

## Building a Welcoming Economy

*How Local Economic Development Can Support Immigrant Business Owners, Investors and Entrepreneurs*

## Implementing Long-Term Inclusion Initiatives

*How to Develop and Sustain Meaningful Economic Inclusion Efforts*

## Creating a Website for Success

*Tools for a Responsive, Innovative Website*

## Powerful Redevelopment

*100-year-old Power Plant Powerhouse Brings New Energy to Sustainable Student Center*

## Planting the Speed in Iowa

*Expanding Broadband to Prepare for the Future*

## Steps to Revitalizing Hamilton's Downtown

*Added Challenge of Surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic*



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## INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

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# dear colleague



Tom Kucharski, CEcD  
IEDC Chair of the Board of  
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I am deeply honored to have been selected as IEDC's board chair in 2021. I am looking forward to continuing the great work of the 2020 chair, Kenny McDonald, with the strong leadership of the IEDC Governance Committee at my side. I am also proud that our board membership demonstrates IEDC's commitment to diversity in terms of age, gender, race, and geographical location.

2020 was no ordinary year in many ways. We faced the triumvirate of a deadly pandemic, a racial reckoning and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Thanks to the strong leadership of Kenny McDonald and the board in partnership with Jeff Finkle and the IEDC staff, IEDC marshalled resources to help its members confront these challenges. IEDC has responded in ways that kept the organization on solid footing while tirelessly working to help our community of economic developers. One of my priorities will be to continue to provide communities with the tools to help their economies recover and prosper while the effects of COVID-19 on the economy persist.

A second priority during my term is to make meaningful, measurable progress in addressing the chronic and worsening racial and social inequities in the global economy. This past year as the country reeled in response to ongoing systemic racism, a special committee of over 50 economic developers was convened to examine racism within economic development and identify tangible measures for addressing these issues. I plan to continue this work to tackle racial and social inequity.

A third priority during my term is to address one of the existential crises of our time: climate change. I plan to help us navigate the challenges and learn to take advantage of the long-term economic and environmental benefits of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. This transition must be in our future if we want to preserve the health of the planet, and the health of its economy, for future generations.

We look forward to connecting and collaborating with a new federal administration. I believe that economic development is a team sport, and it is crucial that we all come together to tackle these key issues of recovery, equity, and climate change.

IEDC achieved many successes this past year, such as quickly pivoting to offering a wide variety of virtual learning opportunities. This included weekly webinars which have convened thousands of economic developers and stakeholders since last March, as well as successfully holding our first ever remote Annual Conference and transitioning our disaster recovery program to virtual technical assistance. With your support, we will continue to provide leadership and promote excellence in economic development for our communities, members, and partners.

Our success in overcoming the challenges of this past year is thanks to the dedication, passion, and hard work of our diverse members. I look forward to working with you in 2021, and to leading IEDC's exciting next steps as the world's preeminent economic development membership body.

Sincerely,

Tom Kucharski, CEcD  
IEDC Chair of the Board of Directors

# The IEDC Economic Development Journal

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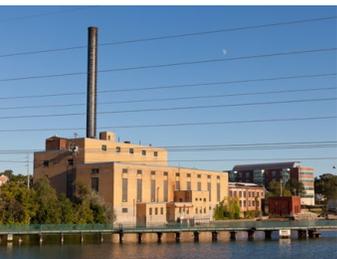
by Steve Tobocman

Across the U.S., immigrants are helping to revive economies as small business owners, startup founders, high-tech employees and exporters. Organizations like Global Detroit and the Neighborhood Development Center in Minneapolis/St. Paul have developed successful immigrant-inclusive economic development strategies. Their work offers lessons and approaches that are replicable in cities and communities of all sizes.

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by Beth Robinson

Uptown Consortium, Inc. (UCI) launched its economic inclusion initiatives to ensure that existing residents benefitted from new development in Cincinnati's Uptown neighborhoods. This article shares examples of success, how efforts are measured, and how organizations can implement a similar strategy. UCI received IEDC's Gold Award in Economic Equity and Inclusion.



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### Creating a Website for Success ..... 20 *Tools for a Responsive, Innovative Website*

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Many economic development organizations struggle with their online presence. There are several key aspects your organization needs to consider with your site such as the visitor's experience, the information you want to convey, and being purposeful in updating your content. This article aims to give you the information you need as you develop or review your own economic development website.



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by Judy Lam

Hamilton is a mid-size city in Ontario, Canada. This article reveals the steps that Hamilton took to successfully revitalize its downtown. Now with a new challenge – the impact of the pandemic – the city has acted quickly with actions that it hopes will assist in the survival and recovery of small businesses that are crucial to the success of downtowns.

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# building a welcoming

## ECONOMY

By Steve Tobocman

### INTRODUCTION

**H**aiyen and Neeson Vang met when they were just 15 years old, while growing up in Minneapolis off of Lake Street during the 1990s. The neighborhood was run down and crime was commonplace. Haiyen and Neeson, both immigrants from South Asia, experienced the effects of that environment. “We were the children from a neighborhood that was a bit forgotten,” Neeson said. Haiyen adds, “As teenagers we both skipped school...we gave our parents a hard time and didn’t do what we should have done.”

Haiyen and Neeson both dropped out of high school. Interested in clothes and fashion, they worked in retail and experienced frustration that the clothes they bought at the clearance racks of local stores were out of style. They conceived of a store where the latest fashions would be priced under \$10, but they didn’t know where to turn for advice. They heard about a series of business planning courses in their neighborhood offered by Northside

The Vangs’ story is not unique. Across the U.S., immigrants are helping to revive economies as small business owners, startup founders, and STEM and high-tech employees. Recognizing the benefits of growing immigrant populations, a handful of leading economic development organizations has sought to build immigrant-inclusive strategies, policies and practices into their work.

Economic Opportunities Network, a local community development corporation, in partnership with the Neighborhood Development Center (NDC), a regional entrepreneurial development organization, and decided to attend.

From that series of courses, The Clearance Rack was born. Haiyen and Neeson not only received coaching on creating their business plan, but were able to obtain a character-based microloan from NDC. They opened their first store within the year.

The Vangs might never have pursued their small business idea, but for a program that reached out and supported their entrepreneurial ideas, that was accessible to them, and that was intentional about including people like them into its efforts. “We came to NDC with bad credit, no education...and they believed in our idea and they believed in us – most importantly they believed in us,” says Haiyen.

Fifteen years later, NDC’s investment in the Vangs has paid off – for the Vangs and for the community. The couple has opened four additional stores across the Minneapolis metro area and they provide jobs for more than 20 employees, offering full-time employees benefits like paid time off and training.

The Vangs’ story is not unique. Across the U.S., immigrants are helping to revive economies as small business owners, startup founders, and STEM and high-tech employees. Recognizing the benefits of growing immigrant populations, a handful of leading economic development organizations has sought to build immigrant-inclusive strategies, policies and practices into their work. This article details lessons learned from this emergent field of immigrant-inclusive economic development, as well as steps to adopt such practices in other economic development organizations seeking to support immigrant business owners.

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**Steve Tobocman** is the founding executive director of Global Detroit, a regional economic and community development organization making Detroit and Southeast Michigan more equitable and prosperous through immigrant inclusion.

He also led the creation and growth of the Welcoming Economies Global Network, a 10-state regional network of immigrant economic development initiatives. (steve.tobocman@gmail.com)

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### HOW LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CAN SUPPORT IMMIGRANT BUSINESS OWNERS, INVESTORS AND ENTREPRENEURS

*Across the U.S., immigrants are helping to revive economies as small business owners, startup founders, high-tech employees and exporters. A handful of leading economic development organizations has sought to build immigrant-inclusive strategies, policies and practices into their work. Organizations like Global Detroit and the Neighborhood Development Center in Minneapolis/St. Paul have developed successful immigrant-inclusive economic development strategies. Their work offers lessons and approaches that are replicable in cities and communities of all sizes.*

## WHY IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS MATTER

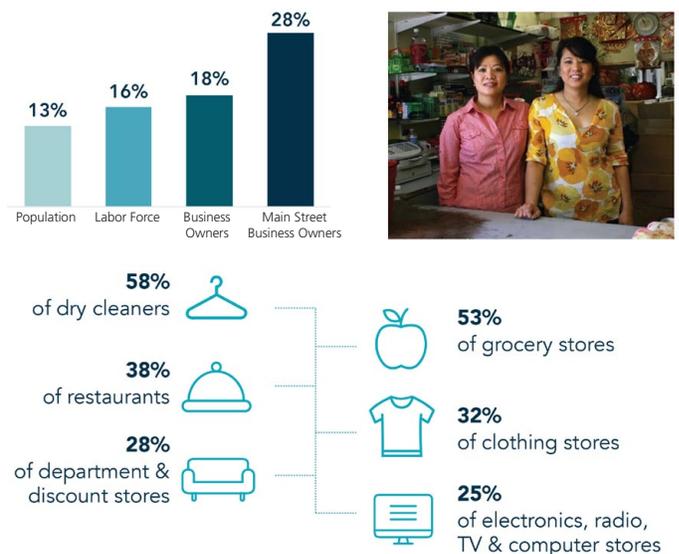
Immigrant entrepreneurs have long been central to the American economic experience. Since the nation's founding, immigrant companies have had tremendous impact on the American economy. In fact, of the Fortune 500 firms in America, 223 (or 44.6%) were founded by immigrants or their first-generation children. These firms, including Ford Motor Company, Dow, The Home Depot, Google, Intel and eBay, employ 13.5 million workers worldwide and grossed \$6.1 trillion in 2018. If these companies were their own country, their annual economic output would rank 3rd in the world, only behind the U.S. and China.

Today, immigrants comprise roughly 13% of America's population (a percentage that continued to grow, even under President Trump) and account for over 20% of the business owners. According to the New American Economy, in 2017, 3.1 million immigrant-owned businesses in the U.S. grossed \$1.3 trillion and employed 8 million American workers. In fact, if immigrant entrepreneurs in the U.S. were their own country, they would comprise the 15th largest economy in the world, just behind Russia and not far behind Canada in total output. The growth of immigrant businesses in the U.S. has accelerated over the last 25 years, while the number of businesses started by U.S.-born entrepreneurs has declined.

Small businesses account for nearly 45% of economic activity and jobs in the United States, and job growth data shows that smaller and younger businesses hire more workers than do larger and older firms, regardless of the economic reality outside their doors. Main Street businesses – such as grocery stores, restaurants and retail shops – are considered important to the revitalization or stabilization of urban commercial districts and communities. Census research suggests that while 28% of all Main Street businesses across the nation are immigrant-owned, 58% of dry cleaners, 53% of grocery stores, 38% of restaurants and 32% of clothing stores are immigrant-owned.<sup>1</sup>

The growth of immigrant businesses in the U.S. has accelerated over the last 25 years, while the number of businesses started by U.S.-born entrepreneurs has declined.

## Immigrants Power America's Main Streets



Source: Bringing Vitality to Main Street: How Immigrant Small Businesses Help Local Economies Grow, Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) analysis of Americas Society/Council of the Americas (AS/COA) 2013 5-year data

Small Main Street businesses have been especially hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, and our nation's economic recovery hinges on the success of these businesses. If we are indeed to have a robust recovery, we will need to ensure that these immigrant Main Street business owners can access the programs, supports and resources necessary to weather the pandemic.

Immigrants contribute significantly to economic growth in the technology sector as well – they launch startups and help meet high-tech companies' talent needs. A series of studies by Vivek Wadhwa looking into the role of immigrants in tech startups over the last two decades reveal that one in four American tech startups was founded by an immigrant founder or co-founder. In Silicon Valley, 43% of the firms created between 2005 and 2015 had an immigrant founder or co-founder (down from 52% in the prior decade). By 2017 the U.S. had produced 110 "unicorns" – venture-backed firms valued at over \$1 billion – and half of these "unicorns" had at least one immigrant founder.<sup>2</sup>

Immigrant-owned businesses are also leaders of our nation's trade and export economy. Many regional economic development strategies include export, trade and even foreign investment strategies. Surprisingly few, however, actually include immigrant communities – immigrant businesses, ethnic chambers and other immigrant institutions – in the execution of these strategies. Yet, according to the New American Economy, immigrant-owned businesses comprise 50.5% of all the American firms that earn more than half their revenues from exports.

## Immigrant Business Owners



**3.1 million**  
immigrant entrepreneurs, 2017

**8.0 million**  
people employed at immigrant-owned businesses, 2017

**\$1.3 trillion**  
total sales of immigrant-owned businesses, 2017

GLOBAL DETROIT

## THE GROWING MOVEMENT OF LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS EMBRACING IMMIGRANT-INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

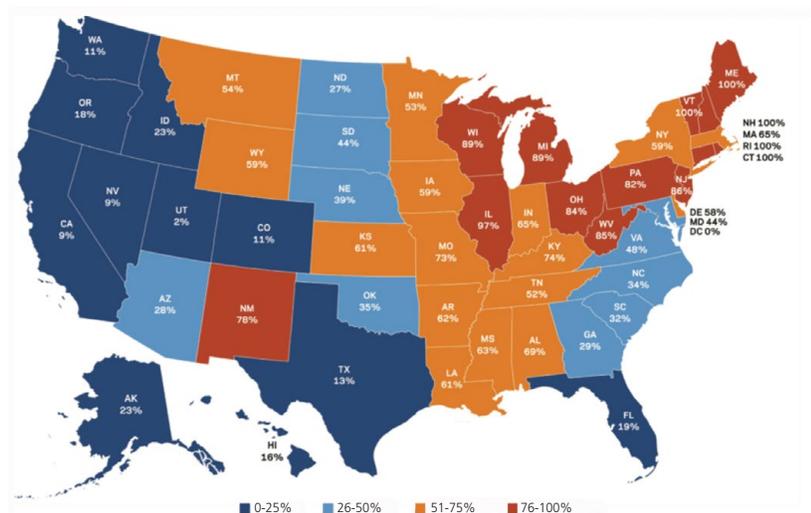
Global Detroit was formed in 2009 when the New Economy Initiative – a collaboration of regional foundations that pooled \$100 million in philanthropic investment to restart Southeast Michigan’s economy after a decade of lost auto and manufacturing jobs and amidst one of the nation’s regions hardest hit by the foreclosure crisis – and the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce joined forces to strategize ways to make the contributions of immigrants a more intentional part of our region’s economic growth. The resulting “Global Detroit Study” detailed the enormously positive contributions that immigrants, immigrant workers and immigrant businesses make in Metro Detroit, a region whose population contains a lower percentage of immigrants than the national average. The study included a strategy plan with 11 separate initiatives which Global Detroit and numerous partners have been implementing and refining over the last decade.

In the three years following Global Detroit’s launch in 2010, nearly a dozen key Midwest communities launched their own economic development initiatives that sought to better include immigrants in local, regional and state economic development plans and programs, including Cleveland, Dayton, Pittsburgh, St. Louis and Toledo, as well as within the State of Michigan’s government plans and programs. In 2013, representatives from eleven of these programs assembled in Detroit to discuss strategies and compare notes in what would become a multi-state network, the Welcoming Economies (WE) Global Network, spanning from Syracuse to St. Louis. The WE Global Network is a program of Welcoming America, run in partnership with Global Detroit, that assists local economic development agencies, state and local government, chambers and others in building more immigrant-inclusive economies.

In addition to valuing the contributions of immigrant businesses, many economic development organizations are investing in immigrant-inclusive economic development strategies, policies, practices and programs to support immigrant talent. For a majority of economic regions in America, immigration remains the most promising prospect for sustaining a rapidly aging workforce. In fact, according to the Economic Innovation Group, 80% of U.S. counties, with a combined total population of 149 million Americans, have lost prime working age population (people aged 25-54) over the past decade

It’s estimated that by 2037, two-thirds of U.S. counties will have fewer prime working age residents than they did in 1997. Immigrants are more likely to be of prime working age and are an important source of labor for communities with talent shortages and challenges.

Share of 2017 population living in a county that lost prime working age population 2007-2017



There are more than a half-dozen states, including Michigan and Ohio, that have created a state office for New Americans that, in part, emphasizes and acts upon economic inclusion of the state's immigrant community. These state offices collaborate through a loose national network.

as World Education Services, Upwardly Global, and the Welcome Back Initiative, provide technical assistance to local workforce, education, government and talent initiatives to help skilled immigrant professionals receive their credentials and/or connect with unmet talent opportunities. Other members, like the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education, help local communities develop immigrant-inclusive strategies for upskilling local immigrant workforce.

Finally, state and local governments have witnessed a rapid expansion in programs and initiatives to build immigrant-inclusion into economic development plans and strategies. There are more than a half-dozen states, including Michigan and Ohio, that have created a state office for New Americans that, in part, emphasizes and acts upon economic inclusion of the state's immigrant community. These state offices collaborate through a loose national network. Observers expect that the Biden Administration will only further economic inclusion efforts and communities that have established organizations, initiatives, programs and policies to support immigrant businesses, immigrant workforce and immigrant communities will have a competitive advantage in working with any federal efforts. In fact, the Biden campaign position on immigration included a call for creating a federal Office for New Americans based upon plans developed under the Obama Administration.

