



## **Economic Development Program Recommendations January 2017**

### **Summary**

The Randolph County Economic Development Authority has undertaken the task of developing a plan to improve their economic development efforts. In order to develop a comprehensive program, RCEDA included members of the community as part of the process. The initial meeting included going through a series of exercises to identify the current economic development environment in the County. The result of the meeting was the identification of strengths weaknesses, opportunities and threats. These findings were presented at a gathering of community stakeholders and the participants identified some key areas that need immediate attention and could provide some critical programs in the local community. The participants chose five specific areas of focus:

- Quality Childcare & Youth Engagement
- Online Presence
- Community Pride
- Downtown Development

The following information encompasses three of the five priorities plus the overall economic development program. This is a starting point for the community addressing the three priorities and creating a robust economic development program for Randolph County. Additional information will be collected and included over the next three to six months as the working groups begin the process of developing targeted plans to accomplish the vision for the community.

### **Online Presence**

In order for a community to successfully compete in the global market, communities need to have an online presence that allows prospects the opportunity to discover the community from afar.

Site Selections consultants have their own method of determining the locations that are presented for further consideration in the process. Typically, a consultant will present 10-12 sites for further, detailed evaluation within a specified geographic region. In many instances, a community may not even know about a project until it is too late because they have been eliminated very early in the process.

One way to counter this situation is to have a well-designed, highly informative online presence. The online presence is not just a static website anymore. Websites need to be content rich, excellent graphics and contain interactive options for potential clients.

Many of the most highly successful communities have a GIS system available for clients to review and evaluate sites in a broad sense online.

In addition to the website, it is also important for the community to interact with the outside world through social media. A fully developed, implementable social media strategy has become important from a marketing standpoint. These channels allow communities to post regular positive updates and messages. Visually appealing and engaging content is very important within this area of marketing.

### **Evaluation**

At present, Randolph County has a very limited online presence. The economic development information is housed within the county's website and on the chamber's website.

The information available on the website is limited: Contact Information, a link to the community video, a link to the Biomass article and some basic information about the Randolph County Economic Development Authority.

### **Recommendations:**

Next 30-90 days – quick goals and no to low cost efforts

1. Improve content
  - a. Add information about sites and buildings available in the community (inventory is currently underway)
  - b. Add demographic and other information, including potential workforce within a 50 mile radius Add graphics to support content
  - c. Add information that tells the story of “Why Randolph County?”
2. Create a social media presence with active links to the website and links from the websites to the different channels:
  - a. LinkedIn
  - b. Twitter
  - c. Pinterest
  - d. Facebook
  - e. Instagram
  - f. Youtube
3. Get active links to chamber website placed on the County Website and other Economic Development websites.

90 days to 6 months

1. Redesign the website completely incorporating the new branding effort (see Community Pride)
2. Create more robust, creative and appealing content through graphics to share information like:
  - a. Location
  - b. Transportation connectivity
  - c. Wood resources
  - d. Regional demographics

3. Upload marketing brochures, maps and other marketing materials for download and availability

## **Community Pride**

Community pride is a critical element of economic development. When a community is cohesively together moving in one direction, the citizens are engaged and there is an element of excitement in the air, the community exudes an air of vibrancy and confidence. Additionally, the citizens are excited to be part of something greater than themselves and want to volunteer and participate in the revitalization, growth and sustainability their home. It attracts tourists who spend their money locally. It attracts businesses that see they can find a home and will have future success. It encourages entrepreneurs to invest at home rather than another location.

A key aspect to community pride is finding a rallying point for the entire community to support. The branding of the community overall, and especially in economic development, can be a catalyst for excitement and activity. The brand brings different groups together to work toward the vision using their own talents and provides for greater communication among stakeholders. It is the umbrella that unites citizens, businesses and organizations.

### **Evaluation**

Randolph County has an exceptionally committed group of citizens who are working to create positive change in the community. With limited resources, Randolph County relies heavily on volunteer hours to accomplish projects and initiatives. All communities rely on their volunteers, but it is especially critical in Randolph County.

Randolph County doesn't have a comprehensive message that the citizens and businesses can rally behind. Additionally, external stakeholders do not have a sense of Randolph County – what does it stand for? Who are they?, etc.

### **Recommendations**

Next 30 to 90 days:

1. Identify a theme/brand for the community
  - a. Name – program, initiative, etc.
  - b. Messaging answers who we are, what we do, what we value and how we do it.
2. Develop a comprehensive roll-out plan of the new brand across the county – how will you get the message out and engage everyone in the County to be brand ambassadors
  - a. Include all governmental entities
  - b. Include community organizations (Rotary, Kiwanis, churches, business groups)
  - c. Include all businesses
3. Identify funding sources to offset the branding costs

Next 90 days to 6 months

1. Roll-out the new brand program throughout the community

2. Develop and implement an external marketing campaign to economic development partners and stakeholders in the region and at the State level.
3. Measure the initial impact of the new brand both internally and externally.

