

Involving All of the Community

by Jack McCall

We usually think of economic development as the job of a small group of community leaders. If we are trying to persuade a business to move to our community, that might be fine. However, if we want to engage in a more dynamic kind of economic development — one that utilizes the resources of the community to create new business opportunities and to make better use of the community's existing resources — the cast of characters involved in the development process needs to be much broader.

Communities that draw on the support of a diverse cross-section of the citizenry end up with more economic development ideas and projects than communities that rely on a select few individuals.

But how is this accomplished? How can we get people involved? Indeed one of the universal complaints of community leaders is, "the same group of people do everything in this town." But in the coffee shops it's easy to hear other people saying, "there's just a small group of people in this town who control everything."

Ironically, most community leaders feel overworked and would welcome help; they do not want to keep the work of improving the community an exclusive privilege. The problem is knowing how to get others in the community involved.

We cannot make people feel they are needed simply by placing an article in the local newspaper inviting "everyone who is interested" to come to a meeting and join the community development organization. That usually leads to disappointment. Recruiting new people requires some planning and some work, but it is well worth the effort. It will result in uncovering a treasure of talent, intelligence, and energy.

Let me broadly sketch out three steps your existing community development or leadership organization can take to broaden its base — and, in turn, strengthen your town or city's development efforts.

Step 1. Organizing the Effort. Begin by creating a profile of the structure of your community. All communities are diverse and complex, with different sectors having separate, but important, roles. Each sector of the community needs to be represented in order to have an effective *community* development organization.

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Prepare a list of the different occupations and lifestyles found in your community. It will be helpful to list them on a flip chart or a large sheet of butcher paper. You can put the occupational categories across the top of the page. Your list might look like this:

<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Elected Officials</i>
<i>Retailers</i>	<i>Social Workers</i>
<i>Factory Workers</i>	<i>Bankers</i>
<i>Attorneys</i>	<i>Business Owners</i>
<i>Trades People</i>	<i>Homemakers</i>
<i>School Administrators</i>	<i>Insurance Agents</i>
<i>Government Workers</i>	<i>Ministers</i>
	<i>Real Estate Brokers</i>

Add any other groups important to your community. Be sure to include all economic sectors in your community. On the left side of the page, place age categories.

Next, list the names of individuals under each category. Take time to work on this list for a few meetings. Don't hesitate to ask people outside of your group to suggest

names of others to include on this list. Do whatever it takes to ensure that you have a cross-section of the community. These will be the individuals to be "recruited" (see Step 2 below).

Step 2. Recruitment. It is very important that each person be contacted personally. If you rely on a news article or just a letter you will end up recruiting the "same old people." A letter followed by a personal contact, followed by a reminder phone call should be the minimum. Some communities place each name on a card which is assigned to one of the recruiting committee members. Yes, the effort required is large, but it will be rewarding.

Step 3. The First Meeting. This is your chance to listen to the people you have recruited. There will be new faces with new ideas. Don't try to get them to do what you as a committee, or organization, feel is best for the community. People will be committed and remain committed when they feel they have had a part in developing the plan.

SUMMING UP:

While broadening the base of a community development organization takes time and energy, the results will likely be a more diverse and energized membership. There will be a greater pool of resources, both human and financial, to draw on to accomplish projects that will improve the community. In addition, your organization will have much greater assurance that the development plans and projects it promotes reflect a consensus of the community. ♦

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by Jack McCall on strategies for strengthening community economic development.