## HOW DO LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS SUPPORT IMMIGRANT BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURS?

### • Supporting Immigrant Small Businesses

As noted, immigrants play an important and growing role in small business creation and growth, owning as much as 30-50+% of small businesses in select industries, like grocery stores, restaurants, clothing and discount stores. Many local economic development organizations offer technical assistance, access to capital and one-on-one coaching for small businesses, but these programs often do not connect with large numbers of immigrant business owners. Small business programs that have been successful in stabilizing and growing immigrant-owned businesses typically contain the following elements:

#### *Language Access and Cultural Competence*

To reach a broader immigrant audience, small business support programs often start with **language access**

and **cultural competence**. For instance, NDC provides its basic business planning program, Plan It, in five separate languages (English, Hmong, Oromo, Somali and Spanish), including written course packs in these languages with course leaders who are fluent and from the communities where they train. NDC's lending staff is similarly diverse. Moreover, NDC partners with dozens of local community organizations, some of whom focus on business development, but many of whom are simply active voices in their neighborhoods, such as a mosque or church.

The results are extraordinary. Over the last 27 years, NDC has trained more than 2,000 aspiring immigrant entrepreneurs through a rigorous 11-session business planning course (in addition to over 2,000 African-American entrepreneurs and over 350 Native American entrepreneurs); they have lent over \$13 million to 443 immigrant business owners; and provided thousands of hours of technical assistance to hundreds of immigrant businesses. And like the Vangs mentioned at the outset, these immigrant businesses have created thousands of jobs and breathed life into disinvested neighborhoods.

#### *Trusted Connectors*

For many immigrant business owners, receiving assistance from the government or a nonprofit economic development organization is indeed a foreign concept. In their home countries, business is often conducted in ways that seek to avoid government attention. Immigrant communities can often be distrustful of large institutions, including colleges, universities, and downtown offices and reluctant to share personal information about their business needs or even success to outsiders. NDC and many leading economic development organizations, thus, invest in **trusted connectors** who are known and respected within these immigrant business communities. For NDC, it's the local partner who recruits aspiring entrepreneurs and hosts the 11 sessions for the Plan It course.

In Detroit, the New Economy Initiative (NEI) also has pioneered the use of **trusted connectors**. In 2014, NEI started five years of annual business expansion grants to small businesses operating in underserved communities in Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park. Disappointed with the number of applications from the Latinx/Hispanic community, NEI and its partner, the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, approached Global Detroit to help market the program. Global Detroit hired local bilingual

NDC and many leading economic development organizations, thus, invest in **trusted connectors** who are known and respected within these immigrant business communities. For NDC, it's the local partner who recruits aspiring entrepreneurs and hosts the 11 sessions for the Plan It course.

As local economic development organizations strategize on how to assist small businesses in surviving the continuing COVID pandemic it will be critical that they be able to reach immigrant small businesses with the array of grant and loan programs available. Investing in trusted connectors – and compensating them for their invaluable services – is a quick way to enhance a local economic development organization’s or financial institution’s or local government’s capacity to serve and meaningfully include immigrant small businesses.

residents to canvass the retail shopping main streets in the Latinx/Hispanic neighborhood and increased minority business owner applications from the core target zip code by 350% in that first year of engagement. By the fifth year of the program, Global Detroit’s method of hiring local bilingual residents to canvass their local business corridors in the Bangladeshi, Yemeni, Latinx/Hispanic and African communities accounted for over 20% of all applications, all finalists, and all awards made by NEI (in a city that is only 7% foreign-born).

Trusted connectors can range from local ethnic business associations to individuals who are well networked within a specific immigrant business community or even a faith leader or institution. Deploying such a connector can be a critical and early step to increasing participation of immigrant small businesses.

As local economic development organizations strategize on how to assist small businesses in surviving the continuing COVID pandemic it will be critical that they be able to reach immigrant small businesses with the array of grant and loan programs available. Investing in trusted connectors – and compensating them for their invaluable services – is a quick way to enhance a local economic development organization’s or financial institution’s or local government’s capacity to serve and meaningfully include immigrant small businesses.

### Access to Capital

NDC’s model of assisting small businesses has been replicated across more than a dozen cities – including Anchorage, Detroit, Fayetteville, Houston, Miami, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Philadelphia, St. Cloud (MN), Syracuse, Wilmington/Dover/Claymont (DE) – through the Build from Within Alliance. A core component of the model is creating **access to capital** for immigrant entrepreneurs. For a variety of reasons, many immigrant small business owners struggle to access traditional financing. Some have not established personal credit histories. Others exist in a largely cash economy. Others find accessing

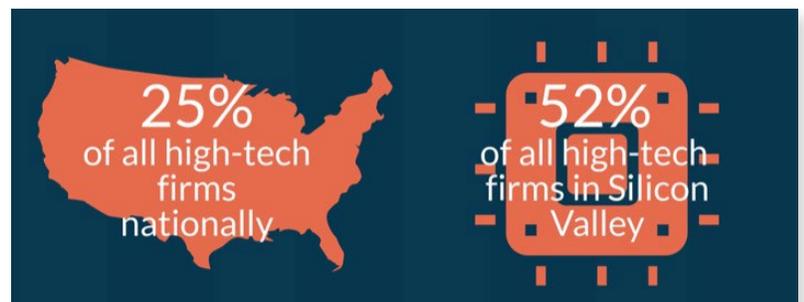
capital from family and community networks to be easier than using banks and, once such informal lending starts, it becomes harder to establish business credit histories. And others work in informal economies because of their cultural distrust of government interference.

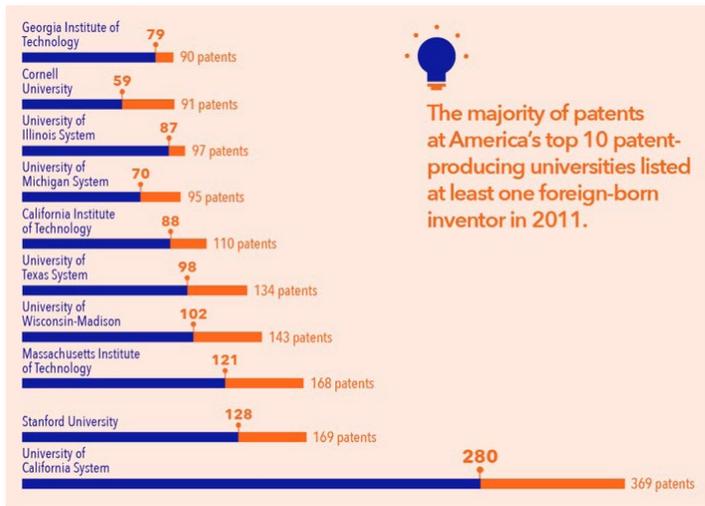
Build from Within Alliance members ensure that every aspiring entrepreneur who graduates from a series of rigorous business planning courses (often provided over three to four months) is offered the opportunity to seek character-based lending that prioritizes the entrepreneurs’ potential over their credit history, collateral or wealth. As a result, over the last two years, across the Build from Within Alliance, nearly 150 African, Asian, and Latinx/Hispanic business owners, over half of whom were extremely-low or low-income, were lent some \$1.5 million in micro-loans, creating or retaining an estimated 300 or more jobs. These loans are recorded to begin the process of building the borrowers’ credit and over time these entrepreneurs hope to mature and grow in ways that will enable them to utilize more conventional business lending programs.

- **Building a High-Growth Tech and Startup Economy**

Immigrants have been at the helm of roughly 25% of the high-tech firms launched in the U.S. over the past two decades and at the center of roughly half of the most successful of these firms, venture-backed companies in the U.S. now valued at over \$1 billion (so-called “unicorns”). Yet, there are still barriers that many immigrant high-tech founders face in launching their dream company in the U.S. America does not possess a “startup visa” that nearly a dozen nations like Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany and others offer to high-tech founders. Without this tool – which would need to be created in federal immigration laws – numerous potential high-tech founders need to look elsewhere to launch their startup companies.

International students, who comprise half of the immigrant unicorn founders, often run into this barrier when seeking to launch startups. There are roughly one million international students at American colleges and universities and they predominate the STEM fields, especially among graduate degree programs. In fact, international students comprise 81% of all graduate degree students in electrical engineering at U.S. colleges and universities and 79% of all graduate degree students in computer science, while comprising 40% to 60% of most





of the other STEM graduate degree programs.<sup>3</sup> While at their universities, international students and faculty are central to the scientific research, estimated to play a role in 75% of the research teams listed on IT, pharmaceutical drugs, and molecular biology patents filed by colleges and universities.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, after helping to invent patentable technological innovations, international students are unable to launch new companies in the U.S. based on the technology they just invented. U.S. visa laws do not give them that option.

A promising program at more than a dozen universities offers a solution by launching Global Entrepreneurs in Residence (Global EIR) programs that can activate new pathways of research commercialization, leverage intellectual capital sitting on the shelf, and follow rising trends of academia-enabled entrepreneurship by investing in new local internship and job opportunities in the innovation ecosystem. Global EIR, a national nonprofit, partners with universities to connect entrepreneurs with visas and allow them to grow their companies locally through a service commitment to the local community.

Global Detroit, with generous support from the William Davidson Foundation, has worked with Global EIR and partnered with both the University of Michigan and Wayne State University to bring the program to Southeast Michigan, supporting visas for eight founders across seven companies, including Ashok Seetharam, co-founder of PAXAFE. Ashok is a serial entrepreneur who came to the U.S. from India to attain a master's degree in biomedical engineering from Brown University. Ashok was living in Milwaukee when PAXAFE, an early stage startup that uses AI and Internet of Things (IoT) technology to decrease risk in business-to-business shipments and enable dynamic cargo insurance, began to take off. His student visa was set to expire and by connecting with a part-time job at the University of Michigan's Economic Growth Institute where he coaches other startups, Ashok and his business partner were able to continue the growth and development of PAXAFE, raising another \$650,000 in pre-seed funding and hiring four Michigan tech workers and interns.

A recent Global EIR initiative with the National League of Cities has brought several local economic development programs and mayors into the fold of pioneering this strategy to assist immigrant startup founders.

But it's not just founders who power high-tech startups. Successful high-tech companies need high-tech talent. In fact, so does much of corporate America. The demand for IT, biotech, health care, industrial and engineering talent remains fierce. And increasingly, local economic development agencies are looking to immigrants and international students to fill unmet talent needs.

As mentioned earlier, members of the IMPRINT network assist local economic development agencies, state and local government and other local talent initiatives to help skilled immigrant professionals attain the necessary credentials and soft skills to fill unmet talent needs. A December 2016 report from NAE, the Migration Policy Institute and World Education Services (WES) noted that almost half of the adult immigrants to the U.S. from 2011-2015 possessed at least a four-year college degree or its equivalent, yet this talent pool was at least 33% more likely than their U.S.-born counterparts to be unemployed or working in low-paying jobs that did not fully utilize their skills. Nationally, the report estimated this group of two million immigrant professionals to signify nearly \$40 billion in lost wages and over \$10 billion in lost tax revenues over a five-year period. These are talented and ambitious Americans who need no visa sponsorship.

Michigan has been a leader in addressing this so-called "brain waste." The state has developed licensing and credentialing guides for 44 occupations to help foreign-trained and educated Michiganders attain their professional licenses and credentials critical to working in their field. Through the Michigan International Talent Solutions (MITS) program, the State Office of Global Michigan has previously assisted hundreds of skilled immigrant professionals attain their licenses and credentials and connect with unmet talent needs in the economy. MITS has worked closely with Upwardly Global and WES Global Talent Bridge in developing its program.



Global Detroit's Millie Chu works with Ashok Seetharam of PAXAFE, a Global EIR startup co-founder, and Ilya Preston, co-founder and CEO of PAXAFE.

International students represent a second source of tech talent that has largely gone unnoticed by economic development, talent, workforce and HR practitioners. Yet, as noted, international students account for more than half of all the graduate students studying at U.S. colleges and universities in critical STEM fields. Many employers do not realize that these students are entitled to one year of optional practical training (OPT) after graduation, allowing them to work for U.S. companies without any visa application fees or delays. For students in STEM fields, this can be extended two additional years if the employer utilizes the federal E-Verify systems and provides additional professional training. During those three years, the employer can seek to apply for an H-1B visa for the OPT worker if they seek a longer-term employment relationship, which actually would give employers four chances to win the H-1B lottery if they were connected to the international student during their final year of student enrollment.

In 2011, Global Detroit helped launch the Global Talent Retention Initiative (GTRI) in partnership with the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Wayne State University and several other schools, as well as with the Detroit Regional Chamber, Automation Alley and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. The nation's first international student retention program, GTRI conducts semi-annual job fairs and has connected some 4,000 international students with over 100 Michigan employers. More recently, GTRI has developed a Global Talent Accelerator to intensively prepare a small cohort of graduating international students with the soft skills they need to secure OPT jobs and succeed with domestic employers. Similar programs now exist in St. Louis and Cleveland. Local economic development agencies wishing to launch their own program can begin with simple events that connect international students with local companies and legal workshops led by local immigration attorneys that can educate employers about the OPT and H-1B processes.

- **Expanding Your Export, Trade and Foreign-Direct Investment Activity**

The value of exports and imports makes up approximately 25% of the U.S. economy. As noted here, according to NAE, 50.5% of the firms that make half or more of their revenues from exports are immigrant owned. In fact, economists have estimated that on average, a 10% increase in immigrants to the United States increases U.S. exports to their country of origin by 4.7%. Yet, local trade and FDI plans are largely devoid of engagement of local immigrant businesses and communities.

The development of intentional and proactive policies to utilize diaspora communities as part of a region's local economic development, growth and trade strategies and programs has been an anomaly. That is both good and bad news for local economic development leaders and strategists. The good news is that there are many unexplored opportunities, low-hanging fruit and easy to implement practices to better include diaspora communities into the local economic fabric. The bad news is that there are few well-developed models from which to borrow. We are largely in new and uncharted waters, but waters rich with opportunity.

- **Building Immigrant Inclusion into Your Local Economic Development Efforts**

Launching new strategies, policies, programs and practices to support immigrant business owners, investors and entrepreneurs need not feel overwhelming or expensive. Developing an immigrant inclusive economic development strategy works best when it is centered upon a local economic development organization's existing goals and aspirations. Outcomes are most significant when inclusive strategies align with local data (e.g., international student retention strategies work best when there are large international student populations at local universities), as well as when they include immigrant voices and strong local partners, such as trusted connectors who can connect local immigrant businesses to opportunities.

An organization looking to develop an immigrant inclusive strategy might start by reviewing current priorities and programs. Next, it can be helpful to study models worth emulating, as well as looking at the data and local knowledge concerning existing immigrant populations, businesses, talent pools, etc. Inclusive economic development practices can start with efforts as simple as reaching out to immigrant business owners and communities and can evolve to established programs that engage trusted connectors, translate small business resources and even fund a Global EIR program for immigrant startups at a local university. Building an inclusion strategy into economic development programs expands the business community and talent pools contributing to the effort.

## TAKEAWAYS

**Immigrant-owned businesses are critical and growing enterprises.** Immigrant business owners make up more than one in four "Main Street" businesses (and more than one in two in certain industries) and predominate the technology and startup sectors. Over the last

Launching new strategies, policies, programs and practices to support immigrant business owners, investors and entrepreneurs need not feel overwhelming or expensive. Developing an immigrant inclusive economic development strategy works best when it is centered upon a local economic development organization's existing goals and aspirations.

two decades there has been considerable growth in the number of immigrant businesses compared to losses for U.S.-born businesses.

**Ensuring that small business support programs are linguistically accessible and culturally competent is a first step.**

**Consider building character-based capital to support small immigrant and minority businesses.** Many immigrant-owned small businesses operate in the informal economy and are distrustful of the government and large institutions. They often rely upon family and community networks for capital. Character-based lending can help them build credit to facilitate longer-term growth.

**Invest in trusted connectors to reach small businesses, as well as to support regional trade and export plans.** Trusted connectors can be a critical source to attract immigrant businesses to local lending, technical assistance and support programs. Including immigrant business owners can help expand regional trade and export.

**Leverage the STEM and high-tech talent of your region's international and immigrant communities.** Promising programs have helped connect local businesses with unmet talent needs with international student and skilled immigrant talent. The Global EIR program has helped launch dozens of immigrant startup companies.

**Build immigrant inclusion into your entire portfolio of programs.** Truly inclusive economic develop-

ment efforts exist not as special projects, social justice programs or charitable endeavors. Inclusion has its most profound impacts and sustainability when it is built into the DNA of local economic development agencies. By revisiting existing economic development priorities, goals, and programs through an immigrant-inclusion lens – that encompasses data, immigrant voices and immigrant partners – new and profound opportunities for action will emerge, raising performance outcomes. 

