



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Keeping Economic Development Goals Relevant

By CED Guest Author

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Lydian Altman is the director of the Strategic Public Leadership Initiative at the School of Government.

The troubled economy has us all searching for efficiencies and often questioning the way we do business. Many in the public sector are now focusing on how to organize — or re-organize — resources. Given the current climate, it makes sense to revisit your community's economic development goals to see if they remain relevant in the face of changing times and circumstances.

All of us seek The Answer or The Best Practice, but the truth is that each community must develop its own path depending on local circumstances, relationships, history, resources, and influences. Nevertheless, you can be better informed about your own direction by reflecting on what and how others have undertaken their work.

As a facilitator, I often get asked to help organize, design, and manage conversations where all participants want to stay fully engaged and be given equal opportunity to weigh in on important issues. This gives me some insights into the workings of many local governments. I'd like to share with you the behind-the-scenes peek in one county in North Carolina (a county experiencing medium population growth, with a highly educated workforce, a mix of rural and urban aspects, and very little industrial base) where they decided to re-examine their economic development efforts.

A Peek Behind the Curtain:

As the county manager put it, "Things are changing. Our attitudes about economic development are different, and we are looking for a model that works better for our needs and will move us in a direction to accomplish our economic development goal."

Goal: *Implement planning and economic development policies which create a balanced, dynamic local economy, and which promote diversity, sustainable growth and enhanced revenue while embracing community values.*

In years past, county officials (elected and staff) had difficulty coming to agreement about what type of economic development efforts were right for the county. In fact, some might say that their lack of agreement resulted in stagnation. But officials were determined to change that perception and move forward. As the facilitator, I met with a small subset of participants who acted as the retreat planning group. Together we crafted outcomes for their discussion and an agenda that generated the information that they needed to be strategic public leaders. Key discussion questions included:

1. What has changed that has led us to re-evaluate our goal?
2. Could economic development be accomplished in a way that was consistent with the values held by our community? How are those values reflected in our goal statement?
3. How can the goal translate into actionable items?"

The Changes: What's happened lately?



Several significant changes opened up plenty of opportunities to do things differently: the economic down turn had forced the county to down size its budget and its work force (through retirement incentives) and to rethink what services the county could deliver. Moreover, a change in leadership (a new county manager was hired, many department heads retired, and three 'new' commissioners were added to the board) resulted in "freedom from old institutional inertia." Throughout the organization, there remained an openness to re-examine how things got done internally and a willingness to take advantage of the financial crisis to make good changes.

The Balancing Act: Can we protect the environment, promote social justice and equity, ensure sound fiscal management and facilitate economic development?

The board and staff heard from School of Government experts about the trends in economic development –developing a more targeted, strategic focus and evaluating efforts, shifting away from a sole emphasis on industrial recruitment and concentrating instead on alternative approaches, and adapting organizational arrangements to reflect local needs. By focusing on the values they wanted to uphold and the goal they had set, we explored the various meanings individuals held to uncover areas of agreement and disagreement. The group also generated a list of assets that they wished to strengthen and build on in any of their endeavors. Although some tensions and differences remained, spending time exploring in depth each others' viewpoints aided their understanding and uncovered many areas where the board and staff was in agreement about the direction the county should take in their economic development efforts. As one veteran commissioner put it, "I'm very excited about this retreat. I think we've never really talked about economic development in this way, understanding that we don't have to pit one goal against another. It all works together, and one thing that's been illuminated for me is that we have so many of the pieces already...we just need to put them together."

The To Do List: Taking Action

Instead of listing what they could not do or did not want, the board decided to think about what they wanted more of in their community. For the immediate future, the board decided to focus on retaining existing businesses because existing businesses are a big resource and the county places a high value on home-grown business. At the same time, they knew they needed to prepare for (light) industrial growth so they directed staff to get started with infrastructure improvements in previously-designated areas. Finally, the board directed staff to review policies and procedures that set up unnecessary roadblocks for potential new businesses to locate.

At the conclusion of this first of many conversations about economic development, perhaps the most important emerging theme was a change in attitude amongst commissioners. It's clear that the tide had shifted from, "Let's use regulations to keep out businesses/industries we don't want" to a desire to build on the strengths and assets the County already has in place: "Let's decide what kind of development we do want and prepare our County for those."

What next?

The economic crunch has sharpened the County's focus on economic development as a way to sustain the quality of life the community has enjoyed. Eighteen months later, commissioners continue to work on defining more proactive, deliberate strategies and to answering the question of, "What kinds of businesses do we want to recruit?" And they are equally deliberate in communicating with the public about the Board's economic development plans and discussions. They want everyone to know that they are 'open for business' that is consistent with their values and they are striving to articulate clearly that message. Finally, board and staff are assessing the trade-offs of organizing their efforts in new and different ways by questioning.

In what ways do you think your community can benefit from a review of the relevancy of its economic development goals?