- Does your city have a clear and consistent message about economic development for the outside world?
- How do your city's communications efforts dovetail with what other organizations in the community (e.g., the chamber of commerce) are doing? Are there ways to enhance coordination on communication activities?

10. Your Economic Development Staff

As discussed throughout the guide, local elected officials have clear and specific roles to play in their cities' efforts to build a strong local economy. However, success in filling these roles often depends on the relationship between elected officials and staff members who work on economic development issues on a daily basis.

As a local elected official, you are often the public face and the cheerleader for your city on economic development. When you are giving a speech, talking to a local business or discussing a new project with constituents, you must be prepared with the facts or run the risk of seeming uninformed and out of touch.

Staying up to date requires open and regular communications with and trust in your city's economic development staff. Your relationship with staff will enable you to gain a better understanding of the economic position of your city, changing local and regional conditions and your city's economic development plans and priorities. You will be better able to articulate economic goals to constituents and the media and make more informed policy decisions based on the most current information. This is especially important in the current economy, as city resources are scarcer and businesses and citizens alike are looking for informed leadership.

Local officials should begin building a strong relationship with economic development staff at the beginning of a political term or new project. Economic development is a complex topic; most newly elected officials may not have an in-depth understanding of the current economic policies or the city's long-term vision and strategy. By forging a relationship early on, local officials can come up to speed more quickly and be able to make better policy decisions in the long run.

It's also important to consider what expertise and knowledge you bring to the relationship that city staff may not have. Most elected officials come to office with a professional background in an area other than local government, such as banking, small business or healthcare. This can make you uniquely qualified to represent the city to important economic interests. With open communication, your city's economic development staff can become more aware of your skills and seek opportunities to use them.

Taking Action, Asking Questions

- How often do you talk to the key economic development staff in your city?
- Do you get regular updates, or "cheat sheets," about the issues, trends and successes of economic development in your city?
- What are your expectations about economic development? Have you discussed this with the economic development staff?
- What economic development issues or practices could you learn more about?

Conclusion

As an elected official, you make decisions every day that impact the future of your community. It is of critical importance that your decisions and actions support your community's vision and do not work at cross purposes with existing efforts. This is particularly true in today's rapidly changing economic environment.

You can use this guide to initiate conversations — or ask questions — with key players within your community. The first step will most likely be to initiate conversations with your economic development staff about how to best use your skills and political capital to support a strategic economic direction. Even if you are already engaged in economic development, this guide can serve as a reminder of all the leadership roles needed for economic success. It can also help you identify how your economic development role should vary over time to support the changing needs of your community and economic development stakeholders.

Your city may have all the right assets, partners and tools, but may never realize its full potential without a leader to bring all the pieces together. You have the power and the ability to do what's needed to advance the cause of successful economic development for your city.