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> David Kallick, "Bringing Vitality to Main Street: How Immigrant Small Businesses Help Local Economies Grow," Fiscal Policy Institute and the Americas Society/Council of the Americas January 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> Vivek Wadhwa, "Boost Visas for Foreign Entrepreneurs," Nature, March 1, 2017 at <https://www.nature.com/news/boost-visas-for-foreign-entrepreneurs-1.21544#/foreign>.
- <sup>3</sup> Stuart Anderson, "International Students and STEM OPT," National Foundation for American Policy Brief, October 2017 at <https://nfap.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/International-Students-and-STEM-OPT.NFAP-Policy-Brief-October-20171.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> "Immigrant Nation, American Success: Ph.D.s and Patents," Vilcek Foundation at <https://vilcek.org/news/immigrant-nation-american-success-phds-and-patents/> (August 31, 2015). The graphic shows the number of patents awarded to American universities in 2011 where at least one foreign-born inventor was named on the patent (patents with at least one foreign-born inventor are in blue and total number of patents are in orange).

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# implementing long-term INCLUSION INITIATIVES

By Beth Robinson

Nationwide, individuals and businesses are abandoning suburban areas and migrating back to the urban core and surrounding areas in both small and large cities. This trend has increased redevelopment efforts in many urban neighborhoods that previously experienced decades of disinvestment to add new developments, amenities and transportation to attract residents, companies and top talent.

However, these efforts often come at a cost. Many of these disinvested neighborhoods are home to primarily low-income people of color, and revitalization efforts stoke fears of displacement due to rising rents and property taxes. And residents have reasons to be concerned. From 2000 to 2014, a greater number of low-income urban census tracts experienced accelerated gains in income and the number of white residents compared to the larger metropolitan area than in previous decades, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.<sup>i</sup> The department's report also states, "The share of initially low-income city census tracts that saw large gains in rents relative to the metropolitan area more than doubled from 10% in the 1990s to 24% in the 2000s."<sup>ii</sup>

However, development efforts in underserved communities don't necessarily need to lead to displacement. Through thoughtful planning, community engagement and broad-reaching inclusion initiatives, it's possible to bring new development, businesses and amenities to a neighborhood in a way that benefits and retains existing residents and community members.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **There is no substitute for commitment and clear expectations.** Commitment to economic inclusion from internal leadership and clear expectations with development and community partners are critical for success.
- **Inclusion must be a long-term strategy.** For economic inclusion efforts to meaningfully impact the community, they must extend beyond construction throughout the life of a development.
- **Leverage partnerships to create a holistic effort.** Inclusion initiatives should involve a range of stakeholders to develop a multi-faceted and wide-reaching program.
- **Learn and adjust along the way.** Economic inclusion can be a difficult process, so it's critical to analyze and improve processes as organizations learn from mistakes.
- **Listen and communicate openly with the community but expect criticism.** Engaging with community members is critical, but fears and sensitivities related to working in historically disenfranchised neighborhoods will drive criticism, even with positive results.

In particular, innovation districts – defined by expert Bruce Katz as “zones in cities where public and private actors work to attract entrepreneurs, startups, business incubators, generally with the aim of revitalizing depressed downtown areas” – around the world are pioneering social innovation and inclusion strategies.<sup>iii</sup> According to the Global Institute on Innovation Districts, innovation districts, especially in the United States, “are disproportionately located in the cores of cities, often surrounded by neighborhoods challenged by economic disenfranchisement and high unemployment.”<sup>iv</sup> This makes innovation districts uniquely positioned to develop inclusion strategies that improve living conditions and livelihoods of

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## HOW TO DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN MEANINGFUL ECONOMIC INCLUSION EFFORTS

*Revitalization of urban neighborhoods nationwide is leading to fears of resident displacement in historically low-income African American neighborhoods. Uptown Consortium, Inc. (UCI) launched its economic inclusion initiatives to ensure that existing residents benefitted from new developments in Cincinnati's Uptown neighborhoods. UCI received IEDC's 2020 Excellence in Economic Development Gold Award in Economic Equity and Inclusion for its inclusion and engagement initiatives. The article covers how UCI's economic inclusion and community benefits agreements are benefitting the community and functioning as a national best practice. It shares examples of success, how efforts are measured, and how organizations can implement a similar strategy to establish long-term economic inclusion efforts in underserved urban communities.*

residents and neighborhoods at-large without the displacement that often accompanies revitalization efforts. However, initiatives developed within innovation districts still offer insights and best-practice models that can be replicated elsewhere.

Uptown Consortium, Inc. (UCI), a nonprofit economic development corporation serving Cincinnati's Uptown neighborhoods, won IEDC's 2020 gold Economic Equity and Inclusion award for its economic inclusion initiative. Since 2014, UCI has developed and implemented an expansive, long-term economic inclusion effort, especially around the development of the region's first innovation district.

## ESTABLISHING A LONG-TERM INCLUSION STRATEGY

As the economic development organization for Cincinnati's Uptown neighborhoods – Avondale, Clifton, Corryville, Clifton Heights/University Heights/Fairview (CUF), and Mt. Auburn – UCI is dedicated to improving the wellbeing of Uptown's residents, businesses and anchor institutions through community inclusion, transportation, redevelopment and more. Over the past 15 years, UCI's investments, including member capital and NMTCs, have induced over \$500 million in projects in the community to bring new development, businesses, amenities and programs to the neighborhoods.

However, before UCI was established in 2004, the Uptown neighborhoods, many of which are predominantly African American and low-income, experienced decades of disinvestment. Like other urban neighborhoods throughout the country, Uptown has gradually gained local and regional attention from corporations and individuals looking to locate in communities near the urban core.

New development – and the surrounding fears of displacement – accelerated in 2014 when construction began on a new interchange off I-71 at Martin Luther King Drive and Reading Road in Avondale. UCI and many oth-

UCI and its board members from the Uptown anchor institutions – Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, the University of Cincinnati, UC Health, TriHealth and the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden – created a plan to effectively develop the new space so it would become an asset to the neighborhoods, not a typical off-highway stop filled with gas stations and fast food restaurants. UCI focused its attention on developing the area into the region's first innovation district, leveraging the Uptown anchor institutions' strengths – research, medicine and innovation advancements – to attract high-growth businesses and top talent to the region.



*A rendering of the region's first innovation district, a 65-acre innovation and technology hub, leveraging the Uptown Cincinnati anchor institutions' strengths – research, medicine and innovation advancements – to attract high-growth businesses and top talent to the region.*

er local organizations and political leaders campaigned for the interchange to increase connectivity to Uptown, the region's largest employment hub second only to downtown Cincinnati. In addition, this new interchange would open up acres of underdeveloped land, an almost unheard-of opportunity in urban areas.

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Some of Cincinnati's largest companies and innovators have already made the Corridor home. They include Procter & Gamble (worldwide leader in consumer goods), The Kroger Co. (one of the world's largest retailers), Cincinnati Insurance Companies (publicly traded provider of business, home and auto insurance), Cincinnati Bell (high speed internet, video, voice and data provider in areas of Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana and Hawaii), Cincy Tech (a regionally focused investor in high growth startup technology companies), as well as a host of local companies and organizations.

UCI began purchasing more than 120 parcels of land, eventually investing more than \$40 million (funds are from UCI member capital and funds from the City of Cincinnati) to secure the property once plans for the interchange were announced.

However, UCI also recognized the need for robust economic inclusion initiatives to ensure that existing residents and businesses could grow alongside each other

and benefit from the planned developments. As the innovation district's master developer, UCI controls the district's planning and design, types of developments, and, most importantly, the economic inclusion and community engagement efforts incorporated into the projects.

In 2014, UCI contracted WEB Ventures LLC (WEB), diversity and inclusion consultants, to develop a long-term economic inclusion framework and lead UCI's inclusion efforts in Uptown. With WEB, UCI established an inclusion strategy focusing on opportunities throughout the life of a development, from pre-construction professional services through construction, tenant selection, staffing and annuity services. This innovative strategy differs from many other inclusion efforts across the country because it extends beyond construction phases to look for short- and long-term inclusion opportunities. This is critical to UCI's approach because construction-focused inclusion efforts only temporarily benefit residents and do not provide long-term financial stability and growth opportunities necessary to prevent displacement as the neighborhoods change in the coming years.

UCI's economic inclusion initiatives focus on two key areas: increasing workforce development opportunities for residents in Uptown and surrounding low-income zip codes and increasing contracting and investment opportunities for local minority business enterprises (MBE) and women business enterprises (WBE) on Uptown projects.

All of UCI's development partners are required to sign Community Benefits Agreements, including high goals for residents, MBE and WBE inclusion and community engagement. Since UCI is the master developer for the project, it can require these contracts before selling land in the innovation district and then monitor adherence through WEB, which works with each development partner.

UCI's economic inclusion initiatives aim to improve the financial health and quality of life for Uptown residents and create career, contracting and investment opportunities for minorities and women in the underserved communities. Ultimately, UCI hopes that these proactive economic inclusion and engagement efforts help prevent resident displacement as development, by UCI and others, continues in the Uptown neighborhoods.



*An open, flat lawn on the southern portion of the Innovation Greenway – a green network that weaves active and passive parks, open spaces, and ecological functions throughout the district – serves as a multi-purpose space that can be used for recreation and other uses.*

UCI's economic inclusion work also integrates with its community engagement efforts. Community engagement has always been a priority for UCI to ensure that community organizations and residents have a seat at the table to determine their neighborhoods' future. To do this, UCI works closely with neighborhood development corporations and community councils to make sure that existing residents and businesses benefit from development efforts.

In addition, UCI has worked with other partners to address housing issues as part of its larger goals to increase homeownership and prevent resident displacement. In 2018, UCI commissioned Dinn Focused Marketing to conduct an in-depth analysis of the physical condition and configuration of Avondale's housing stock and to understand market trends. The Avondale Development Corporation used the data in its Quality of Life plan to guide decisions around housing development in the neighborhood. UCI also partnered with Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) and the Avondale Development Corporation on a home improvement program that offers interest-free loans up to \$35,000 for critical home exterior repairs<sup>v</sup> to improve living conditions that contribute to safety and health for neighborhood residents. The funding of this program is provided by CCHMC.

Another significant concern is the availability of low-income housing. To support the creation of additional low-income housing in the neighborhood, UCI contributed \$2.8 million in New Markets Tax Credits to the redevelopment of the Avondale Town Center, a mixed-use development at the center of the neighborhood. The project includes 118 apartments plus a health center and planned grocery store. As other developments move forward, UCI will continue looking for opportunities to support housing choices in the community to ensure that options exist for residents of different income levels.

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Residents and local organizations best understand what the community needs, and UCI believes in consistently listening to these stakeholders and implementing feedback, so development plans, inclusion efforts and programming genuinely benefit the community. It's critical that these key members are brought to the table from the very beginning of the planning process – not after development plans have already been established, which is often a criticism of other construction projects in similar urban neighborhoods.

These engagement efforts allowed UCI to build strong relationships in the community. Without these relationships and the support from UCI's partner organizations, UCI would not be able to fulfill its mission as the area's economic developer.

## LEADING IN INNOVATIVE INCLUSION

Since UCI launched its inclusion initiative, UCI and WEB have implemented the strategy around several different development efforts in Uptown, including the new I-71 interchange, UC Gardner Neuroscience Institute, and the region's first innovation district. While each project is different and requires a specialized approach, UCI and WEB have implemented the overall strategy in each of the following examples. To-date, each project has shown positive results.

All inclusion goals are set in UCI's Community Benefits Agreements (CBA) with WEB and its development partners, including lofty goals for MBE, WBE and workforce inclusion during pre-construction, construction and post-construction phases. Contractor inclusion is measured as one aspect of the overall project budget, so a specific percentage of the total contract amounts must be spent with regional MBEs or WBEs. UCI's economic inclusion goals include:

- 25% MBE subcontractor spend
- 6% WBE subcontractor spend
- 10% investment by minority and women-owned investor groups
- 12% minority workforce inclusion
- 3% women workforce inclusion

### MLK Interchange

The development of a new highway interchange off I-71 at Martin Luther King Drive and Reading Road spurred the creation of UCI's economic inclusion initiatives. After contracting WEB in 2014 and developing its economic inclusion strategy, UCI first implemented the inclusion effort on the interchange construction project.

WEB contacted Kokosing Construction, the construction management company overseeing the project, about opportunities to train and hire Uptown residents for the construction project but learned that they needed to coordinate with union leadership to secure apprenticeships and employment. WEB then convened the four primary highway construction trade unions – carpenters, laborers, iron workers and operating engineers – and several regional job readiness providers to develop a workforce training program that offered training, apprenticeship and future job opportunities for Uptown residents and residents in surrounding low-income zip codes. It was the first time these organizations had met to collaborate on workforce issues. This was critical to developing an effective, sustainable program, so each organization understood the challenges and necessary collaborations to make it possible.

As a result of UCI and WEB's workforce development effort, Kokosing Construction hired 16 minority



*An event space can serve to hold large outdoor events and activities (this is a conceptual example of what the Innovation Greenway could look like upon completion).*

men and three women who were local union members/residents for the interchange project and enrolled an additional six residents from the Uptown neighborhoods in union-based apprenticeship programs across the four unions.

This workforce development initiative helped UCI and WEB form critical relationships with labor unions and workforce development organizations and lent credibility for UCI's economic inclusion initiatives among community organizations. In fact, following the collaboration with labor and workforce organizations around the interchange project, WEB formed an organization called Pathways to Careers in Construction and Innovation to continue the organizations' partnership moving forward. The group continues meeting monthly to address workforce needs and collaborate on various projects, in Uptown and throughout the city.

### UC Gardner Neuroscience Institute

The UC Gardner Neuroscience Institute (UCGNI) is a joint effort between the University of Cincinnati and UC Health, the region's only academic medical system. In 2017, the two institutions began construction on UCGNI, a 114,000-square-foot state-of-the-art building on UC Health's Uptown campus that serves as the leading regional treatment center for complex neurological and psychological conditions.

UC Health, one of UCI's founding members, wanted to improve its inclusion rates on the construction project, which had already begun, so it enlisted WEB. UC Health set a 40% MBE/WBE inclusion goal for UCGNI construction subcontractors and a 20% workforce inclusion goal, reported in terms of race, gender and zip code. WEB was tasked with identifying MBE and WBE subcontractors and recruiting Uptown residents and residents of surrounding low-income neighborhoods to work on the project.

Through WEB's efforts, UC Health surpassed all inclusion goals set in its Community Benefits Agreement



*The Innovation Greenway will be a vital amenity in the Uptown community for everyone who works in and visits these developments. The green space will be accessible to community members.*

(CBA) for construction of the main building, reaching 44.6% MBE/WBE inclusion – beyond its 40% MBE/WBE inclusion goal – with more than \$20.7 million in MBE/WBE spend. The project also surpassed the 20% minority and women workforce inclusion goal, reaching 22.7% workforce inclusion, including 19 Uptown residents and 37 residents from adjacent, low-income zip codes.

### **Uptown Gateway**

As the innovation district’s master developer, UCI holds Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) with its four development partners, including economic inclusion goals and community engagement requirements. WEB works with each individual developer to ensure that goals are met on the project from pre-development, construction and post-development phases. While three of the four developments are currently in the planning and pre-development phases, the Uptown Gateway project by Cincinnati-based Terrex Development & Construction began construction in 2019.

In pre-construction and the initial construction phases to-date, Terrex reached 14.4% MBE and 20.1% WBE inclusion for a combined 34.5% MBE/WBE inclusion across the project, reaching more than \$3.5 million in contract spend. UCI, WEB and Terrex continue working to meet inclusion goals across all areas of development.

In fact, after working with UCI and WEB, Terrex adjusted its project framework to incorporate economic inclusion and community engagement efforts in all company projects, not just its work with UCI. While initially skeptical about the ability to reach the high goals set in its CBA without increasing costs or compromising quality, Terrex completely changed its view on the possibilities around economic inclusion.

“Since executing the CBA in June of 2016, we have met with WEB every month to advance our CBA commitments to economic inclusion. But beyond our project goals, WEB has had a profound influence on the principals of Terrex and the way we look at the roles and responsibilities of a developer and the impact we have on communities where we develop projects,” said Peter Horton, Principal at Terrex.

In addition to the economic inclusion work, Terrex coordinates with UCI and its community partners to engage Uptown residents around development plans and to solicit feedback throughout the planning and design process. UCI includes this process in its CBAs with developers to ensure that Uptown residents have a voice in determining their neighborhoods’ future.

Since planning began for the innovation district, UCI and its development partners regularly host open house events for residents to learn about development plans, connect with developers and provide feedback. UCI also created several committees to help guide planning and development efforts, which include neighborhood leaders, representatives from the Uptown anchor institutions, and other partners.

### **HOW TO ESTABLISH AN INCLUSION PROGRAM**

UCI’s economic inclusion model can be adapted by other economic development organizations across the country. Whether organizations bring some functions in-house or leverage partners and contractors depends on each organization’s size and specialties. Still, either method is viable as long as partners follow several specific steps. Following are the critical components to developing and implementing a similar economic inclusion initiative.

**Develop strong partnerships:** Most economic development organizations likely already have many strong partnerships in their communities, but when it comes to economic inclusion, partnerships are critical. These partnerships include: community organizations, such as community councils, development corporations and business associations; workforce development organizations; labor unions; developers; chambers and business accelerators; and local government. One of these partnerships may also be a diversity and inclusion consultant, like WEB, to lead implementation efforts.



