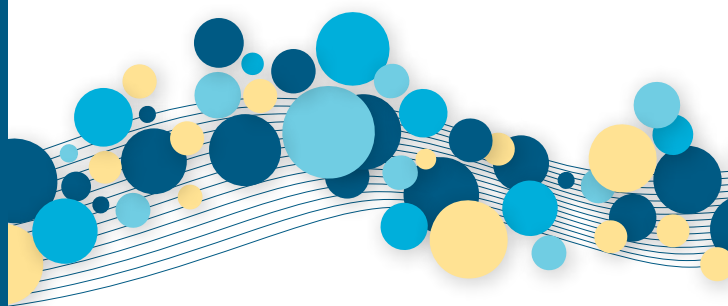


Turning Strategies into

Action



Economic Development Planning Guide for Communities



Turning Strategies into

Action

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INTRODUCTION

Turning Strategies into Action

Ten lessons about preparing the implementation plan for your community's economic development strategy

When it comes to economic development strategic plans (and many other community plans), there is often a disconnect between the preparation of the plan and its implementation. A great deal of volunteer and community time and effort has likely gone into the plan's development. The challenge for many communities is turning all the thinking and dreaming that went into the strategic planning into action – the doing.


This guidebook contains lessons from many communities and provides you with tips and suggestions to help turn your community's economic development strategy into action.


We look at 10 common actions that communities may not think through enough or simply overlook. For a number of actions, we have troubleshooting suggestions for those times when you find yourself challenged at the implementation stage of your strategic plan.

Integrating implementation plans into your strategic plan

The guidebook has two purposes. The first is to help you prepare the implementation phase of your economic development strategic plan. This is so that all the hard work and effort your community has put into the strategic plan flows into a set of actions. The second purpose of this guidebook is to help you troubleshoot if parts of your implementation plan seem to be stuck.

When should you use this guidebook?

Use this guidebook as a companion to your strategic planning process. The best time to use this book is as part of your preparatory work before you start. The guidebook can help you identify the issues you might think about during the public consultation phase of the process and when you come to writing the actual plan. The  symbol at the beginning of each chapter will outline the underlying purpose of each lesson.

Throughout the guidebook, you will encounter the  symbol which will be followed by troubleshooting tips and suggestions. While the troubleshooting tips might appear to be premature, reading them now is a good idea. These suggestions will give you some ideas about how to set out your implementation steps so you can avoid delays in the implementation process in the future.

The second time you might use this guidebook is near the end of the planning process when you are double-checking to make sure you haven't forgotten anything in the implementation plan.

And the third time, which you hope will never come, is months later when your strategic plan seems to be stuck and no action has been taken. That is when you should come back to this guidebook and look over the troubleshooting tips in more detail.

How should you use this guidebook

It's unlikely that you're going to read this guidebook from cover to cover. More likely, you and your community leaders will use this guidebook as a reference guide and flip back and forth between sections depending on the challenge.

So what is an economic development strategic plan?

A economic development strategic plan is, in essence, a plan that identifies where the community is today and where it wants to be tomorrow in terms of economic development. The plan sets out steps to make that journey and establishes a methodology to determine whether the community got to where it was heading.

Typically this type of plan will have a “where are we now” component to the document that lists community demographic data (things like population, education and employment), local and regional trends in major and minor industries, and local resources such as availability of land, state of infrastructure and other community assets.

Once the “where are we now” component of the economic development strategic plan is completed, the next step is for the community to decide “where do we want to go” or, in more technical terms, establish a vision and goals. Typically this part of the plan looks down the road 10 to 20 years and sets out a picture of the community in the future. The goals are often accompanied by objectives. While a goal can be somewhat general, objectives are more specific. Objectives should be SMART – specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely.

Once a vision and goals (and objectives) have been identified, the next step is to identify strategies and actions to achieve them. The strategies should take into account the realities of the community and reflect the capacity (both human and fiscal) of the community. It is generally a good practice for the particular strategies and action steps to be accompanied by deliverables (the “what”) and timelines (the “when”).

