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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Do You Hear What New Elected Officials Are Saying about Economic Development?

By CED Guest Author

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This time of year, I travel across North Carolina orienting newly elected city

and county officials. I routinely ask why they ran for office and hear how they want to strengthen the economy or attract good jobs. New to a city council or board of commissioners, these elected officials are eager to act on their campaign promises but often have gaps in their understanding of how local government fits into a larger economic picture.

When talking about economic development, newly elected city and county officials describe what they promised to do during their campaigns, what they think local governments should do, and what they think is affecting economic development in their communities. Professional economic development staff could help local elected officials by initiating conversations to expand and deepen the local elected officials' understanding of economic development. Following are examples of what local elected officials are saying and questions professionals can use to initiate conversations with local officials.

*What is our local economic development process?* Fewer than half of the newly elected officials attending School of Government orientation programs report having local government experience before being elected. In North Carolina, an increasing number of local elected officials are retirees who have moved to the state within the last decade. In conversation, people often begin by saying, "Where I used to live (Ohio, New York, Arizona) the local government provided..." New to the state and to their roles, city and county officials may assume local governments do things they do not do. Rarely do they understand the way local government is structured or how economic development fits into the larger picture.

*How can we structure incentives for new businesses?* Local officials typically have strong opinions about their local government's economic development agenda. One county official said, "Local government should not be spending money on economic development. As far as I'm concerned, businesses should build their own roads." Still others want to leverage local government's power asking, "How do we offer incentives so businesses will come to our area." What incentives are available and how can they be used most effectively are questions on the minds of many newly elected leaders.

*How to develop the local workforce?* Local elected leaders know their communities and want to capitalize on local assets. "We have a good workforce," an elected official explained, "But our people need new types of training to get good jobs."



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Elected officials want to attract industries that fit the local culture and build on traditions. They may also have personal experience that informs their understanding of how the local economy fits into the regional, national and global economy. “I was the last one to turn out the lights after our factory was bought out,” said a newly elected councilman. Elected leaders can bring fresh ideas to the table. “We need local businesses to grow,” said an official over lunch. He then went on to talk about seeding local entrepreneurs, growing businesses and creating more diverse and unique local economies to take advantage of community resources and assets.

*What infrastructure is needed for growth?* Local government capital projects, policies and regulations can seem random and unnecessary to newly elected officials. “Why do we need a landscape ordinance?” a new official complained before learning that the city’s landscape ordinance had improved the town’s appearance, which in turn increased downtown development. Inheriting a former board’s capital commitments and debt obligations is also a difficult pill for newly elected leaders to swallow. “Why are we spending so much on a state-of-the-art training facility?” a new county commissioner protested. “We could accomplish this for a lot less money.” Newly elected officials may be unaware of the public sector’s role in economic development. In a town with leaky pipes, an official said, “We need economic development. We don’t have money to upgrade our water and sewer system.” Others prefer to reduce or eliminate local government debt rather than build infrastructure as a means to help businesses grow.

*How to fit into regional efforts?* Inexperienced officials may be surprised to learn that local governments participate in larger economic development networks. “We are part of a regional economic development effort?” one elected official asked. Newly elected officials familiar with the local economic development structures are not always happy with how it operates. “Our local EDC (Economic Development Commission) takes our money but doesn’t do what we want it to do.” Local officials can get frustrated when they learn they do not fully control the economic development process. Without knowing how quasi-public and publicly funded entities are held accountable, elected officials may believe the EDC or others are working in secret.

*How does local government budget for economic development services?* Local elected officials frequently run for office promising to reduce taxes, eliminate government debt, or shrink government’s burden on business. They bring personal experiences and existing relationships into their new roles. If an elected official has run a business successfully, he is ready to run local government in the same way. If she has a strong community network, she is indebted to her constituents and wants to make sure she fulfills their expectations. Local elected officials may not understand how their local government provides financial and administrative support for economic development. Local government’s historic, current and future economic development roles are often unclear to newly elected officials. Figuring out the economic development structure and budget are common priorities. “Do we have an economic development budget?” is a question I often hear new officials asking.

*How does our local government help existing businesses?* With limited governing experience, newly elected city and county officials typically lack an understanding of their legal requirements, authorities and limitations. They soon discover they cannot make all of the changes they wanted or operate as they did in the private sector. Newly elected officials can be overheard saying, “You mean I can’t accept those game tickets or go to that business lunch?” Local business owners who get elected routinely discover that they can no longer do business with the city or county. “I will have to lay off employees if I stay in office!” a commissioner said. New elected officials often are surprised to learn that they have to restructure their local contracts and external business relationships once they assume office.

What are your new elected officials saying about economic development?

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