

Economic Development Trends Ignite Success

Economic development is the heartbeat that can break or make a city or county worth living in. Over the years, the importance of economic success is more vital today than ever in that innovative trends have emerged. Among those trends are public and private partnerships, regionalism and more focus on workforce development.

The traditional approach to economic development has been through grants and infrastructure enhancement, while those approaches are still needed, other ways of "doing business" have proven to give municipalities a stronger competitive edge.

Across the United States, many municipalities are forming public-private partnerships with their own chambers of commerce or others outside their regions that have stronger influence.

The first example leads us to the Area Development Partnership located in Hattiesburg, MS. This is a dual mission organization that serves as a chamber of commerce and economic development organization for three counties: Forrest, Lamar, and Perry along with two cities: Petal and Hattiesburg.

Angie Dvorak, President of ADP, remarks, "We have always had a regional-oriented focus from the start. Our organization has partners in southwest Alabama, the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and Louisiana. We are also a 501(c 6) non-profit corporation with professional service contracts with a number of public entities allowing us to work on their behalf."

She said there are 2 major reasons why public-private partnerships and regionalism are successful: "when you maximize your resources, you create a seamless presence for your customer and cities and counties that have limited resources ...they need to do more on less, so joining resources to reach a common goal is necessary."

"Secondly, when people are looking at a community where they want to live or a company wants to build a plant in a certain location...they look at viability. Getting as much information as possible and presenting your community as one big package with all the benefits is very attractive to newcomers and regionalism allows you to do that."

According to Dvorak, articulating and explaining how new opportunities in one area benefit the whole region is an ongoing challenge. It often means one of the local governments will have to provide funds to support these new opportunities, so showing them their return on investment is vital.

Last year a new partnership emerged between Washington County and the city of Mobile, AL. It was Washington County, a rural community, that first approached Mobile Chamber of Commerce about this partnership and concluded that it would be the best route to take. Thus, the Washington County Economic Development Initiative was established.

"Although these types of partnerships are not a new concept, it is a unique one," said Joey Grisham, Economic Developer with the Washington County Economic Development Initiative. "It is unique because I have been able to spend one to two days in Mobile every week, which allows me to be heavily involved in the partnership that ultimately allows both organizations to sell our region successfully."

According to Grisham, Washington County has three major industries that include 2 chemical companies: Ciba Geigy (employs 950), Olin Industries (employs 300), and Tate and Lyle,

which manufactures Splenda (employs 150). Over the next 10 years, he expects major industrial and residential development as a result of this public private partnership.

Many would say that rural and urban areas are very different but they are very much alike because both want to expand their economies. With this partnership, it brings both communities together.

"The advantage is that our rural community can utilize the resources of the Mobile Chamber of Commerce and many don't have that access, this gives us a 'leg up' on the competition," said Grisham.

"This is a huge step in the right direction as far as goals for regionalism," said Bill Sisson, Vice President of Economic Development for the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce. "I am a firm believer to compete globally you must cooperate regionally. This relationship allows us to fortunately do just that."

Workforce development continues to grow as an effect of public and private partnerships like those mentioned above. Many companies are looking for the best attributes a community has to offer.

Companies like Honda and Toyota, have found their locations in places like Lincoln, AL and San Antonio, TX. This is due to cities, counties, and Chambers of Commerce working together to offer premier community packages.

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