*Uptown Consortium, Inc. (UCI) received the Minority Business Accelerator’s (MBA) Goal Setter of the Year Award for its work with WEB Ventures, management and economic inclusion business. Left to Right: William Witten (WEB), Darrin Redus (Chamber vice president and executive director of the MBA), Cynthia Booth (owner of COBCO Enterprises), Beth Robinson (UCI’s CEO), Howard Elliot (WEB), Henry Brown (WEB) and Ali Razzaghi (member of Frost Brown Todd).*

These partners play a critical role in implementing a successful economic inclusion program, from helping engage community members and reach residents, providing workforce development opportunities, and connecting residents, MBEs and WBEs with job and contracting opportunities.

**Implement Community Benefits Agreements (CBA):** CBAs are critical to holding developers accountable for meeting economic inclusion goals. These CBAs should be created in partnership with community organizations before implementation, which gives residents and stakeholders a voice to ensure that the work is in the community's best interest.

Every developer should be required to sign the CBA and commit to the economic inclusion and community engagement goals, but this can be challenging. Many developers that are not used to robust economic inclusion initiatives may fear that increasing MBE and WBE subcontractors will result in higher costs or lower quality work. However, that is not the case, so it's critical to take a strong stance and refuse any workarounds that would allow reluctant developers to skirt economic inclusion efforts.

**Create a pipeline of talent and subcontractors:** Identify and vet individuals, MBEs and WBEs for potential bidding opportunities. For example, WEB meets with individuals and potential subcontractors every Monday, which is necessary to truly vetting an applicant. These interviews are critical because there are several "watch-outs" that may make a business or individual a poor fit for a specific project, such as:

- *Size and capabilities:* Some contractors may not have experience working on large contracts and may not have the scale needed to bid on specific opportunities. In these cases, WEB refers promising businesses to other partners to help build the company based on its specific needs. For example, WEB met with an MBE specializing in demolition, but the business needed help growing its back-end operations before it could take on large contracts. WEB referred them to HCDC, Inc., a local business incubator, for business coaching as part of UCI's partnership with HCDC. Later, WEB helped the same company secure a contract on an Uptown project after they got the necessary help to effectively grow their businesses. Supporting promising MBEs and WBEs helps grow a pipeline of potential subcontractors so they can bid on larger contracts in Uptown and elsewhere.

CBAs are critical to holding developers accountable for meeting economic inclusion goals. These CBAs should be created in partnership with community organizations before implementation, which gives residents and stakeholders a voice to ensure that the work is in the community's best interest.

Holistic economic inclusion initiatives should create long-term financial opportunities for nearby residents that improve their financial wellbeing and allow them to stay in and grow with the neighborhood. This also means looking for job training programs that prepare individuals for jobs in growing sectors, such as website coding and development and other tech occupations, or jobs specific to the development's tenants.

- *WBE status:* It's important to ensure that WBEs are truly women-owned and operated. There's an unfortunate trend where businesses put a certain percentage of the company in a woman's name (such as an owner's wife), even if she is not actively involved in managing the company, to take advantage of WBE accreditation. UCI and WEB want to make sure that its WBE goals truly benefit women-owned businesses, so interviewing these companies is important for selecting the right partners.
- *Job readiness:* Depending on the job, not all individuals are prepared for certain workforce development opportunities. This is especially true for construction and labor union programs where residents may not be prepared for job challenges. UCI and WEB initially noticed low workforce retention numbers from local residents on construction projects, so WEB adjusted its approach to better vet individuals and set expectations before residents enter training programs.

This alleviates the responsibility of finding viable subcontractors and workers from development partners to ensure that goals are met. Because of this pipeline, developers cannot claim that there are not enough residents, MBEs or WBEs to meet goals on a project.

**Incorporate inclusion opportunities throughout the life of a development:** Economic inclusion initiatives must be long-term to create a meaningful impact on communities and prevent displacement. This means identifying opportunities for inclusion from pre-development professional services, such as engineering and architecture, through construction; tenant selection to include MBE and WBE tenants; staffing to hire residents from the surrounding communities; and annuity services, such as landscaping, snow removal and paper suppliers.

Holistic economic inclusion initiatives should create long-term financial opportunities for nearby residents that improve their financial wellbeing and allow them to stay in and grow with the neighborhood. This also means looking for job training programs that prepare individuals for jobs in growing sectors, such as website coding and development and other tech occupations, or jobs specific to the development's tenants.

While UCI's economic inclusion initiatives have shown promising results and offer a strong model for others, we recognize that neither UCI nor WEB has all the answers. Economic inclusion is a nuanced process. Any organization dedicated to inclusion must be willing to learn – from its own mistakes and others' best practices – and adjust along the way. Just as innovation and disruption in other sectors never end, truly innovative inclusion is an ongoing process requiring dedication and constant improvement.

**Measure progress towards goals:** Track progress towards inclusion goals throughout development phases to ensure that projects are on-track. It's important to transparently report these numbers internally and with partners to earn trust and demonstrate the effectiveness of inclusion initiatives.

While every city and project is different and comes with unique challenges and opportunities, these steps should provide a solid foundation for any organization to develop and implement a successful economic inclusion initiative.

## CONCLUSION

As neighborhood revitalization continues in many urban areas throughout the U.S., robust economic inclusion efforts will be necessary to maintain vibrant and diverse communities and prevent displacement, especially of low-income and minority residents. We believe that UCI's economic inclusion initiatives can serve as a model and industry best practice for establishing long-term economic inclusion efforts in underserved urban communities.

While UCI's economic inclusion initiatives have shown promising results and offer a strong model for others, we recognize that neither UCI nor WEB has all the answers. Economic inclusion is a nuanced process. Any organization dedicated to inclusion must be willing to learn – from its own mistakes and others' best prac-

tices – and adjust along the way. Just as innovation and disruption in other sectors never end, truly innovative inclusion is an ongoing process requiring dedication and constant improvement.

As the developments in Uptown progress, UCI and WEB will continue looking for ways to adjust its strategy to meet the community's needs as new challenges and opportunities arise – and other economic developers should too. 🌐

## ENDNOTES

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# creating a website

## FOR SUCCESS

By Dana Millard

**a**n economic development website is the first impression your community will have with current and prospective clients. As a result, websites need to be appealing and must convey your brand in an appropriate, effective manner while providing demographics, economic data, maps of the region, business information, and workforce data.

Building your own website can feel like a daunting task, as many people will have opinions on website design and how to increase its effectiveness. However, if an organization is truly going to be effective in creating a website, the first step is to fire the committee.

*“Fire the committee. No great website in history has been conceived of by more than three people. Not one. This is a dealbreaker.” – Seth Godin, author and dot com executive.*

Having a small group of individuals participate in the planning and development can lead to success; however, if you have too many individuals involved, it can lead to paralysis. Though well intended, oftentimes a committee is established to make everyone feel involved in the process; as a result, it may hamper creativity and innovation. Most committees end up in this kind of circular, unproductive feedback loop.

If, for one reason or another, you must have multiple people involved in the website design process, develop a small steering committee and nominate a leader, one who will listen, absorb, and discuss ideas, be able to defend any design decision with clarity and reason, and know when to pick your battles or know when to let go.

### START WITH THE END IN MIND

Successful design starts with a well-defined objective that everyone understands and supports.

### TAKEAWAYS

- Successful design starts with a well-defined objective that everyone understands and supports. The objective should define the purpose of your website, target market, and key elements of your site.
- Make your contact information clear and easy to find in multiple places throughout your site. Be certain to include contact information on every page so that a potential client does not have to search for it and make sure that information is up to date.
- Websites are designed to be viewed: Who’s viewing your site and what that user is trying to accomplish determines your site navigation and content.
- Your content is how you will be found. Your search engine optimization ranking is often about making small modifications to parts of your website, resulting in a big impact. Choose a system that you can update easily to ensure your site stays relevant.

The objective should define the purpose of your website, target market, and key elements of your site.

A successful website must have three key elements:

- Mobile friendly
- Easy-to-find contact information
- Great design and visuals

### MOBILE FRIENDLY

Being mobile friendly is essential in today’s economy. Mobile accounts for approximately half of web traffic worldwide. In the third quarter of 2019, mobile devices (excluding tablets) generated 51.5% of global website traffic, consistently hovering around the 50% mark since the beginning of 2017.<sup>1</sup>

With over 50% of website traffic happening on mobile devices, it’s important that users are not only able to view your site on their device but easily nav-

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## TOOLS FOR A RESPONSIVE, INNOVATIVE WEBSITE

Many economic development organizations struggle with their online presence. There are several key aspects your organization needs to consider with your site such as the visitor’s experience, the information you want to convey, and being purposeful in updating your content. This article aims to give you the information you need as you develop or review your own economic development website. Organizations need to consider who will be viewing their site, what will they be looking for and how you can display that information in a concise, visually pleasing layout.

igate it as well. For many, being mobile-friendly means that your regular website must display in full on a mobile device. Keep in mind, however, that a miniature version of your website may require excessive zooming, pinching, and scrolling, resulting in a poor user experience. All of which means that your site must have a responsive design, i.e., a flexible layout that will detect a visitor's screen size and orientation and changes accordingly.

While conducting a familiarization (fam) tour of our communities, it was common for potential developers to pull out a tablet or phone to check information. Having our available properties and sites easily accessible and responsive to their device heightened our professionalism and resulted in more productive conversations.

### EASY-TO-FIND CONTACT INFORMATION

Without basic information on how to contact your economic development organization, users will quickly get frustrated and leave your site. According to *Site Selection Magazine's* 2019 Site Selectors Survey, a company's name and contact information were the number one items site selectors want to see on an economic development organization's website.

Be certain to include contact information on every page so that a potential client does not have to search for it and also make sure that information is up to date. The 2019 Site Selector's Survey also listed "lack of responsiveness" as the number-one most common deal killer in economic development.

When putting contact information on your site, keep in mind that people want to deal with people. If they send or leave a message, they expect a timely response.

Contact forms, though they have their place, are not appealing when we are in the relationship business. In order for your website to be a lead generator, direct contact information must be easily accessible on the website and in multiple places. Having a variety of ways clients can get a hold of you is also necessary. With five generations in the workplace, and each having a different preference on how they communicate, having your phone number, email, address, and social media links will help you connect with these different audiences.

In appropriate sections of your website, with your contact information, include a call to action encouraging visitors to contact you. Economic development organiza-

tions can also use other calls to action as a lead generation tool. Having buttons on your site encouraging visitors to find out more or download specific content adds to the user's experience. This also allows you to see who and what visitors are clicking on.

### GREAT DESIGN AND VISUALS

Keep it visual but allow ways to find out more information.

The human brain processes images 60,000 times faster than text, and 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual.<sup>2</sup> Organizing data in a visual way will help your users process and retain information.

Important topics such as your community's existing industries, transportation, and demographics, where you have multiple categories to sift through, can be better consumed through visual content. Then, if a user wants to learn more, allow him or her to dig deeper through subpages. This is especially true on your homepage, which is the front door to your organization and community. Think of your homepage as the curb appeal to persuade the user to click further.



This means you should have key content in multiple places within your site, as not everyone is going to take the same path to find the same information. With the example of workforce information, not only are existing industries looking for this, site selectors are as well; however, they might take a different path in order to find it on your site.

### WHAT'S IMPORTANT? THINK LIKE THE USER

You defined your target audience in your objective. Have a plan for each of your audiences. Think like the user. Be thoughtful about what the user is looking for and how he or she will access information on your site. Remember the Rule of Three: The user should find any information on your site with no more than three mouse clicks. This means that some of your content will appear in multiple places within your site, and some pages will be under several navigation headings.

Websites are designed to be viewed: Who's viewing your site and what that user is trying to accomplish determines your site navigation and content.

There are many ways you can define your target audiences for an economic development website. For these purposes, we will divide them into two categories, i.e.,



internal and external. Your internal audiences are those in your community, e.g., stakeholders, businesses, community leaders, local media, etc. When building an economic development website, this audience is often overlooked. External audiences are those you are looking at to attract to your community, e.g., site selectors, prospective businesses, potential workforce, etc.

Ideally, each audience will have its own targeted website, specific to its needs. This can be accomplished in a couple of ways: through building separate sites with the same branding, or website providers can offer microsite development. A microsite is an individual web page or a small cluster of pages designed to meet a specific need or complement a full website. The microsite's main landing page can have its own domain name or subdomain. This may be appropriate if your organization covers multiple areas of focus, e.g., economic development, chamber, tourism, etc. However, some organizations are successful with one website that addresses each of their areas of focus. You will need to choose what works best for your organization, keeping in mind time and budget.

## INTERNAL AUDIENCES

View your website as a value-added resource for existing stakeholders and businesses by providing information that your stakeholders commonly request. Keep in mind that these individuals are probably going to your site more than a site selector, so have information they would be looking for readily available. This information should be easily accessible and part of your main navigation.

Your website is also where the media will find more information about your activities and organization. Utilize your site as a way to communicate your successes and as a reference guide for your stakeholders. Having a news feed or a media section helps keep your site relevant. However, if you have a news and media section, it is critical to keep this section up to date. The easiest way to lose credibility is to have the most current newsletter or post be a year-old. It's recommended to have monthly updates at a minimum. Without frequently updated content, you are less likely to rank in search engine results. Search engines, like Google, use bots to scan your site and calculate the "freshness" of your site. The higher the freshness score, the higher your site will score in Google searches. Search engines want to see regular, quality updates as a signal of a fresh site.

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## EXTERNAL AUDIENCES

External audiences are those you are trying to recruit to your community. Keep in mind these individuals are not from your community. You're selling your location; let your visitors know where you are. Never assume someone knows where you are. This is true not only for rural areas but metropolitan as well. Revealing the state in which you're located and using clear visuals, such as the map below, eliminates frustration and helps sell your community.



There are over 4,000 economic development organizations in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In our case, there are 12 Lee counties in the country. Chances are there are multiple organizations throughout the country with your community name as well. Identifying where your community and organization is located helps the user become familiar with your area and reduces frustration.

Also, site selectors are typically looking at more than one location at a time, frequently toggling between sites; thus, having clear location information on multiple sections of your site helps avoid your location being lost. Having easily accessible maps on your site and a clear location map on the homepage are helpful as well.

## CONTENT IS KING

Visuals are how you keep users on your page but content gets them there. Your content is how you will be found; thus, making your site easily readable for the Googlebots to find is key. Your search engine optimization ranking is often about making small modifications to parts of your website, resulting in a big impact. When viewed individually, these changes might seem like incremental improvements, but, when combined with other strategies, they could have a noticeable impact on your site's user experience and performance in organic search results. The easier your user experience, the better your ranking.

Economic development websites must convey a substantial amount of information in a clear, concise manner. Writing for a website is different than other types of writing.

Less is more when it comes to writing for a website. Ask yourself:

- Do I need to have this?
- Can I break up this content?

The average person scans your site and, in less than eight seconds, decides if it's worth continuing on or navigating away (which is known as a bounce). Bounce rate is the percentage of visitors to a particular website who navigate away from the site after viewing only one page. The shorter the sentences and less words you can use to convey the same message, the better.

- Can I create a list instead?
- Is this readable?

The average person scans your site and, in less than eight seconds, decides if it's worth continuing on or navigating away (which is known as a bounce). Bounce rate is the percentage of visitors to a particular website who navigate away from the site after viewing only one page. The shorter the sentences and less words you can use to convey the same message, the better.

Both internal and external audiences will view your site to find out more information about your activities and track your progress. Existing businesses and investors want to make sure they are receiving a return on their investment and will look to your website for those statistics. Site selectors also want to show their clients that a community is proactive. No community is perfect; however, if you can show that your community is actively addressing the negatives and the progress your organization has made over time, it helps alleviate some of the risk for potential businesses.

In the end, economic development websites should include at minimum the following basic information:

- Community or organization name and location
- Staff contact information
- Available properties and sites
- Economic data such as demographics, workforce, and business information
- An up-to-date list of the organization's programs and services
- Organizational recent news, media, and press releases

## SUSTAINABILITY

Also, with your content, this doesn't mean you have to create everything from scratch. As economic developers, we use our partners a lot; as such, ask your local college to write a synopsis about its institution or submit photos; you can also tap into your chambers and existing industries for photos. Ask your workforce partners for graphs or data. Keep in mind that you may need to reformat the content to fit your branding, but you don't have to start from scratch. So, when asking others for content, be specific.

If you send out a blanket email saying you're looking for photos to update your website, your response rate

will be low. Instead, contact your employers individually and tell them you are looking for photos to showcase their workforce. Do they have a photo of their employee using their equipment that you can highlight? Include photo sizes and the parameters of what you are looking for to increase your odds of receiving useful content.

The article has described how content is king and the need to keep your site updated; a big part of that, however, is choosing the right backend for your site. Even though the majority of users will never see it, your website's content management system (CMS) is one of the most important parts of choosing a website provider and keeping your website from becoming irrelevant.

When comparing providers, ask to see or demo the website's CMS, which is where you will be doing all the updates and managing your site. Ask questions about usability, what can you update versus what aspects the provider has to update. Ask for references and research other economic development websites, finding design and style examples you would like to incorporate.