## **Downtown Development**

A thriving downtown is a great testament to the economic vitality of the community as well as a great testament of the camaraderie among citizens of the community.

Downtowns create a critical mass of activities where commercial, cultural and civic activities are concentrated. Many downtowns have historically significant, iconic structures and distinctive features. They paint a picture of the past, present and future.

In addition, downtowns are a critical part of economic development efforts.

Approximately 80% of non-lodging dollars is spent on shopping, entertainment and dining in an intimate setting like downtowns. When a company is looking to locate a business, they want to locate where the quality of life is good for their workers and good for their executives. Many downtowns have suffered throughout the rural south with bypasses around the central business district, driving restaurants, retail operations and other service to areas that have the most driving traffic. Developing a program that encourages businesses to invest in the downtown area of a community can be a great tool in revitalizing the downtown area and encouraging tourists to spend more of their dollars in the local community.

## **Evaluation**

Randolph County residents take pride in the downtowns of both Cuthbert and Shellman. The community has suffered population decline and an economic drought that had led to the closure of some businesses. The community has invested in restoring the historical County Courthouse and has worked to improve the appearance of the square and surrounding areas.

## **Recommendations**

Next 30-90 days

1. Create a comprehensive community vision for downtown development.
2. Create Community Transformation Strategies that provide a clear sense of direction and priorities for revitalization.
3. Create a downtown business owners program that provides opportunities for marketing to the community and to regional areas.
4. Develop a list of targeted businesses (like a coffee shop, ice cream shop, art gallery, restaurants, hotel /lodging) that could be successful in the downtown business districts.
5. Research and develop downtown business funding opportunities, like facade grants.
6. Create a start-up kit for the downtown area for potential new businesses.

90 days to 6 months

1. Develop downtown development standards to create a comprehensive approach to a cohesive downtown could include façade standards, signage, awnings, planters, and outdoor seating.
2. Create a LOCAL campaign for the community to encourage citizens to frequent downtown businesses.
3. Create events or activities at least quarterly that bring people into the downtown area to create more traffic for existing businesses (farmers markets, festivals, parades, outdoor movies, Taste of Randolph)
4. Identify potential opportunities to create a downtown residential community.
5. Evaluate funding sources for major projects and begin applying for funding through programs like CDBG.

## **Economic Development Program**

### **Program of Work**

Successful economic development organizations have a balanced approach to creating new jobs and increasing capital investment. The balance comes by focusing on three key areas:

- Business Recruitment – focused on recruiting new business investment from outside the community, targeted approach identifying and recruiting businesses with the target industry clusters, working with state and regional partners to communicate assets, activities, product and incentive programs to encourage location to Randolph County
- Business Retention and Expansion – focused internally on working with existing business to grow their operations in Randolph and also to manage potential closures due to external forces.
- Business Startups – internally focused on helping new businesses get off the ground, provide guidance and resources to help new businesses succeed and grow

Within in each of the three areas, there are specific tasks that will create a solid foundation for the community's economic development program. The following are recommendations for near-term activities, in addition to the recommendations for the 5 Community Priorities, which will continue moving Randolph forward.

### **Recommendations:**

Next 30-90 days

1. Inventory of existing product – sites and buildings – currently underway.
2. Create a new business start-up kit to help and encourage new businesses to open in the community.
3. Create an existing industries council that meets at least quarterly to address issues facing existing business, get feedback on workforce development, and get counsel on possible public policy initiatives that would benefit expansion and growth locally.
4. Existing Industry Visitation Program – set a schedule of visits to each of the existing major employers, especially private sector, as well as all companies with manufacturing and distribution operations to have one-on-one meetings – minimum of annually visiting each company.

5. Collect content for the online marketing program – outline under online presence – and get information up quickly to reach the external world.
6. Development a comprehensive marketing plan that includes a budget and every aspect of the marketing program covering all three of the program areas.
7. Create a marketing brochure with the newly minted brand that can be printed, but more importantly, will be available online for download.
8. Create a job description for the two staff positions.
9. Identify resources and develop a fundraising plan to meet the proposed budget for the new program.
10. Identify long-term economic development related infrastructure projects and product development efforts (adding new sites and buildings to the existing inventory).

#### Target Industries

- Value-Added Wood Products
- Food Processing
- Agribusiness
- Tourism
- Equipment Manufacturing

#### **Tourism**

The Randolph County Chamber of Commerce is playing a major role in this strategic planning, with the President working with each committee and taking the lead as the contact with the consultant. The Chamber has a strong active Tourism Committee which has already brought a number of tourism opportunities to Randolph County. Tourism is a huge component of economic development and is included in this strategic planning.