The final step in the strategic plan is the measurement or “did we make it” step. This is a good way for a community to stay on track and determine if it is making progress towards its goals or if it needs to evaluate the plan and rethink some of the goals, strategies, actions, or timelines.

More than just economic development

Just before you get started, you should note that while the focus of this guidebook is on economic development, many of the tips are equally applicable to plans for culture, social services, roads and sewers, and many other issues facing your community. These plans always answer those four important questions – where are you now, where do you want to be, how will you get there, and how will you know when you’ve arrived.

STEPS TO TAKING ACTION

The steps that one community takes to implement its strategic plan can be different from the steps taken by another community. But whatever challenges your community faces there are some common issues that the most successful strategic economic development plans take into consideration. These can be boiled down into five general themes—leadership, context, communications, process, and resources. Within those themes here are ten important lessons shared by successful communities in compiling this guidebook.

Leadership

A person or group of people or unifying idea to get the community to move along. More specifically, a strategic plan should:

1. Identify a leader to drive the implementation

You need an advocate or leader to lead the implementation.

2. Identify an organization to take charge

People to follow-up and take on the implementation after the economic development strategy committee has completed its work.

Communications

This is the grease that gets the many parts to move. It might be top down, bottom up, or among peers.

3. Create community buy-in

Public involvement is critical to implementation of the plan; the community needs to know about the plan and care about it.

Process

The actual mechanics of taking action.

4. Make approval of the strategic plan the starting point

It is critical the plan has support from elected officials. If the plan is not approved, it is unlikely staff will feel comfortable implementing it.

5. Elevate the priority of the economic development strategic plan

The implementation of the economic development strategic plan must have equal or greater priority compared to other municipal priorities.

6. Prioritize the implementation of the economic development strategic plan

Rank the actions so you know which are most important and which are nice but not critical.

7. Make actions specific and concrete

Make your implementation steps concrete so that you can actually complete them and confirm they are completed.

Context

Your economic development strategic plan will need to work within all aspects of your community and must account for social, financial and geographical factors.

8. Account for changing circumstances

Circumstances change over time and the economic development strategic plan may need adjusting to face new challenges.

Resources

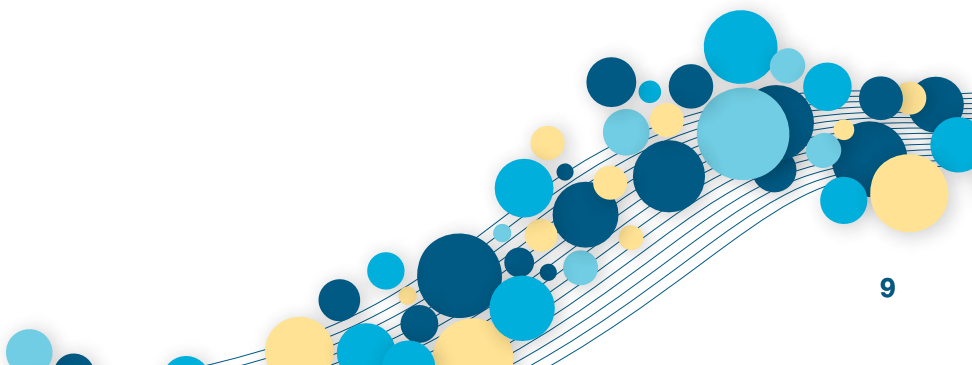
Identify and allocate human, time, and/or financial resources.

9. Identify people power

Each action that is contemplated should include an estimate of the resources and time commitments required of volunteers, municipal staff and outside resources.

10. Identify funding sources

Ensure that your implementation plan comes with an estimate of the budget required and potential funding sources.



Leadership — Implementation tips

1. IDENTIFY A LEADER TO DRIVE THE IMPLEMENTATION



Why is this important?

In almost every case of a successful economic development strategic plan, there is a driving force behind the plan – a champion that believes strongly in the project and will work to see it through to completion. Without this energy behind the implementation of the strategic plan, focus, momentum and enthusiasm may soon wane and local interest may shift as the next new thing appears on the horizon. The champion might be the current chair or a member of the economic development strategic planning committee, a member of the municipal government staff, someone from the business community, an educator, or an active community volunteer.