Discuss with the website provider if you are getting a custom site or using a pre-made template. Both types are useful, however it comes down to budget and time. Custom built sites tend to be more expensive and take longer to launch, however custom sites make sense if you have a specific idea or goal to accomplish. Keep in mind if you're working with a limited budget a template site can meet your needs as well. Templated websites will allow you to save money with a premade theme that can be customized with your logo, content, and colors.

Find a CMS that is intuitive and easy to use; what that means depends on your comfort level of your employees' skills. Ask your prospective web developer if they use an open source CMS (such as WordPress) or if they use their own custom CMS. A custom CMS can be easy to use but typically means that your website will be hosted and owned by your provider. An open source CMS allows you more freedom although your organization must have the skill and ability to utilize it. The easier you make it for you to update your information the more likely it's going to get done because, once the website is launched, you still have to feed it in order for it to remain relevant. When you have the same content in different areas, it is

Find a CMS that is intuitive and easy to use; what that means depends on your comfort level of your employees' skills. Ask your prospective web developer if they use an open source CMS (such as WordPress) or if they use their own custom CMS.

A custom CMS can be easy to use but typically means that your website will be hosted and owned by your provider. An open source CMS allows you more freedom although your organization must have the skill and ability to utilize it.

important to know how this content is linked, if at all. For example, if it is updated on one page, it's also updated in each location it appears on your site or does this have to be done manually.

A good way to help feed your site is to have your provider connect it with your existing platforms. This includes geographic information systems and social media platforms. So, if you post something on Twitter, for example, it automatically posts on your website as well. We all get busy, and, for many of us, website development and management isn't our only job; therefore, the more automatic updates you can connect the better. Just remember: If you put it on your site, make sure it's being updated.

Making the process efficient and effective will tremendously improve the chances of having your website become a lead generating tool. To do this develop a strong objective and audience identification. Then your first priority is getting your target audiences the information they need. Users are impatient, so give them easily digestible content through visuals and concise content quickly. Finally, keep your site up to date. Know that launching a website is only the beginning. In order for it to be effective, sites must be updated a minimum of monthly. Developing a schedule where someone in your organization takes a look at the site and provides updates will help this be manageable.

Creating an economic development website and keeping your site content updated may sound like a difficult and time-consuming task, but, with a strategy and schedule in place, it does not have to be. 🌐

A good way to help feed your site is to have your provider connect it with your existing platforms. This includes geographic information systems and social media platforms. So, if you post something on Twitter, for example, it automatically posts on your website as well. We all get busy, and, for many of us, website development and management isn't our only job; therefore, the more automatic updates you can connect the better. Just remember: If you put it on your site, make sure it's being updated.

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# NEWS FROM IEDC

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH PARTNERS (EDRP) PROGRAM LAUNCHED A NEW PLAYBOOK ON ASSISTING ENTREPRENEURS OF COLOR

On February 1, EDRP launched a new playbook that focuses on how EDOs can support small businesses and entrepreneurs of color in response to the pandemic and its disproportionate impact on businesses owned by people of color. The playbook includes guidance on collecting and analyzing data to better understand entrepreneurs of color in a community, as well as a wide variety of brief examples and resources to improve access to capital, access to mentorship and a culture of entrepreneurship among youth.

EDRP is currently conducting research on broadband, and the future of work and inclusion. These papers will be launched in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> quarters of the year.



## NEW ENTREPRENEURSHIP-LED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COURSES AND CREDENTIAL LAUNCH IN APRIL

IEDC will be launching a new set of training courses and credential focused on entrepreneurship-led economic development (ELED) strategies and approaches in April 2021. This is brand new content that IEDC has developed in partnership with SourceLink and through support from the Kauffman Foundation and the Economic Development Administration's Denver Regional Office.

The initiative is aimed at economic developers, entrepreneurship support professionals, ecosystem builders and others who work directly with entrepreneurs or support them indirectly through community programs. The courses have recently been piloted and IEDC is developing the certification exam materials for the credential, which will launch around IEDC's Annual Conference.

## 2021 IEDC WEBINAR SERIES

Join IEDC each month throughout 2021 as we host timely and topical webinars that are sure to up your economic development game! Coming in April, we'll be talking about the 'Green Wave' in climate change-driven manufacturing and how economic developers and their communities can benefit from massive growth in this sector.

Purchasing one registration means you can participate in the webinar with your whole office, maximizing your professional development dollars.

IEDC is once again offering series packages at heavily discounted rates, making it possible to access a year's worth of great webinar content at one low-cost. Full-series packages are still available with the recordings of past webinars shared with each purchase. Visit [IEDCOnline.org](http://IEDCOnline.org) for more information today!

## 2021 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSES AVAILABLE ONLINE

IEDC is expanding accessibility of professional development by offering the majority of 2021 training courses and certification exams online. This includes IEDC's Economic Development Academy (EDA), which combines two IEDC training courses, a virtual happy hour, and the Exam Essentials Workshop. Register for the Academy and save 15% on the cost of both courses. The spring certification exam provides another opportunity to earn the Certified Economic Developer (CECD) designation without having to travel. For more information on the CECD and upcoming exams, please go to [www.iedconline.org/cecd](http://www.iedconline.org/cecd).

## EIGHT ORGANIZATIONS EARN REACCREDITATION!

Accredited organizations find the rigorous application process allows for self-learning and provides an outside perspective on how to strengthen operations and goals. Every three years, accredited organizations undergo a thorough review to maintain their accreditation. Between October 2020 and January 2021, the following organizations have achieved reaccreditation.



- Ada Jobs Foundation in Oklahoma
- City of Scottsdale Economic Development Department in Arizona
- Greater Richmond Partnership in Virginia
- Halifax Partnership in Nova Scotia
- Regional Economic Development, Inc. in Missouri
- St. Louis Economic Development Partnership in Missouri
- Sumter County Economic Development in Florida
- Tampa Bay Economic Development Council in Florida

Learn more about becoming an accredited organization at [www.iedconline.org/AEDO](http://www.iedconline.org/AEDO).



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# CALENDAR OF EVENTS

## RECERTIFICATION FOR CERTIFIED ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS

Fulfill a recertification requirement without tapping into your budget!

Earn two credits towards your next recertification by having an article published in the *Economic Development Journal*, IEDC's quarterly publication.

This is one of a number of ways that you can pursue recertification credits.

Submissions are accepted throughout the year. The Journal Editorial Board reviews all articles and determines which articles are accepted for publication.

For more information contact Jenny Murphy, editor, at [murp@erols.com](mailto:murp@erols.com) (703-715-0147).



INTERNATIONAL  
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IEDC sponsors an annual conference and a series of technical conferences each year to bring economic development professionals together to network with their peers and learn about the latest tools and trends from public and private experts.

IEDC also provides training courses and webinars throughout the year for professional development, a core value of the IEDC. It is essential for enhancing your leadership skills, advancing your career, and, most importantly, plays an invaluable role in furthering your efforts in your community.

**For more information** about these upcoming conferences, webinars, and professional development training courses, please visit our website at [www.iedconline.org](http://www.iedconline.org).

## CONFERENCES

### 2021 Economic Future Forum

June 6-8  
Spokane, WA

### 2021 Annual Conference

October 3-6  
Nashville, TN

### 2022 Leadership Summit

January 30-February 1  
Coachella Valley, CA

### 2022 Economic Future Forum

June 12-14  
Richardson, TX

### 2022 Annual Conference

September 18-21  
Oklahoma City, OK

## 2021 EDUCATION COURSES

### Entrepreneurial & Small Business Development Strategies

March 25-26  
(online)

### Economic Development Marketing and Attraction

April 15-16  
(online)

### Introduction to Entrepreneurship-led Economic Development

April 20-21  
(online)

### Accelerating Growth through Entrepreneurship-led Economic Development

April 22-23  
(online)

### Workforce Development Strategies

May 4-5  
(online)

### Business Retention & Expansion

May 6-7  
(online)

### Economic Development Finance Programs

May 19-21  
(online)

### Economic Development Marketing and Attraction

June 3-4  
Spokane, WA

### Introduction to Entrepreneurship-led Economic Development

June 17-18  
(online)

### Real Estate Development and Reuse

July 15-16  
(online)

### Accelerating Growth through Entrepreneurship-led Economic Development

July 29-30  
(online)

### Economic Development Strategic Planning

August 12-13  
(online)

### Entrepreneurial & Small Business Development Strategies

August 26-27  
(online)

### Workforce Development Strategies

August 31-September 1  
(online)

### Economic Development Credit Analysis

September 15-17  
(online)

### Business Retention & Expansion

September 30-October 1  
Nashville, TN

### Neighborhood Development Strategies

November 2-3  
(online)

### Real Estate Development and Reuse

November 4-5  
(online)

### Foreign Direct Investment and Exporting

December 2-3  
(online)

## 2021 CERTIFIED ECONOMIC DEVELOPER EXAMS

June 12, June 17 & 18  
Online  
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# powerful redevelopment

By Donna Walker, MBA, MEDP

**B**eloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin, has a student center that is unlike most. It's located in a decommissioned electric generating station building. Inside, an elevated running and walking track rings the edges of the structure. You will also find a fitness center, café, swimming pool, study areas, event space, and an auditorium.

Alliant Energy played a key role in the \$38 million collaborative project that brought this special place to the over 1,000 students who attend this private liberal arts college, founded in 1846 before Wisconsin became a state. The partnership included the college's leadership, faculty, and students as well as the community, alumni, and a world-renowned architectural firm.

## A WORKHORSE GENERATING STATION BECOMES OBSOLETE

The site started as a location for the Rock River Paper Mill in 1884. A coal-fired generating station run by Beloit Water, Gas and Electric Company began operating on the property in 1908, with construction

Alliant Energy played a key role in the \$38 million collaborative project that brought this special place to the over 1,000 students who attend this private liberal arts college, founded in 1846 before Wisconsin became a state. The partnership included the college's leadership, faculty, and students as well as the community, alumni, and a world-renowned architectural firm.

## BELOIT AREA SNAPSHOT

Population	111,808
Median age	39.8
Education	55% post-secondary or higher
Median household income	\$59,681
Median home value	\$147,021
Household size	2.6

Source: 2020-21 Beloit 10-Mile City Report; economic activity within a 20-minute drive of downtown.

finalized in 1913. Wisconsin Power and Light Company, a future subsidiary of Alliant Energy, took over the power plant in 1925.

As demand for power grew along with the state's manufacturing sector, the Blackhawk Generating Station was expanded in 1927, and again in the mid-1940s, with a conversion to natural gas fuel in 1986.

For decades, Alliant Energy's power plant was a workhorse power-provider for the city of Beloit, energizing its strong industrial sector. Its tall stack served as an area landmark. Nestled between the Rock River in downtown Beloit and the Beloit College campus, it contributed greatly to the economic development of Beloit (pop. 37,000) and southern Wisconsin.

However, as the generating station approached the century mark, its relatively small capacity by modern standards made it too inefficient and costly to customers and the company for continued operation. The plant was among the most expensive to operate in Alliant Energy's Wisconsin generating

Donna Walker, MBA, MEDP, is the Senior Community and Economic Development Manager in Wisconsin for Alliant Energy. (DonnaWalker@alliantenergy.com)

## 100-YEAR-OLD POWER PLANT POWERHOUSE BRINGS NEW ENERGY TO SUSTAINABLE STUDENT CENTER

*Over the past decade, coal-fired power plants have become subject to increasingly tighter air emission standards. More recently, they have become less economical to operate, primarily due to decreased cost-competitiveness of coal compared with other energy sources. This has caused coal-fired power plants to be retired in increasing numbers. Communities that host these facilities are impacted by job and tax revenue loss. Utilities face an added challenge of deciding what to do with a gutted structure and the surrounding site after decommissioning. This article examines how a partnership between a Midwest utility and a college led to maximizing the potential of a former coal-fired power plant into a sustainable redevelopment project. This collaboration led to Alliant Energy receiving IEDC's Gold Award for Partnerships with Educational Institutions for the Beloit College Powerhouse facility project.*



Exterior and interior photos of Blackhawk Generating Station in 2011.



Photo credit: Trevor Johnson.

fleet, and it had last run in 2005. In 2009, after intensive analysis, Alliant Energy decided to retire Blackhawk in spring 2010.

### **AN IDEA TO BRING NEW ENERGY TO THE FACILITY**

Decommissioning a coal-fired power plant is a meticulous process. It can take a year or more to complete. The easiest path to follow for a utility company is to completely gut the structure and tear it down, removing any visible evidence that it ever existed. Most coal-fired power plants are decommissioned and retired in this fashion. Alliant Energy's Blackhawk powerhouse structure would be different.

In the mid to late 2000s, Beloit College officials knew they needed a new recreation, fitness, and health space in the short-term, and that they also eventually required new student union space. The college wanted to continue growing, and improved facilities are key to attract students. The timing of this need and the potential availability of a structure adjacent to the campus almost seemed like destiny in the making.

Once it became known that one of the college's closest neighbors to the west was planning to cease generation operations within a 120,000-square-foot, seven-story building, quiet conversations started in 2009 between Alliant Energy and the college about acquiring the struc-

Decommissioning a coal-fired power plant is a meticulous process. It can take a year or more to complete. The easiest path to follow for a utility company is to completely gut the structure and tear it down, removing any visible evidence that it ever existed. Most coal-fired power plants are decommissioned and retired in this fashion. Alliant Energy's Blackhawk powerhouse structure would be different.

ture. The energy business and educational institution continued informal discussions about pursuing a dream to press the century-old powerhouse building back into service.

"We're looking at this because there is a very tight window," said former Beloit College Director of Communications and Marketing Jason Hughes. "I don't want to look back in five years, see something happening there, and regret not having at least looked into it. This is a building that could be something special and say something powerful about Beloit."

Before what became later known as the Powerhouse project could get off the ground, much more needed to be done. While the building with the towering stack was robust and sound, the past 100 years couldn't help but take a toll. Some portions of the roof and many exterior bricks would need replacement. The 1913 portion of the structure was in the roughest shape and in need of the most rehab.

The site and building work by Alliant Energy would take much more effort than a normal decommissioning because the end game was redevelopment rather than demolition. Then a final agreement needed to be negotiated, spelling out the parameters under which Alliant Energy would turn over the structure to the college.

These would include financial conditions, as well as the condition of the building itself: What would stay and what would be removed to keep the flavor of the old power plant in the modern Powerhouse project? Finally, Beloit College faced a fundraising challenge: It would need to raise what it initially estimated as \$30 million to complete the transformation from a generating station powerhouse to the Powerhouse student center.

### **TAKING SERIOUS STEPS TOWARD A STUDENT CENTER**

Later in 2010, it became clear that Alliant Energy and Beloit College were getting more serious about laying the groundwork to make the Powerhouse project a reality. By early 2012, Beloit College officials confirmed with local media that they were taking a closer and serious look at

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The team canvassed the campus with questions put together at their kickoff meeting to get student input and drive conversation. Two students, six staffers, and two faculty members polled individuals and groups to find out what kind of services and spaces students, faculty, and staff wanted and needed.

“We want to know what you want in an activity and recreation center; what you’d put in a space like that,” said Isaac Bamgbose, one of two students on the investigation team. “It would need to be more than just another box of a building labeled for fitness. It would need to be a place where people can come together. But to do what? That’s what we want to know.”

Team members routinely attended student club meetings and other events where students gathered. Athletes were heavily involved in the process, but the final facility was to be for non-athletes as well. The committee wanted any new space to be a place for all students, faculty, and staff to come together.

Later in 2012, sporadic conversations and negotiations started to occur to put more focus on a timeline and milestones that needed to be met for Beloit College to take ownership of the powerhouse and property.

By fall 2012, more serious discussions began about a redevelopment agreement. The local media took an even more visible notice of the potential project when the college sent out a news release in October 2012, announcing that it was partnering with Alliant Energy to explore the possible reuse of the company’s Blackhawk Generating Station as an activity and recreation center for the college.

“Alliant Energy is excited to be partnering with Beloit College and working through details of a potential agreement for the Blackhawk site,” said former Alliant Energy Chairman, President and CEO Patricia Kampling. “The college’s vision for the transformation of this riverfront site into a state-of-the-art student recreation and activity center that will benefit students for generations to come is very impressive and we are proud to be part of this effort.”

## BELOIT COLLEGE GETS THE GREEN LIGHT

The college’s board of trustees formally approved the exploratory work at its fall 2012 meeting. The college had been developing its plans for more than a year, and preliminary architectural plans and information from student and staff surveys were already done. With the board’s approval, the college had the green light to fully explore the project’s feasibility.

“I am very excited to hear the college board of trustees has authorized the president to move forward with final negotiations to acquire the old power plant from Alliant Energy to be repurposed,” said former Beloit City Manager Larry Arft. “This is a unique opportunity for the college to create another high-quality facility for the campus while contributing to the city’s continuing city center revitalization.”

At the same time, the college began fundraising to complete the project. College officials pledged to secure all necessary funds for the project without adding debt. So, an intensive outreach effort to alumni and the community was needed for the project to succeed.

While many details still needed to be finalized, both Alliant Energy and the college became more outwardly committed to making the Powerhouse project come together as the calendar turned to 2013. Beloit College President Scott Bierman and then Alliant Energy CEO Pat Kampling were energized and engaged in moving forward.

