

Positioning Communities and Sub-State Regions for Economic Improvement

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Historically, most economic development planning and programming in the U.S. has been done by federal and state levels of government and policymaking. Local economic development programs largely involved hiring someone who understood these programs and could tap into their funding. But this is changing.

“The primary responsibility for designing and implementing economic development activities must rest with states, regions, and localities. The federal government, by itself, cannot have an enduring impact on economic conditions in the widely different communities and regions throughout the country.”

“At the sub-state level there’s a search underway for “middle ground” – a regional level more encompassing than a single city or county, but smaller than the state – for devising and pursuing effective strategies for economic improvement and sustainability.”

- *A Path to Smarter Economic Development*, National Academy of Public Administration, Washington, D.C.

Wide economic diversity from place to place ... the need for more effective strategies for economic improvement that reflect area strengths, weaknesses, and values ... and fundamental changes in the economy itself .. are shifting the responsibility for economic development planning and programming from federal and state governments to sub-state regional and local levels.

Local leaders and decision makers cannot “remake” their local economies. The economy is bigger than communities and many forces and factors shaping directions in it operate at the supra-community level. But what you can do is better *position* yourself – your businesses, governments, schools, work forces, families, etc. – for anticipated future growth and change in the economy.

Framework for Community and Regional Economic Positioning

Pursue Economic Improvement at Sub-State Levels To be successful, economic development initiatives must reflect underlying and emerging area strengths and weaknesses. So, economic development strategies and approaches must vary from place to place. Don't look for "one-size-fits-all" state-wide approaches.

Get your "region" right Pursuing economic development city-by-city or county-by-county is difficult. Influencing area economic conditions and trends in positive ways requires capacity, best achieved at the regional level, by people, businesses, and communities occupying common sub-state economic regions working together.

Know that Economic Development is more than Business Development It's more than business retention, expansion, and sometimes recruitment – all traditional focuses of ED. But it also entails strategic decisions and plans regarding **infrastructure** and **housing**, **workforce development** and **education** more generally, and **area planning**.

Build Structures and Networks for Public-Private Leadership Interaction and Development Build and nurture a network of people and organizations, cutting across private and public spheres, to sustain discussions about economic development and to sustain efforts and initiatives coming from these discussions. *The Big Table*

Regionally Develop Healthy Urban-Rural, Community-to-Community Partnerships Within real economic regions, the economy does not recognize bounds of urban and rural. It operates across them. Partnerships for area economic improvement also must cross lines of urban and rural, while respecting and recognizing important differences in each. Build around areas of mutual need and benefit. Build trust by working together.

Become a "Learning Community" and a "Learning Region" Area economic development is never finally attained. It can only be pursued. It is a constant matter of attempting to position yourself – your businesses, organizations, workers, families, schools, etc. – for future change. Positioning for change requires constant learning, systematically pursued by key area leadership and the larger community.

Agree upon a Compelling and Realistic Vision for the Future *Imagine* where you want to be in the future, taking stock of where you are today and where you were in the past. *Visualize* what you want your community and region to look like. Identify steps and measures lying between where you are now and where you want to be in the future and pursue them in deliberative, inter-coordinated and sustained ways. Make course corrections as necessary.