What does the typical champion look like?

Committee champions share some common traits:

- They know the community and more importantly they know the people who live there and the economic development challenges and opportunities of the area.
- They're enthusiastic about all aspects of community life and think in a holistic way. They know and believe in the importance of more than just business or more than just culture or more than just social service or more than just tourism.
- They are willing to make the time and the commitment to see the implementation through. Perhaps this is the most important trait to look for, since the chair is often the inspiration for others to work through the challenges and get on with the job.

- They will probably be known for other community successes where they played a key role.

The most important aspects of being a champion are personalities and perseverance. These community leaders can, and often do, come from every walk of life.

Where are likely places we should look for a champion to chair the implementation committee?

Some typical backgrounds of champions include:

- Chamber of commerce executive
- A person who works in the main industry of your community (e.g. agriculture, resources)
- The chair of the group that prepared the original economic development plan

Typically, municipal employees do not act as the chair of the implementation group. That is because a staff member acting as chair may be put in an awkward position if the committee wants one thing and municipal staff is given a different set of marching orders from senior municipal officials. It is also not likely that the head of the implementation committee is going to be a private consultant working for the committee or the municipality. Their job is more likely to advise than it is to implement (and you'll likely need to pay for the consultant's services).

What do you need to think about?

For your implementation plan, think about the following:

- **What if** the senior members, especially the chair and vice chair of the committee, that put together the economic development strategic plan are burnt out, tired, or have moved on to something else and just don't want to implement the plan?
- **What if** committee members are interested in following up with the implementation but don't know how to get involved?
- **What if** the local media looks for a spokesperson but they can't find one?
- **What if** people point to others as key players but those key players point at someone else?

How does the economic development strategy implementation committee chair work with municipal staff?

A committee is typically set up to advise rather than manage the community's economic development activities. That means that municipal staff will likely work with the implementation committee but won't be taking direct orders from the committee. This is an important concept to keep in mind.

Naturally, the most effective relationships are the ones where the staff and the chair see eye-to-eye on the vision for the community and feel the same pressure to get on with the job. But you'll also find many successful relationships where the two might have different ideas about timing of certain projects and the resources needed. What they do share is a common passion for the community's economic wellbeing.

What is the job description of the project implementation leader?

So what does a project leader do other than lead? That is not as silly as it sounds. Sometimes a leader needs to know when to get out of the way and let someone better able or better positioned take over a specific project.

As a general rule, the project leader can expect to get involved in the following types of projects related to implementing the economic development strategic plan (in collaboration with other board members and municipal staff):

Setting vision and direction for the committee.

This includes:

- Leading the implementation of the economic development vision
- Prioritizing and leading (or coordinating) the implementation projects

Determining organization and governance.

This includes:

- Recruiting and selecting committee members
- Setting up subcommittee structure

Managing communications with stakeholders and community such as:

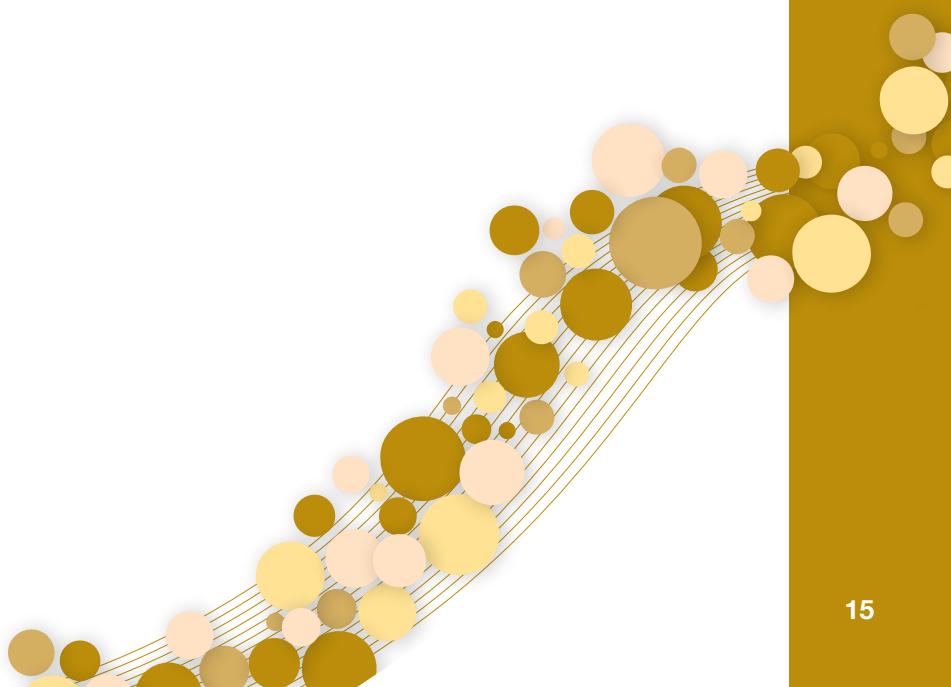
- Representing the committee to the community
- Representing the committee to municipal council
- Acting as the primary media contact