In the spring of 2013, the Beloit College Board of Trustees gave a more formal blessing but urged the college to proceed carefully and deliberately. Fundraising remained one of the key challenges.

The student and faculty surveys were completed. They identified an indoor track, fitness center, a lecture and movie hall, flexible open space, and areas that could take advantage of Rock River views as important features for the Powerhouse.

The upper floor would likely be expanded so it could include an indoor track. Other ideas that came forward included a “green” roof, competition pool, wellness center, event space, and numerous student activity areas and lounges. The college believed it would know by the end of 2014 whether donors were willing to financially support the project at the level needed to move forward.

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Students and faculty took a very active role and interest in the project that extended beyond filling out surveys. The Powerhouse brought about an interest as well in how the Blackhawk Generating Station fit into Beloit's history.

### STUDENTS POWER THE PLANNING

Students and faculty took a very active role and interest in the project that extended beyond filling out surveys. The Powerhouse brought about an interest as well in how the Blackhawk Generating Station fit into Beloit's history.

Beloit College and the Blackhawk Generating Station had something in common: They both shared a long history in the community and in their fields. The college had more than a 160-year educational tradition. The power plant traced its electric production back more than a century and supported the prosperity of an industrial and manufacturing city.

The Powerhouse project became a focus of a variety of classes on campus, many of which dealt with the history of the Blackhawk Generating Station and how that history could be preserved. An anonymous donor added to the educational value of studying the former coal-fired facility by providing Beloit College with a \$125,000 gift. Some of the dollars from the contribution were dedicated to four student internships with the architects as they worked to transform the building into a student center while preserving its history.

"If we are successful, Beloit and Beloit College will gain a landmark on the river that will celebrate the industrial history of this city while providing the college with a building that will be the envy of every small college in the country," said Beloit College President Scott Biermann.

In addition, individual students also came forward with proposals for the project. These ideas included reducing the building's water runoff, bringing more light into the building's dark basement, and considering several different landscape design plans.

Students consulted with science faculty to find out the practicality of their projects and later presented their final ideas to fellow students and college leadership. Student projects all had a common thread: They sought to preserve the structure's history and to educate visitors about its past.

### COMMUNITY CONNECTION IS KEY

Another view strongly and clearly expressed by students, faculty, and staff was that the Powerhouse should not only be for the campus population but for the wider community as well. The importance of the city-college connection came through, and many said that the project had to be a symbol of city and community pride.

Former Beloit College Director of Communications and Marketing Jason Hughes emphasized that the final project must connect the city with the college. "It may be surprising the number of people who said this can't just be a college building," he said. "It has to be a building the city is proud of."

With that in mind, the college made plans to have a river access point near the Powerhouse, which would extend the nearby park to include a path along the Rock River. The plans also included a deck on the back of the Powerhouse to open onto the river. The deck would allow community members to take in river views. Grant dollars would be pursued to help with the cost.

As the Powerhouse project gained more traction, the community took an increasing notice as well. The Rock River corridor in Beloit had already been developed over more than two decades into a major attraction for events, residents, and tourists. Representatives from many other communities had visited to gain knowledge as they were developing similar plans for their cities.

One of the few unimproved areas remaining along the city's river corridor was the Blackhawk Generating Station site. The site was ripe for redevelopment and doing so would fill in a missing piece of the city's river corridor puzzle.

For Beloit, improving the Blackhawk building and property would be another success on a list of numerous recent riverfront projects that were transforming the city and its traditional manufacturing-only image to a more contemporary place to live, work, and play.

### WORK CONTINUES WITH AGREEMENT GETTING CLOSER

The vision for the Powerhouse was starting to come together, and once the project was done, the college's existing fieldhouse could be demolished. But for now, any campus changes were pending a final agreement between Alliant Energy and Beloit College. Many issues remained to be addressed, though steady progress was being made.

By mid-2013, the college was preparing to accept bids from architectural companies to provide more information on the needed changes to the building to accommodate their plans. A working group was set up, and a hiring process was put together by the end of the summer.

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Because of the uniqueness of the project and the desire to preserve as much of the facility's history as possible, the group sought an architectural firm that specialized in unconventional redevelopment. In October 2013, a second architectural firm was hired.

"We are inspired by the facility's history and wish to preserve as much of it as is feasible," former Beloit College Dean of Students Christina Klawitter said. "We think having an additional architectural firm working with us beginning this fall is the right next step."

During roughly the same time period, Alliant Energy was working with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the college to identify any environmental concerns regarding the soil and ground structure on the site.

Environmental assessments had already been completed, and nothing of any major concern was found. Alliant Energy continued with plans to fully decommission the plant. By late 2013, a contractor had already been on site for several months removing asbestos. The planned removal of equipment started several months later.

In December 2013, *Architect Magazine* published an article on adapting power plants for reuse and mentioned the Powerhouse project. A Beloit College official noted that the redevelopment would be much more challenging than putting up a new building.

"It requires care at every step," said Dan Schoof, Beloit College's Powerhouse Project Manager. "It's much more complicated than building a new building. But we think the payoff is worth it."

Yet, Alliant Energy's pledge to decommission the structure in such a way to meet the college's needs and turn over the building and property for a nominal cost made the project more appealing. The college placed a sentimental value on making the student center a tribute to Wisconsin's industrial past by preserving many of the structure's original features.

## AGREEMENT APPROVED AND FUNDRAISING BEGINS

In late April 2014, the collaboration between Alliant Energy and Beloit College reached a more formalized stage. The Beloit College Board of Trustees approved a definitive purchase agreement for the Powerhouse proj-

Once the agreement was finalized, it would open a three-year window for the college to raise the funding for the project. If the funding was secured, Alliant Energy would turn over the building and property to the college. Beloit College officials also noted at the time that the original \$30 million cost estimate was two years old and might need to be updated to account for new plans and inflation.

ect. Alliant Energy then sought internal approvals to sign on to the agreement.

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The college maintained its commitment that all the money would come from private contributions, with no debt incurred. Smaller fundraising efforts had already begun, and initial contacts had been made to get a feel for whether the fundraising effort was feasible. Potential contributors were pitched the idea of a campus center dedicated to wellness.

The plan was to complete the fundraising in three years or less. Then, the college expected it would need between 18 months and two years to complete preparation work and construction.

In early May 2014, the college held an event for the public where the architecture firm in charge of redevelopment showcased potential drawings and designs. The amenities the Powerhouse could bring to students and the community were also discussed. Other meetings with student groups and faculty later took place around campus to showcase the project.

Alliant Energy approved the definitive purchase agreement in June 2014, starting the three-year period in which Beloit College would attempt to raise the dollars



Exterior photos of The Powerhouse in 2020.



Photo credit: Beloit College/Todd Anderbyrne

needed to repurpose the Blackhawk powerhouse building. The price tag for redevelopment had increased, and the fundraising goal was set at approximately \$38 million.

The college remained optimistic, despite the increased fundraising goal, as leadership had received some positive early response from their contacts with possible donors. The aggressive initial goal was to raise the funds by mid-2017 and complete the project sometime in 2018.

## **PRESERVATION PLANS UNVEILED AND FUNDING SECURED**

In late 2014, the college and its architects unveiled preliminary plans for the facility. The design included a conference center, a theater, and a coffee shop, along with several athletic facilities, including a competition-style swimming pool.

A new 17,000-square-foot addition on the building's north side would serve as a practice area for football, softball, baseball, lacrosse, soccer, and Ultimate Frisbee. A suspended track would weave through the middle of the building and be located above the pool, linking the various sections.

The design team was also considering a system that would draw water from the nearby river and use it as a heating and cooling source. Boiler or heat-pump infrastructure would be used to fill in on the coldest or hottest days. The system came from a desire by the college to be sustainable and also preserve the original interior brick and steel that can be impacted by a large variance in temperatures.

Historic preservation was an ongoing theme woven throughout the Powerhouse project. The college wanted to maintain as much of the industrial character as possible, including some banks of dials and coal hoppers. Another element that the college hoped to preserve was the massive stack that towered above street level. The stack was the last one in the city of Beloit and symbolized its industrial history.

"We are planning to keep a lot of the interior. There are banks of dials and coal hoppers that we are hoping to keep," said Dan Schoof. "We will preserve the interior walls as they exist today. We will not have to insulate the inside and drywall inside because we will be insulating the outside of the building."

Beloit College alumni and the community stepped up in a big way. Excitement and enthusiasm for the Powerhouse project translated into financial support. In April 2017, the college announced it had reached its fundraising goal.

About \$28 million was raised in donations from alumni and friends of the college and the board of trustees, with another \$10 million coming in from federal and state historic tax credits and federal new market tax credits. Another critical milestone had been reached, but much work remained for both Alliant Energy and the college before the Powerhouse would become a reality.

## **FINAL DECOMMISSIONING AND CONSTRUCTION COMPLETED**

Confirmation that the project would move forward provided final guidance to Alliant Energy on the intricate path to follow for the last steps in its decommissioning work. To finalize the decommissioning effort would take

more finesse than usual and require even more collaboration with Beloit College than had happened at earlier stages.

What would remain on and in the building and what would not become a regular topic of conversation between the energy company and the college. Alliant Energy and its contractor carefully removed equipment, while giving special attention to preserving historic features. Decommissioning was completed over several months,

and "the keys" to the structure were handed to Beloit College officials.

The redevelopment construction kicked off in February 2018. The college's estimate of an 18-month to two-year construction timeframe rang true. The finishing touches were put on the Powerhouse in January 2020.

## **THE POWERHOUSE OPENS**

A series of soft openings took place that month for swimming, softball, and baseball practices, as well as some faculty meetings in the new space. Students returned to campus on January 19 and eagerly waited for the doors to open.

Some students began getting access to the facility in late January. The entire student body came into the structure on February 6, and a long line formed outside as they waited excitedly to enter.

On February 7, a donors' and special dedication event was held at the integrated student union, recreation center, and athletics facility. Instead of a typical ribbon cutting, a switch was flipped to light up the Powerhouse that also initiated a pyrotechnic show. An official open house for the community was held on February 8.

"This is an open house in the truest sense of the word. We want to open the doors to the community to show off what we think is the best student and community center in the country," said Dan Schoof.



Interior photos of The Powerhouse in 2020.

Photo credit: Beloit College/Alex Garcia.

The Powerhouse realized its goals to connect student life space with recreational facilities, tying the project itself to the larger community and preserving the history of the city’s industrial past. The former power plant is now home to meeting rooms, nooks, and “hang out” space, an indoor track, pool, cafe, conference center, outdoor decks, lecture hall, and health and wellness center. A field house was added to the building. In June, a pedestrian bridge was installed to connect the campus to the Powerhouse.

“The Powerhouse is the culmination of years of planning and implementation that involved a diverse mix of public-private partners such as Beloit College, the city of Beloit, Beloit 200, Alliant Energy, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, Kerry, and other private donors to create a masterpiece example of redevelopment in the heart of Beloit’s City Center,” said Beloit City Manager Lori Curtis Luther. “The Powerhouse demonstrates what even small cities with limited resources can accomplish when they effectively collaborate and share a common goal to transform a long vacant property liability into one of the community’s most iconic, award-winning, and successful redevelopment projects.”

Many reminders of the generation station’s past remain in the Powerhouse. Coal hoppers and funnels, a 100-foot stack, old intake pipe, and retro gauges are among the features from the original building. The waters of the Rock River, long ago used as a cooling water source and pathway for coal, are now being tapped for a geothermal heating and cooling system.

While the collaboration between Alliant Energy and Beloit College to re-purpose the retired Blackhawk Generating Station came to a successful outcome, not every shuttered coal plant can become a college student center. The circumstances that resulted in the Powerhouse project will never again be replicated. With the Blackhawk Generating Station, a near perfect circumstance occurred where an ideal use for the retired facility became known fairly early after the retirement was announced.

### PLANNING PROCESS AND COMMUNITY KEY TO REDEVELOPMENT

Still, there are lessons to be learned. While a large focus and measure of success is the ultimate end use for retired coal facilities and the properties they sit on, the process to get to an end use is also important.

Alliant Energy has retired several fossil-fueled generating stations as it continues a transition to clean energy. There will be more retirements in the future. Each time, the circumstances are different, and the facility features are different. The company, though, has developed a similar process it follows that lays the groundwork for whatever the final use may be. From the start of the process, a balance needs to be struck between the company’s responsibility to customer interests as ratepayers and community interests that favor an outcome that supports economic development.

The customer impacts of coal facility closures are typically favorable over the long-term, given the avoided costs on continuing to invest in the plant, and increasingly lower cost of renewable energy that will likely replace the output. However, in the shorter term there can be some higher costs that impact customers.

The company’s process works to keep the community impact top of mind. Coal-fired generating stations have been community fixtures for decades, and generations of residents and workers have a strong emotional attachment to them.

In many rural areas, a job at the coal plant is revered and is among the highest paying in the region. Announcing a plant closure hits hard on a number of levels and brings with it many economic development challenges. With that in mind, Alliant Energy provides communities with as much lead time as possible regarding the re-

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retirement dates of its coal-fired facilities. This allows the company to do everything it can to assist the impacted employees, gives the community time to adjust to the reality of upcoming closure, and provides the opportunity to adequately explore potential future uses for the structures and surrounding property with local officials and economic development professionals.

The company has a strong track record of working with its employees in a thoughtful manner as it has transitioned coal facilities over the past decade. It develops a comprehensive, long-term plan to work with employees to identify interests, provide retraining opportunities, and connect them with available jobs across the company or in the communities where they live. This is a winning formula designed to provide as many opportunities as possible to the top-quality, talented union and nonunion employees who want to continue working for Alliant Energy or other employers in the community for years to come.

#### **FUTURE SITE USE FOLLOWS A PARTNERSHIP PATH**

The retirement and decommissioning of less efficient, higher cost coal plants fulfills the company's responsibility to its customers. This is just the start of the process as the company's values focus on partnering with customers and communities to solve problems, create opportunities, and help make life better. Alliant Energy has a responsibility to its employees and the community to explore and maximize the site's reuse.

Once a retirement announcement is made, there is a high level of interest within the community on the future

use of the site. The company usually engages a firm with economic development and planning experience to help it plan and prepare for the property's future, which is a multi-year transition. The consultant works to engage the community early and throughout the process, guided by the economic development group within Alliant Energy.

While playing a large role in the process, Alliant Energy highly values the community's input regarding the decision on what to do with the land and structures of a retired facility. The company will remain invested in the area after the generating station is gone through service to its customers for many years to come, and it has a direct interest in building strong communities. Therefore, the company's plan for the site is driven more by community interests and customer benefits than financial gain. Its goal is to leave the site and/or buildings ready for future use and economic development by the community.

When a coal-facility retirement is announced, an economic development professional is best served by putting on their redevelopment hat and thinking about business or other uses for the site. The characteristics and location of the property will drive much of the analysis, but other factors will come into play as well. The community at large will be a good source of ideas too.

The relationship an economic development professional has with the economic development team at the energy company will be key. Economic developers should be active participants in the process. Your knowledge of the community and expertise will be an invaluable resource to an energy company as the future use of a former coal plant property is decided. 🌐

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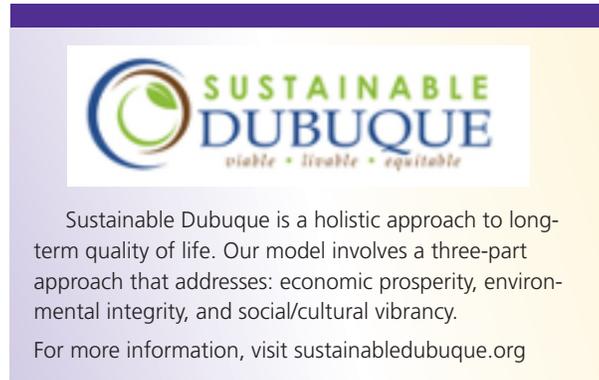
# planting the speed in iowa

By David Lyons

## INTRODUCTION

In Dubuque, Iowa (pop. 58,700) local employers are the source of more than 85 percent of the area's job growth. They're key to Dubuque's success and Greater Dubuque Development Corporation understands that. Recognized as the number-one program for existing industry in North America by *Business Retention and Expansion International*, Greater Dubuque Development's InfoAction program aims to continually identify and assess the needs of the area's existing employers, then takes the necessary actions to address both challenges and opportunities. Over 300 CEO-level meetings occur each year.

Often the interviews help our team identify a new issue within a traditional challenge, be it workforce, regulation, access to business services or other needs. Once identified, Greater Dubuque Development resolves it with a wide array of tools and relationships. However, periodically it gleans new challenges for which the traditional approach



is not effective. That was the case in 2016 when the Greater Dubuque Development InfoAction program revealed that local industry had begun to fear that neither they, nor the community as a whole, were prepared for the future demands of high-speed broadband access. On initial analysis it appeared that local industry was right to be concerned, and the challenge was turned over to Greater Dubuque Development's *Sustainable Innovations* group.

David Lyons is a Sustainable Innovations Consultant for the Greater Dubuque Development Corporation. (davel@greaterdubuque.org)

## InfoAction

Throughout the year, the Business Retention and Expansion team at Greater Dubuque Development conducts one-on-one interviews with regional employers. Area business owners, CEOs, and top managers share their valuable time and information by participating in our InfoAction program. It provides a deeper understanding of the area economy and data that helps guide our work. From these interviews, we respond to challenges and maximize opportunities as well as compile and report on regional trends.

