



Strategic Planning for Economic Development in Rural Areas and Small Towns of Oklahoma

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Economic development has become the “watchword” for rural Oklahoma as local leaders struggle to revitalize the rural economy. Economic development is concerned with diversifying the rural economy and creating additional jobs and income to maintain and enhance the quality of life in rural towns and communities. A troubled agricultural industry, declining resource prices, and national economic trends have all combined to challenge those interested in a strong rural economy.

Much effort occurs at the national and state level to address important development issues. These issues, including fiscal policy, the trade position of the U.S., and State development policy, are all critical to development in both rural and urban areas. Rural leaders need to understand the impact these issues may have on their local economic development efforts. But of equal importance is the fact that rural leaders need to know what policies and strategies are possible to guide economic development at the local level. These local considerations are the topic of this fact sheet.

Strategic planning implies forward thinking and anticipation of the future. Resources will be utilized and decisions made to achieve desired future goals. Strategic planning is the process of identifying future goals and how to achieve them. Strategic planning will clarify the process of building a local foundation for economic development. There is nothing mystical about developing a strategy. It involves hard work, communication, thought, and cooperation. To succeed in economic development efforts, a community must know where it wants to go and how it should get there. A strategy is simply a plan or a road map showing how to get there. Business firms are often advised to develop a business plan in order to survive in a constantly changing environment. The plans can be used to assist management in assessing potential opportunities and implementing decisions [1]. Developing a strategy for community economic development is very similar and necessary if communities are to succeed. Local leaders must be involved in developing the strategy because it cannot be successful without their total support. It is also important that local leaders understand at the very beginning that they must make a substantial commitment of their time and effort if they hope to succeed. The purpose of this fact sheet is to:

1. Review the benefits of strategic planning

2. Summarize the steps required to build an economic development strategy
3. Provide some tools to do some of the preliminary work in building a strategy.

It should be emphasized that this fact sheet is only intended to provide local leaders with information about strategic planning and not as an exhaustive procedure on how to complete such a plan. Sub-state planning and development districts, the Cooperative Extension Service, the Department of Commerce, and other agencies are available to help communities in developing strategic plans for economic development.

Benefits of Strategic Planning

Time spent in developing an economic development strategy will pay big dividends because it will [2]:

1. Outline the steps to follow. Economic development does not just happen. It requires the community to identify a number of intermediate steps to reach its final goals.
2. Promote efficient use of scarce resources. A significant amount of money, time, and people will be required for economic development efforts and these limited resources must not be wasted. The plan will provide rationale for resource allocation.
3. Improve coordination. Many programs, activities, groups, and individuals will be involved in the development effort and it is important that they not overlap or conflict. The plan will serve as a vehicle for communicating development activities.
4. Build consensus. The public and the private sector must agree on the major issues involved. This will lead to support in implementing the plan.
5. Increase public awareness. Without public support, economic development cannot happen. It is important that the public know how development occurs and how it affects the community.
6. Strengthen the community's competitive position. A community with a strategy will not only be inherently more likely to succeed, it will appear more attractive to potential business or industry than a community without a plan.
7. Encourage forward-thinking. The strategy will encourage community leaders to think about the future and to not overlook opportunities for development as they arise.

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Bringing the University to You!

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 42 cents per copy. 0803