Managing relationships both internal to the community and with outside groups such as:

- Working with municipal departments (through the economic development municipal staff)
- Maintaining relationships with elected officials in other orders of government
- Maintaining relationships with outside third-party partners

Identifying and allocating resources in consultation with the committee including:

- Prioritizing committee member time
- Overseeing municipal financial resources (if any) allocated to committee



2. IDENTIFY AN ORGANIZATION TO TAKE CHARGE



Why is this important?

Unless there is a group, organization, or person specifically designated to take on the task of “making the plan happen,” the strategic plan may collect dust on someone’s book shelf. That group of people is the engine that drives the implementation program, so it is worthwhile to spend some time to make sure you have assembled the right implementation team. Remember it isn’t unusual to find that there is a bit of scrambling to identify a leader or group of people willing and interested to carry on the work and implement the plan.

What do you need to think about?

When your community tries to assemble a leadership group, think about:

- **What if** the economic development strategy committee disbands itself after it completes the strategy and no other group is appointed to implement the plan?
- **What if** there is no chair or only an acting chair?
- **What if** there is no municipal staff appointed to assist a committee?
- **What is** the right mix of skills to have on the economic development strategic plan implementation committee and who in the community has that skill set?

Where is the most natural place to look for committee members?

The implementation committee might be made up of the same people who prepared the strategy or the group responsible for advising municipal council on economic development issues. Either is a good starting point to put together a group to implement the economic development strategic plan.

Who should be on the committee?

Let's say that the original strategic planning committee has disbanded and is no longer available to help (maybe no time or no interest) or there isn't a volunteer economic development advisory committee that you can draw members or support from. If you are starting from scratch then you might try recruiting the following people:

- Municipal councillor(s) especially the chair of the economic development committee
- Chair or representative of the chamber of commerce
- Chair or representative of the business association
- Chair or representative of the tourism sector
- Representative from the community's largest employers
- Representative from the major local industrial sector (*e.g. agriculture, manufacturing, resources*)
- Representative of social service organizations or service clubs
- Representative from the local university, college or training centre
- Representative from the arts, cultural, heritage sector
- Representative from the sports and recreation sector

The last three representatives might seem unusual but with the transition to a knowledge-based economy, these sectors are playing an increasingly important role in attracting businesses and employees. Municipal staff usually sit on the committee as advisors and implementers rather than as the leader.

You might also want to consider local residents who have retired, such as that ex-professor or that person who used to run that big company in the big city who has now moved back to his or her home town. These forgotten resources may have the time, the skills, and most importantly, the interest to get involved in implementing the economic development plan.

What types of committees do we need to establish and what are their roles and responsibilities?

As the implementation committee organizes its work, it might be more efficient to establish sub-committees to tackle particular responsibilities, such as communications or to take on specific projects such as developing a business recruitment, expansion, and retention program. Sometimes the committee as a whole is responsible, sometimes just the executive.

The following chart gives examples of different responsibilities for different committees and sub-committees you might set up. Keep in mind the chart is just an example of one way to organize the implementation of the economic development strategic plan. Every community will have a committee structure that reflects their particular circumstances.