For more information on InfoAction, visit [www.greaterdubuque.org/business-development/infoaction](http://www.greaterdubuque.org/business-development/infoaction)

## INNOVATIONS

The *Sustainable Innovations* group operates as an informal community development Research & Development unit, operating under the umbrella of the private development corporation but with funding and support from local government. It was an out-growth of the Sustainable Dubuque Initiative, a decade-long commitment and focus on improving the environmental, cultural and economic outcomes for the community. The group's role is to create research, collaborations and tools as needed to cope with new challenges identified by local industry and to assure that those tools are economically and environmentally sustainable over time. In 2016, it led research and data collection into local industry's concern on broadband. Among other important conclusions, the research showed:

## EXPANDING BROADBAND TO PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE

*Broadband connectivity is the lifeblood of a modern economy. Starting in 2016, the Sustainable Innovations team at Greater Dubuque Development worked with the city of Dubuque to build new partnerships in public and private sectors to expand the broadband network and increase providers. The initiative wasn't only about staying globally competitive, it was about being prepared for a modern workforce. This preparation was put to the test as Dubuque made the widespread leap to remote work and education due to COVID-19. The initiative received IEDC's 2020 Gold Award for Resiliency, Recovery, and Mitigation.*

Given the expanding consumer and business appetite for internet access and speed and the increasing number of devices seeking access, the only infrastructure predicted to be able to meet Dubuque's need to compete would be fiber optic cable (wired broadband). Referred to as "future proofing," the design requires extensive access within the community to optical fibers which in turn allows for significantly more production and flexibility than other existing systems.

- In terms of speed, services, price and competition, Dubuque was average in comparison to its scientific cohort of communities but behind its main regional economic competition (Madison, Wisconsin; St Paul, Minnesota; Rochester, Minnesota; Des Moines, Iowa) and that gap was widening.
- Given the expanding consumer and business appetite for internet access and speed and the increasing number of devices seeking access, the only infrastructure predicted to be able to meet Dubuque's need to compete would be fiber optic cable (wired broadband). Referred to as "future proofing," the design requires extensive access within the community to optical fibers which in turn allows for significantly more production and flexibility than other existing systems. The scientific consensus was that of existing, viable technologies, only fiber could support the growth and the whenever, wherever, however demand for connectivity that Dubuque's emerging creative economy would need if it was to compete globally.
- The primary strategy used by small communities on broadband was to build their own. This strategy was determined as not viable for Dubuque due its size, challenging topography of rocky bluffs bordering the Mississippi River, and the unusually high level of broadband complexity/demand already surfacing in the local economy (one size wasn't going to fit all in Dubuque).
- The primary strategy used by large communities was to facilitate access to relatively dense populations for market leaders/innovators (ex. Google fiber being implemented in Kansas City). The apparent minimum population needed for this strategy was a community of 500,000 or greater, which was obviously beyond Dubuque's capacity.
- Dubuque needed to create a middle path, one which innovatively combined both public and private sectors into a connectivity collaboration.
- Likely the most effective (and simplest) overall strategy for the city would be to leverage such a collaborative to create an environment where new broadband investment was easier, faster and lower cost to do

in Dubuque, despite its topography, than anywhere else (i.e., move Dubuque to the head of the line for investment).

- Within that overall strategy, there should be three specific efforts to kick start the collaborative environment (which were quickly undertaken and completed):
  - Identify all existing carriers/providers either already in Dubuque (or that should have interest in serving Dubuque) and create a facilitated discussion on the needs, plans and timing of future connectivity investments in Dubuque.
  - Identify existing city assets which could be used to collaborate on new connectivity investments and a means to make those available for expansion efforts without impacting the integrity of public safety needs.
  - Review and update all city regulations, ordinances, permits and procedures that could impact connectivity investments to integrate technological and regulatory changes and reduce costs for both city and carriers, while increasing speed to market for industry.
- It would be imperative for whatever strategy was developed to better anticipate the limited nature of public right-of-way. Initial analysis was that up to 30% of the city's existing major commercial rights-of-way had already become choked with existing underground infrastructure to the point that the opportunity for additional conduit placement was limited, if not non-existent. (Subsequent analysis noted that a portion of that limitation was caused by topographical constraints and city history, not surprising for the state's oldest city built on the riverfront and bluffs of the Mississippi. However, it also showed that a large portion was caused by poor carrier and utility practices and a notable amount of unauthorized activity.)

## IMPLEMENTATION

Based upon that research, Greater Dubuque Development then organized and facilitated a public/private collaborative approach for implementation of the new broadband strategy, including:

- Working with the city government on a comprehensive review of existing ordinances and processes to

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simplify understanding, reduce costs and reflect the speed of change in the telecommunications industry. The first set of regulations reviewed was updated and reduced from 12 to four pages.

- Working with the city government to identify and utilize its assets, capabilities, and other attributes to enable deployment of new and cost-effective broadband, wireless and service options in the city. Among other assets, the city so far has been able to make use of right-of-way, conduit, fiber, and wireless siting locations. For example:
  - A two-inch conduit placed by the city in 2002 for early traffic signal automation with 24-count loose fiber could be repurposed in 2021 to provide, in that same footprint, sufficient capacity for all city needs and seven private carriers, with the equivalent of over 2,400 direct fiber connections.
  - Facilities abandoned to a city during the consolidation of the telecom industries could be repurposed as cost-saving broadband “meet-me rooms” and co-location sites for industry (not to mention new revenue generation points for city government). (Figure 1)



Figure 1. A space vacated by a telecom client (at left) is now housing equipment for multiple carriers (at right) and generating revenue for the city through leasing.

- Upon examination, most cities will discover multiple abandoned conduits and ducts in their main commercial areas, many of which can be repurposed for new fiber deployment.
- Industry Small Cell and 5G installations are undergoing a massive build-out in this country and these wireless devices all have one thing in common: they need wire (i.e., fiber). Their needed routes often overlap with existing city fiber connections, saving industry time and money while creating new revenue streams for the city.
- Working with city and Industry to design efficient legal and regulatory mechanisms to enable government to operate at the speed of business and technological change. For example:
  - *Master Shared Service Agreements (MSSA)* which allow carriers and the city to settle all organizational, structural and regulatory issues, as well as financial processes, one-time and up front. Industry can then work with city staff to supplement or amend the MSSA with Project Statements (specific

Industry Small Cell and 5G installations are undergoing a massive build-out in this country and these wireless devices all have one thing in common: they need wire (i.e., fiber). Their needed routes often overlap with existing city fiber connections, saving industry time and money while creating new revenue streams for the city.

licenses for specific assets) on an ongoing basis. A collaboration project that would have previously taken weeks/months can now be completed in days. The city is now capable of operating at the speed this industry needs to thrive.

- *Flex Licenses* that allow carriers to be aggressive and nimble with their investments and assets in the community. One area where these types of licenses are valued by industry is in short-term or emergency needs. In one case, a major carrier was faced with the prospect of having to create an alternate path for its fiber for three years while a major DOT project was completed. While the city normally only licenses conduit, for good cause shown they will license their excess fiber if the carrier can show the business plan will create or repair its own connections. In this case, a three-year temporary license allowed the carrier to avoid significant costs while providing a seamless cut over for customers. Industry will also look to these types of short-term fiber licenses to reach new developments on the outskirts of town, giving them time to build a client base to justify installing their own new conduit infrastructure there.
- Developing opportunity maps which allowed both public and private sectors to analyze how upcoming investments could be leveraged for cost savings or new revenue generation. As an example, all pending private sector broadband builds are plotted on an opportunity map of city/citizen needs. The builds are then modified to accomplish the public needs, with the city reimbursing or crediting the carrier for costs, and in some cases cost-sharing the build itself. Dispersed city assets can then be cost effectively brought into the city’s fiber backbone – from public parks to lift stations, public safety cameras/phones to environmental monitors. Correspondingly, the city provides the industry with mapping and information on all upcoming capital improvement projects (CIPs) to allow industry to plan years in advance for collaboration and cost-saving opportunities these CIPs may create. (Figure 2)
- Creating a “living lab” environment for city and industry to interact and discover how the collaborative broadband network and technological advances

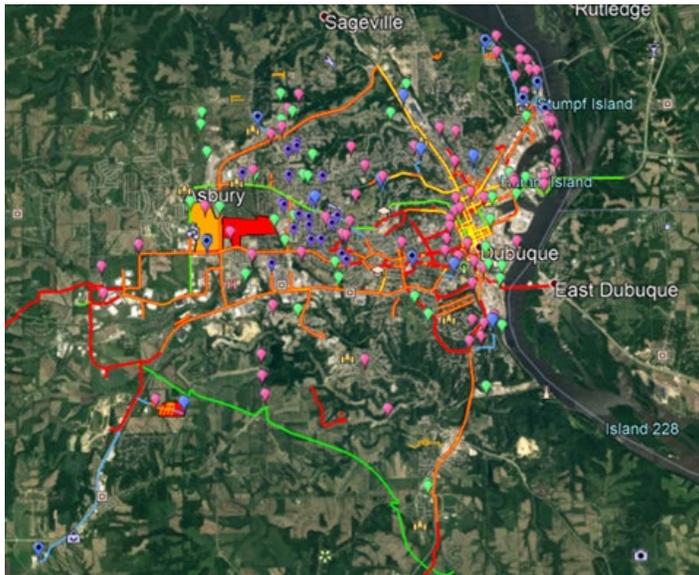


Figure 2. Collaborative project map for Dubuque. Available capacities and sharing opportunities are represented by different colors. For example, green lines represent new conduit under installation and pink dots represent city facilities or other IoT sites with which the city would like to connect. Both the city and carriers can use this to quickly ascertain what is possible in any new installation and who may be interested in partnering.

in fiber, wireless, sensors, big data analytics, and connected devices can create new avenues of opportunity for the city and its broadband industry. Industry leaders like NVIDIA and Milestone Systems and multiple major research universities are actively conducting research in Dubuque.

## RESULTS

By all measures, the effort has been a success. Examples include:

- In 2016 the city had two legacy carriers with aging infrastructure and one small wireless telecom. Today it has 10 carriers actively investing in broadband fiber in the community.
- The city first began placing conduit in the public right-of-way in 2001. From 2016 to 2019 the collaboration doubled the amount of fiber conduit available for collaboration. In 2020, we doubled that again.
- The public and private partners have mutually developed a plan for providing broadband competition and redundancy to all industrial and commercial areas, as well as a plan to complete universal fiber-to-the-home within a five-year period.
- The city government's budget for broadband infrastructure now leverages over \$10 of private sector investment for each \$1 of city investment.

Perhaps the most telling feedback came 60 days into the COVID-19 pandemic in Dubuque. On April 12, 2020, amid the rush to e-commerce, tele-health, online learning and work from home, the local newspaper (*Dubuque Telegraph Herald*) conducted a comprehensive

Greater Dubuque Development also undertook a series of interviews with local industry to determine how they were dealing with the pandemic and what else the organization could be doing. In interview after interview, the importance of the broadband collaborative came to light. Reports by CEOs indicated that the work from home shift went extremely smooth for their employees in Dubuque (although they reported that was not necessarily the situation for employees living outside Dubuque).

review of the status of internet connectivity in Dubuque. The headline that day started with the following: "Up to the Challenge."

Greater Dubuque Development also undertook a series of interviews with local industry to determine how they were dealing with the pandemic and what else the organization could be doing. In interview after interview, the importance of the broadband collaborative came to light. Reports by CEOs indicated that the work from home shift went extremely smooth for their employees in Dubuque (although they reported that was not necessarily the situation for employees living outside Dubuque).

Operating facilities were now able to access higher broadband capacity from carriers, sometimes within hours, to support their pivot to an e-commerce approach. And as additional needs arose in Dubuque for capacity, the infrastructure and planning were easily leveraged for more value. Free public Wi-Fi locations were quickly turned up to support small business areas and those without access at home in order to find multiple options in their neighborhood to connect. The fiber was also leveraged by the telecom industry that was faced with a huge push for increased wireless capacity. Their ability to quickly license city conduit through their Master Agreements vastly reduced the time and costs to place new small cell communication equipment throughout the community.

## CHALLENGES

As the strategy has progressed, a number of additional challenges have been discovered.

**Redundancy.** Globally competitive access no longer means just connection to fast fiber. It now means connection to a fast fiber system which is incredibly reliable through redundant capacity and failover planning. "Discovery by backhoe" continues to plague the industry, particularly from the increasing frequency of strikes in over-crowded and poorly located rights-of-way. Previously, redundant access in Dubuque meant a company needed to buy two separate services. (Imagine buying a second automobile just to assure you had transportation if your first car wouldn't start). In Dubuque, three responding efforts were undertaken:

- First, the city prioritized its public/private efforts to create additional, separate fiber routes into and out of the city. In 2016 there were only two major back-bone routes into and out of the city, putting large portions of the community at risk if there were a strike. In 2021 there are now six major routes, with an additional two under development.
- Second, it incented the use of “joint builds” and “duct banks,” where the city and multiple providers combined their infrastructures, making these routes almost impossible to poorly locate or mis-flag.
- Third, the city is actively working with industry on shared “fail-over” capacities. This allows carriers and the city to tie into each other’s routes and to use them when there is an outage. The concept is to make each other redundant without having to build anything new.

**Planning (Keeping broadband needs top of mind).**

As the city’s role in broadband expansion grew it began to encounter areas where previous long-term planning did not adequately contemplate the needs of broadband. For example, the city found that many of the easements it was entering into for traditional utilities did not contemplate fiber conduit. In some that did include telecommunications generally with the easement, it was specific to city telecommunications and did not allow for the new style public/private collaborations to use these easements. And while the public’s perception and expectation of broadband is now in essence as a utility, the city had not designated broadband or internet access as an essential corporate purpose for which many mainstream city funding sources could be used.

Normal city budgeting practices cannot easily monetize the value of the enhanced broadband system to the city itself and the community as a whole. A tele-health visit to the local community health center, made possible by broadband investment, may save time and costs as well as reduce future medical bills. However, there is no way to recognize or capture that value for continued broadband expansions. Fiber-enabled monitoring and remote activation systems can significantly reduce the incidence and severity of flooding. However, there is no

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As the strategy in Dubuque took hold and investment accelerated, it created a tsunami of additional workload for a small city staff.

Permitting, licensing, engineering reviews, inspections and a host of other demands on time threatened to overwhelm staff. It quickly became clear that the city would either have to increase staff or undertake radical new process improvements. It chose to do both.

mechanism for those saved insurance or disaster recovery funds to find their way back into city broadband investment accounts – or even the city budget as a whole. Experimentation on ways to monetize broadband-related outcomes is underway.

**Human Infrastructure.** As the strategy in Dubuque took hold and investment accelerated, it created a tsunami of additional workload for a small city staff. Permitting, licensing, engineering reviews, inspections and a host of other demands on time threatened to overwhelm staff. It quickly became clear that the city would either have to increase staff or undertake radical new process improvements. It chose to do both. *Note: At the time of publication, due to COVID-19 budget impacts, new positions have been frozen and the city is relying only upon process improvements to handle the increased workload.*

**Outdated, misguided or just plain wrong-headed approaches by state and federal agencies/partners.** While it was clear that the city’s ability to be flexible and pivot was instrumental in success to date, it is more and more often finding a complete lack of nimbleness on the part of state and federal government. For example, Dubuque was in a particularly good position to leverage its own infrastructure and existing public/private partnerships with new federal funding through the CARES Act for fiber access to low/moderate income households. Even though the city could show that in large portions of its lowest-income census tracts residents could not access high speed internet, it was turned down for assistance by both the federal and state agencies. The rationale was the federal guideline that such funds could not be used in a census tract where existing industry could show it provided at least one residence/business with high speed internet (defined as a paltry 25mb down/3mb up).

We have discovered that this is an issue plaguing nearly every metropolitan and micropolitan center in the country. Also, the federal government and many states, including Iowa, have increasingly turned to preemption of local authority under the banner of accelerating technology when in fact many of those restrictions can actually slow development in proactive communities. Providing local government incentives and support is the

Historically, private sector business plans have not concentrated new investments in low-income neighborhoods. While broadband technology is certainly a tool for opening new doors to opportunity, the lack of it in low-income households in Dubuque was creating a digital divide. The broadband initiative was able to position the city to both incent new carrier investment where it was needed most in these neighborhoods and gave the city cost-effective opportunities to provide direct service to low income households itself.

quicker and more efficient means to broadband acceleration and universal access to the internet.

**Deficit of equity.** Historically, private sector business plans have not concentrated new investments in low-income neighborhoods. While broadband technology is certainly a tool for opening new doors to opportunity, the lack of it in low-income households in Dubuque was creating a digital divide. The broadband initiative was able to position the city to both incent new carrier investment where it was needed most in these neighborhoods and gave the city cost-effective opportunities to provide direct service to low income households itself. The Dubuque broadband strategy has now incorporated a digital equity component that is unfolding in three phases:

- Free public Wi-Fi throughout the community's lowest-income census tracts. Using conduit, fiber and power incorporated within a major recent flood prevention project and an existing public/private collaboration with ImOn Communications, a public Wi-Fi system will be launched in an approximately 12-block area and create the foundation for additional Wi-Fi expansion.
- Low cost/free point-to-point wireless options will be created for low income families in these areas to provide residents who need higher, more secure access

for distance learning, tele-health, work from home and other similar needs. It works off of the foundation established by the public Wi-Fi system.