Exhibit 1

RESPONSIBILITY OF DIFFERENT COMMITTEES	
THE ISSUE	SUB-COMMITTEE
Leadership	Nomination and search
Communications	Communications
Process	Whole committee
Context	Whole committee
Resources	Executive committee

Communications — Implementation tips and troubleshooting

3. CREATE COMMUNITY BUY-IN



Why is this important?

The most successful economic development strategic plans are those that have a lot of buy-in from stakeholders, municipal staff, the business community, and the public. The result: the community is behind the spirit of the plan and is actively involved in its development and implementation.

Unfortunately, in a number of communities, the situation may be far from perfect. The public may not know about, or care about, the economic development strategic plan. Municipal staff and politicians may not see its implementation as a high priority at this time. It might also be the case that there is a great deal of *interest* in the economic future of the community but there isn't a great deal of *security* that the strategic plan is the right way to go to bring about that future. If the community doesn't buy into the plan then the document will lose its relevance.

What do you need to think about related to community buy-in?

When you are trying to encourage community acceptance or greater knowledge of the strategy, think about:

- **What if** most people in the community are not aware of the plan?
- **What if** there are splinter groups who have taken it upon themselves to pursue the projects they were interested in, regardless of what the plan said?
- **What if** there are no volunteers to take on the job of implementing the economic development strategic plan?

- **What if** when the implementation committee meets, there is more wrangling about the process than actually planning or taking action?
- **What if** the strategic plan is abandoned or so many new actions are proposed that priorities become unclear?
- **What if** public meetings are sparsely attended and those who you would expect to be interested, like the business association or large employers, don't show up?
- **What if** the local media hasn't mentioned the economic development strategic plan, or worse, they don't even know it exists?



Troubleshooting

After taking a deep breath it might be useful to see if there is any specific reason why there is little community support for the economic development strategic plan. To accomplish this, you need to pretend you are looking at the project from the outside for the first time and honestly evaluate why there is a lack of community buy-in.

Although every community is unique here are some possible reasons and suggestions to get the process restarted.

- **Communications and consultations did not fully capture the community's intentions** —The communications process may have been flawed during the development of the economic development strategic plan or has not been followed up to this point. Either way, people may not be interested, they may be frustrated or confused because they don't understand the plan, or they weren't consulted or weren't consulted enough. You may have to

reconsider the planning process. You don't have to start the economic development strategic plan from scratch again, but it may mean going back and looking at the conclusion and actions you thought were needed. These sessions could mean holding additional "town hall" style meetings or information sessions and could prove to be a good opportunity for community feedback that will ultimately build momentum for the project.

- **There is a lack of consensus on the committee that developed the plan** — The starting point for an economic development strategic plan is a common understanding and agreement on what the future of your community should look like. If the committee began their work without this consensus it will be difficult to implement any strategies developed from the plan in a focused fashion. The committee will need to go back to the drawing board and begin the process again.
- **The implementation projects are too big** — The economic development strategic plan could have recommended some projects or initiatives that were either too big or too complex for the available financial and/or people resources within the community. Try taking a look at the priorities of the project implementation or consider phasing the project in over a longer period so that you implement it in bite-sized chunks. This might make the completion of the projects easier to understand and implement. Taking a phased approach can help the community develop trust in the process and encourage willingness to embrace the implementation and ultimately support the economic development strategy. On the other hand, this may also mean the project will take longer to complete and take more management time.

- **There is a lack of leadership** — This usually means there isn't anyone championing the plan, vision, or tasks that need to be completed in order to make the economic development strategic plan come to life. It could also mean the champion you have is not effective.

Often, the community has worked hard to come up with the plan. The dreaming or planning development stage can be difficult and volunteers see the “making it happen” stage as yet another mountain to climb. As a result, key individuals or organizations want to step away from the plan for a while to regroup, or they may have moved on to other issues in the community. Without those key individuals, support for the plan begins to unravel. At this stage you might want to look at some of the information in Chapter One - *Identify a leader to drive the implementation* and Chapter Two - *Identify an organization to take charge*. This will help you find ways to identify leaders within the community to take on the implementation phase.