- The city will allow private carriers to leverage its public infrastructure to complete their planned fiber-to-the-home buildout. In return, the carriers will provide special pricing and bulk purchasing opportunities for the city to assist low-income residents.

## CONCLUSION

There is never a shortage of challenges in economic development. The COVID-19 pandemic has been uncharted territory for many of our employers and we do our best to help them navigate through it. This initiative showcases that the work we've done can make an immense difference, even in ways we didn't think possible at the time. We launched this initiative in 2016 knowing our city could be better prepared for the future and we helped develop a solution that made financial sense for everyone involved. The strategy has been put to the test four years later and our efforts have made a monumental difference for our employers and our city. 🌐

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# steps to revitalizing

## HAMILTON'S DOWNTOWN

By Judy Lam

With the pandemic affecting the economic health of cities around the world, its effects are especially impacting downtowns. Commercial Districts and Small Business (CDSB) is a section of the Economic Development Division for the city of Hamilton specifically focused on our downtowns, Business Improvement Areas and commercial corridors. Hamilton is a mid-size city located in Ontario, Canada with a population of more than half a million and located within an hour's drive of Toronto and the United States border (near Niagara Falls). The city experienced a significant downturn in the 1990's and 2000's. Some residents did not believe there was a way out of the spiraling slump. Our commercial areas were filled with boarded up vacant storefronts and an office vacancy rate sitting around 21%.

But Hamilton's downtown did rebound and is now considered a revitalized, cool city with people from the nearby Greater Toronto Area moving in. Developers, investors, and newcomers are taking a second look at this city of opportunity. This article examines the steps the city took to recover as the recovery was a deliberate set of actions approved



Art mural in downtown Hamilton named "Gateway" by Vivian Rosas and Vesna Asanovic. The mural showcases the creative spirit of Hamilton and reflects life and activities in this beautiful city.

Hamilton is a mid-size city located in Ontario, Canada with a population of more than half a million and located within an hour's drive of Toronto and the United States border (near Niagara Falls).

by City Council. However, COVID-19 is creating new challenges never experienced before that threatens the gains and successes made in recent years. Although the full extent of the effects on the downtown is not yet fully known, this article outlines the steps taken to date to assist our businesses in adjusting from the early shutdown days to the gradual reopening phases of the pandemic.

A special section of Economic Development was created in 2001 named *Urban Renewal*, and subsequently renamed in 2020 as *Commercial Districts and Small Business (CDSB)*. The mandate of CDSB was to revitalize our downtown supported by a budget to implement the changes needed to turn things around. The downtown has recently been experiencing exploding growth in multi-residential

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### ADDED CHALLENGE OF SURVIVING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Downtowns have had to contend with people and jobs moving out of the core into the suburbs. The city of Hamilton's downtown was no different and experienced a significant downturn in the 1990's and 2000's. Hamilton is a mid-size city located in Ontario, Canada. Today, it is often referred to as the "Brooklyn of the north." This article reveals steps Hamilton took to revitalize its downtown. Now downtowns are facing another unprecedented challenge – the impact of the pandemic – forcing small businesses to shut down during lockdowns and adjusting to reduced capacities. Hamilton acted quickly to meet this latest challenge with actions that it hopes will assist in the survival and recovery of these businesses crucial to the success of downtowns.

Without residents, the shops and restaurants have little chance of succeeding. People living in the suburbs enjoy the convenience of driving to their malls with amenities such as free parking. Offering incentives to developers to build housing in the downtown was key to rejuvenation. In Ontario, incentives cannot be offered unless a Community Improvement Plan (CIP) is implemented.

construction combined with a significant drop in office vacancies. Heritage buildings are being brought back to renewed life and people are asking “when did Hamilton become so cool”? The city has even been called the “Brooklyn” of the north because of our similarities to the number of artists that moved into the city adding to the creative culture. With our rich heritage of brick and beam buildings, we are attracting millennials and generation Z talent. So how did we do this? Many of the steps we took are easily transferable to most cities. The article focuses on six steps we followed to rejuvenate Hamilton’s downtown. Then it addresses how we are handling the unexpected and evolving COVID-19 pandemic effects on our small businesses.

### STEPS TO REJUVENATE HAMILTON’S DOWNTOWN

**First, we need to have people return to living downtown.** Without residents, the shops and restaurants have little chance of succeeding. People living in the suburbs enjoy the convenience of driving to their malls with amenities such as free parking. Offering incentives to developers to build housing in the downtown was key to rejuvenation. In Ontario, incentives cannot be offered unless a Community Improvement Plan (CIP) is implemented. These CIPs are planning tools that allow municipalities to make loans or grants in order to focus on the maintenance, rehabilitation, development or redevelopment of targeted areas. Hamilton created two programs that targeted the increase of residential dwelling units in our downtown. The first was the Hamilton Downtown, Barton and Kenilworth Multi Residential Property Investment Program. This program offered construction financing to developers to a maximum of \$4 million (CAD) per project.

The other program named Commercial Corridor Housing Loan and Grant Program was geared to renovating apartment buildings that were neglected. These loans were also used to convert excess commercial spaces into residential units. Both programs charge 0% interest and are secured by second mortgages allowing the developer to have another lender in first position. The result is that the city has seen over 3,000 residential units constructed with more than double that amount planned and in discussion with the city.

**Second, we need to help our small businesses invest in their own properties to improve the attractiveness of the stores and restaurants.** Retail shops and restaurants in downtowns offer a unique experience that cannot be found in shopping malls. They tend to be one of a kind and in order to entice patrons to come, sprucing up their businesses is vital. The city offers a few façade grant programs to share equally the cost of improving their façades. The dollar amount depends on the area such as whether they are located within one of the city’s 13 Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) or other specially designated areas. These programs are the most popular of all the programs and shows that sharing the cost of improving the attractiveness of the property benefits everyone. To further encourage the investment in art for which Hamilton is known for, an additional matching grant up to \$10,000 (CAD) is offered to businesses that incorporate artfully designed façade improvements or art pieces, such as art murals, on private property that can be viewed by the public.

**Third, we need to make downtowns feel clean and safe.** For cities that have a significant urban district, there are aspects of downtowns that make some people uncomfortable. For large cities, the number of panhandlers or homeless blend in and become accepted as part of city living. However, for cities that do not have the same density, people can feel unsafe and choose to avoid downtown. Our CDSB team liaised with the city’s local police force. The police created a special team called the *Action Team* as part of the Neighbourhood Safety Project. They wear highly visible, bright yellow jackets and the team is focused on intervention, prevention, enforcement and community mobilization, not punishment. Their mandate is to reduce violence, improve safety and enhance the quality of life in Hamilton’s most vulnerable neighbourhoods.



*Hamilton’s Action Team is part of the police team to reduce violence, improve safety and enhance the quality of life in Hamilton’s most vulnerable neighbourhoods. Action is part of the Neighbourhood Safety Project (NSP) and its objectives and mandate are in line with NSP. Action is focused on intervention, prevention, enforcement and community mobilization, not punishment.*



*Downtown Hamilton's newest urban park that transformed an asphalt parking lot to an urban oasis that contains a fountain and spray pads, an ice rink, shade structure and sitting areas, lawn space, trees, and accessible walkways.*

Another program that we were proud to finance as a pilot project is the *Social Navigator Program* (SNP). We worked with the Hamilton police and the Hamilton paramedics to develop an innovative program to refer “at risk” individuals and those who have had repeat interactions with the Hamilton Police Service, to appropriate health and social service agencies. The SNP is part of the Crisis Response Unit and is made up of a paramedic and a program officer. The goal is to address the specific needs and underlying issues of the person that may be the result of lack of housing, mental health, addiction or lack of stable finances and housing. This is a new approach to breaking the cycle of repeat offenders that is improving outcomes and optimizing resources and is now a permanent program due to its great success.

**Fourth, it is imperative that we work together with internal and external partners.** Improving downtowns cannot be done in isolation. We depend on other departments within the city and with our external partners and investors. Already mentioned above is how we work closely with our police and paramedics. Similarly, we rely on our own by-law officers in keeping the downtown clean and safe. A working group from all departments of the city and chaired by CDSB was created so that we could jointly work on issues that affect downtown. City representatives from planning, building, library, housing, finance, legal, and police all meet once a month to cooperatively look for solutions to make the downtown better. Projects include the already mentioned Social Navigator Program, adding bicycle racks, pedestrianization of a downtown park, funding improvements to a feature in a downtown park, cleaning up alleyways, funding an affordable housing project for artists, and piloting an on-street patio program.

Externally, we rely on the commitment of our BIAs which service over 1000 businesses in the city. We work closely with our Chambers of Commerce to support our local businesses. We are fortunate to have several post-secondary institutions in the city and we work closely

with them to support their initiatives and they support ours by ensuring we have the talent we need to attract the companies and jobs to the city. Our other partners include our international airport, the Port Authority, the health science partners, local workforce partner, and a university research park. However, without the investors and developers that invest their own funds into the projects in our downtown, we would not be able to do it alone. As enablers and facilitators, we work closely with them to help them navigate any potential issues with their projects. We support them with municipal advice, and marketing and research support.

**Fifth, the city needs to improve downtown infrastructure and placemaking.** The steps taken have significantly revitalized our downtown, but the city also invested in infrastructure improvements to make the downtown more livable. It has invested in more cycling infrastructure. It also invested in public transit by improving schedules and routes and built a downtown transit station to avoid having buses idle on main streets. Many streets that were one-way streets have been converted to two-way, making streets more walkable and pedestrian friendly. Hamilton has invested in urban braille on sidewalks and all new or repaired intersections will now alert blind and visually-impaired pedestrians of a curb slope or depression.

Investments in parks and public art have improved public placemaking, contributing towards the city's livability. Other investments included renewal of the city's downtown permanent Farmer's Market. The Farmer's Market is one of the city's oldest, most cherished traditions established in 1837. The city's original Central Library benefitted from a major renovation in 2010 adjacent to the Farmer's Market surrounded by offices, shops, library, cinemas, hotel and an arena. Our investment in public art projects has enhanced our sense of community and public places in downtown and across the city. From large art sculptures to art murals to utility box wraps which deter graffiti and represent our history and area, Hamilton's arts and culture sector is attracting much attention.



*Hamilton public art piece that features a giant bead maze at the downtown's commuter train station. The artist, Laura Marotta, chose to design this colorful piece to showcase “migration, mobility and connections between modes of transportation because the Bead Maze recalls the intersecting lines and movement of a regional transit system.”*

**Sixth, we need to provide incentives but slowly phase them out.** It is a delicate balance to provide incentives when many cities face their own budget constraints. However, we can justify that certain programs are a win-win situation. As an example, our municipality has several tax incentive grant programs. They all work in a similar way. We grant back a certain portion of the increase in municipal taxes that result from their redevelopment project. It is a win-win because underperforming sites may sit for many years or decades earning minimal tax revenue for the city. As a result of the development, the city benefits from the increased taxes in perpetuity and the cost is the foregone revenue for a few years. There is no need for the city to set aside the funds for this grant as it is taken from the future revenues earned on this site.

To further incentivize development in the downtown, development charges are partially exempt. This incentive was created to address the premium of infill development and the fact that many of the infrastructure needs are already present in the downtown area. This helps reduce the pressures of greenfield development and suburban sprawl.

As downtowns improve, it is hoped that downtown desirability will eventually eliminate the need to offer such incentives by providing the developers with the required profit margins to carry out these projects. To further advance the city's investment in public art, developers have the option to donate up to 10% of the development charges payable towards the city's downtown public art fund. However, as the downtown revitalizes, the development charges exemption diminishes. This has the effect of encouraging developers who were on the fence about when to develop their sites, to do it sooner rather than later. Façade grants are now limited to the maximum dollar amount every five years instead of allowing an application to collect the maximum annually.

### **ACTIONS TO MEET THE PANDEMIC CHALLENGE**

While downtowns are always changing, and the recent resurgence of downtowns is encouraging, it takes a pandemic to concern even the most optimistic economic developer. Downtowns are home to a great number of small businesses. Small businesses are the lifeline of many cities. In Canada, almost 98% of businesses are considered small business – with less than 100 employees. Downtowns also comprise many of the retail and service industries. Offices in the urban downtowns consist of companies within the Finance, Insurance and Real Estate sector, administration, public and social services, and food services. When many businesses were forced

to shut down during the early stages of the pandemic, Hamilton Economic Development worked quickly to see what could be done to help them weather the crisis. We partnered immediately with *Hometown Hub*, a local company, to quickly get our restaurants online to be able to sell gift cards. For people wanting to help our businesses survive, this was a solution that provided some immediate revenue without the need for the business to create their own website.

Another program that has helped our small businesses is called Digital Main Street (DMS) managed by our Hamilton Business Centre in Economic Development. It offers a suite of services that helps small, main street businesses achieve digital transformation. They provide one on one assistance to businesses with consulting and support. To date, it has helped over 600 businesses in Hamilton. The Digital Service Squad is comprised of a team of trained students and/or recent graduates with strong technology and digital marketing skills and experiences that help our small businesses grow their digital presence and grow their business.

Most recently, we partnered again with DMS and Google to offer the *shopHere* program. This program provides a volunteer website developer who will provide businesses and artists with over 17 hours of hands-on support to design and launch an e-commerce website using the *Shopify* platform. It is important to help businesses survive in this new era by having an e-commerce offering.

Restaurants were hit hard during Covid-19 when they were first forced to shut down. Curbside pick up helped some businesses survive the impact of lost business. The creation of Outdoor Dining Districts also brought back patrons. In May 2020, Hamilton City Council unanimously approved the creation of the Outdoor Dining Districts program reflecting their ongoing commitment to support economic recovery. Over 150 local businesses were able to quickly establish temporary seasonal patios and seating areas on municipal or private property during the 2020 Summer and Fall season. This program was so successful that it has been extended to October 2021. Economic Development absorbed the cost of the lost parking revenue and other administrative costs of patios located on public property. The application process was established without red tape and patios were operating in short order.

The winter season has limited the benefit of outdoor patios and restaurateurs are admittedly nervous about their survival in the cold season. Patios helped them survive for now but the effects of shutting down patios would be catastrophic. We are in the midst of temporar-



*Public art piece designed by Dave Kuruc in downtown Hamilton called "Music City Marker." It features a dozen lyrics by Hamilton area artists embracing the city's push to be recognized as a Music City.*

ily amending our façade grant programs to permit costs related to extending the patio season – outdoor heaters, tents and other protective structures, etc.

There are still many unknowns about the future impact as this pandemic continues. We do not know how it will affect our office sector. Will companies choose to give up their offices in favor of allowing employees to work from home? Or will they downsize the total space needed. It is too early to tell but we remain optimistic that there will still be a need for office space. People are social and one of the most difficult parts about the effects is the feeling of isolation. As economies move into stages where larger gatherings are permitted, it is obvious that people need to be around other people – but in a safe manner. Fortunately, Hamilton is a mid-size city where an urban vibe exists but without extreme density issues. Also, companies may decide that they can expand their office to double the space at the same cost as in larger cities while taking advantage of our interest-free loans to finance leasehold improvements. Developers may benefit from lower development charges and tax grants if they choose to build a new office building. They may decide to go for the hub and spoke model where a satellite office can locate in Hamilton so that employees are close to home and can bike or walk to work.

Discussions with office landlords have found that while tenants initially thought they needed less space while employees were working remotely, some tenants have realized that downsizing to less space won't work because of the need to social distance. One trend that is emerging is that tenants are renegotiating shorter lease terms. CDSB is proposing to tweak our office incentive program to allow for shorter lease terms as well as amendments that will encourage start-up companies to secure space in downtown Hamilton.

To continue Hamilton's long-term, sustainable and equitable economic recovery, a Mayor's Task Force on Economic Recovery was established in June 2020 which provides multi-sectoral leadership and direction to guide Hamilton's economic recovery in the aftermath of the



*Locke Street Outdoor Dining District created to show Hamilton's commitment to economic recovery due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This program allows eligible local businesses to establish temporary seasonal patios and seating areas on municipal or private property.*

COVID-19 pandemic. Hamilton Economic Development is embarking on the next five-year action plan in which the goals and strategies will be vital in addressing challenges and providing the framework for current and future economic opportunities. The Commercial Districts and Small Business section is reviewing and amending the Community Improvement Plan to plan for what incentives will be tailored to meet our future goals and objectives. Consultation with our investment community, business improvement areas, business owners, city partners, Chambers of Commerce, and the public will play a large part in addressing the city's economic prosperity and direction.

## CONCLUSION

I believe that our action plan and stated goals and objectives will prove beneficial to Hamilton's downtown continued success as well as meeting the pandemic challenge and that this plan can serve as a model and blueprint for many other cities facing similar challenges. 🌐





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