- **There is a lack of communication about the plan** — The plan and its related projects have been either “under the radar” or undertaken in stealth mode and no one, other than the committee members appears to “be in the know”. To deal with this situation a communications plan may be needed to get the word out about the strategic plan and the direction the community is headed.

ABCS OF A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Successful strategic plans and their implementation depend very heavily on good communication among many different stakeholders, including municipal staff, residents and the media. A communications plan does not have to be a daunting task to complete; however, it does need to answer the following questions:

GOALS

What is the ultimate goal(s) that you are trying to accomplish with the communications plan?

Think in action terms such as “understand,” “support,” and “change.” Do you want to inform, educate, persuade or gain consent?

MESSAGES

What is it that you want people to understand, support, or change?

What are the strategies, tools, and tactics you will use to get key messages into the target audience’s head?

This isn’t necessarily the advertising copy but the underlying thoughts that you want your audiences to hear or see and might change their behaviour (if that is what you are aiming for) and *how* you plan on ensuring this happens. This is also the time to think about what your answers might be if there are objections to the plan or parts of it.

CONTEXT OF THE COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES

What is the environment in which the communications will take place?

What else is going on or what are other hot issues that will affect your communications?

Are your messages about the economic development strategy likely to be crowded out by other issues that council, the public, media, and stakeholders are more concerned about?

TARGET AUDIENCES

What are the different audiences that need to be included in the communications?

This will include the people whose behaviour you want to change. This also includes facilitators (such as the media, stakeholder groups, business associations) who help you get your messages out. The messages may need to be tailored to each audience.

The following chart shows examples of target audiences and the messages that could be supplied with information related to the implementation of the economic development strategic plan, what types of information audiences might be looking for, and why it is important the information gets out to each group.

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW	WHY THEY NEED TO KNOW
Politicians	The vision, the projects being undertaken from the plan (in general terms) and the major themes being pursued.	As part of the governing body within the community this group needs to endorse the direction as being in the long-term interest of the community.
Economic development staff	They need to know the strategy inside and out.	These are the front lines of implementation and often the central information source on the plan for the community.
Other municipal staff	Like politicians, they should know the vision, the projects being undertaken and the major themes being pursued.	They need to understand the general direction of the community in terms of economic development. They are involved in other areas of municipal policy that will touch upon and influence economic development.
Other community groups and organizations (e.g. Chamber of Commerce)	The vision, the projects being undertaken from the plan (in general terms) and the major themes being pursued.	They need to understand and feel comfortable that the community does have a solid economic development plan. They should be aware of the role that they can play as partners in the community's overall economic development goals.
General public	Community members need to know and believe there is a strategy in place related to economic development. They should also know who to contact if they require additional information on economic development issues.	They want to be assured that their municipality has things under control and the long-term economic future of the community is secure.

COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES AND TOOLS

What communications tools are your target audiences most likely to pay attention to (e.g. print advertising, speeches and presentations, special events, public relations, social media)?

The possibilities are practically endless though, of course, they are not all equally effective. Their effectiveness may also depend on the audience. Think in terms of repeating the messages and using a combination of media to increase the possibility that they will break through all the noise of competing messages. Now is the time to select a spokesperson and to finalize your messages so that everyone involved in the communications effort has a common understanding of the messages. Regardless what communications vehicles you choose (it will differ from community to community and from audience to audience), you should add the following to your list:

- **Presentations to council** – The committee should consider making periodic presentations to council on the economic development strategic plan, progress related to implementation and recent developments. This will ensure councillors are aware there is a plan, what it is and become familiar with the goals of the plan. Keep in mind that council agendas are usually crowded so presentations should be concise and with a particular purpose. For example, provide information, seek a decision, and tie the presentation into another council project.
- **Short summary of the plan** – Prepare a short (one- or two-page) summary of the strategic plan for both public and media distribution. This summary should be updated regularly to ensure the information is current. The summary would address why economic development is important in the community, what the

vision for economic development (from the strategic plan) is within the community, the major strategic directions of the economic development plan, and what positive things have happened. This would be part of a larger information/media package which would also include the strategic plan itself and any background information that a reader might find useful.

TIMETABLE

You have two timetables to contend with. The first is the deadline by which time you are hoping to have your audiences convinced. Perhaps it is the next council meeting or a funding deadline. The other timetable is that of your audiences and facilitators. The media, for example, might need story copy submitted by a certain time of the day or a website may need to be updated once a week or month.

FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

What is it going to cost to carry out your communications activities?

It isn't often you have an unlimited supply of funds so you may need to include a budget and get the whole communications plan approved before moving forward with your activities. Examining your priorities is key to the smart use of financial and human resources.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

How do you know if you have been successful?

Given your communications goal, think of signs of what success would look like. It might be something like the number of people who come out to a public meeting, or it might be something much softer such as the number of households that were exposed to your messages. Think in terms that are tangible and easily measurable.

Process — Implementation tips and troubleshooting



4. MAKE APPROVAL OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN THE STARTING POINT

Why is this important?

Without approval (or at least endorsement) of the economic development strategic plan, municipal staff, and residents may not be able to commit to action. As well, without the backing of the local government it is highly unlikely municipal resources will be provided for implementation of the plan.

What do you need to think about?

Consider the following:

- Have municipal staff received direction from the municipal council to follow through with the economic development strategy?
- If the strategy hasn't been approved by the municipal council, has it come to council's attention? Has the plan been an agenda item for council to consider recently? And if so, what was discussed?
- Has the economic development strategy been rejected or unsuccessfully submitted to council?
- Are there lingering questions about the plan and its implementation?
- Are there concerns about the cost of implementing the plan either in terms of funding or the time commitment of municipal staff?

Troubleshooting

There are really two scenarios to consider at this point – if the plan has been rejected by the municipal council or if it is stuck in limbo with questions.

What should I do if the plan has been rejected by council?

If the economic development strategic plan has been rejected by council then the first thing to do is try and understand what led to the rejection of the plan—why did council feel it couldn't accept the plan? Did the plan focus on the wrong areas? Was it too vague? Did it not meet community needs? Figuring this out could take a bit of detective work such as reading through council minutes, chatting with the key councillors voicing objections, or discussing the issue with key members of your municipality's administration.

The next step could be to assess the feasibility or appetite to re-initiate discussions on the plan. This might include identifying difficulties encountered last time around and looking at ways to ensure these will be overcome in the new and improved version of the plan. This could include a more detailed plan to be put forward for council consideration including: timing of the plan, what resources are needed (dollars, staff time, and volunteers), and the approvals required to be considered. When would the revised plan need to be brought back to council for approval? How long will it take to revise the existing economic development strategic plan? Does the plan have to start from scratch?

What if the economic development strategic plan is in limbo – not yet approved but not rejected?

In this case the plan likely has been received by council and is still under consideration or has been tabled as information. If this is the situation, the plan has not been rejected but it hasn't been accepted either. For council to make a decision on the strategic plan it must appear on an agenda and be decided on a vote. There will likely be a process that must be followed by municipal administration to get an item onto the agenda. A good place to start would be to contact municipal administration and see if the economic development strategic plan is headed back to council in the near future.

If the plan isn't headed back to council for a decision in the near future, you may want to consider the same questions as mentioned in the above section. Council may have a reason for tabling the plan and you need to know what it is to move forward. It might be worthwhile to approach some council members and discuss the economic development strategic plan to ask why it has been tabled or why it is still under consideration and how you might go about improving the plan or bringing it back onto the council's agenda if it is believed to be adequate.

Possible considerations for council to reconsider the plan can include:

- The resources (such as an estimate of the time and money spent on the development of the plan) already expended by the community to develop the plan. This will all be for naught if the plan continues to sit in the place between "yes" and "no."

- While your community continues to contemplate the economic development strategic plan, other communities may be out-performing your community on the economic development front and therefore your community may be falling behind.
- Municipal staff need to have a solid mandate to move forward on economic development initiatives identified within the economic development strategic plan.
- The community, including the business community, knows that economic development is important. By moving forward with an economic development strategic plan, the message is conveyed to the community that council is committed to having an economically healthy and thriving community.

How can concerns about implementation costs be overcome?

This concern is likely linked to a view that economic development is an expenditure or a cost and not an investment. If the implementation costs have been poorly calculated or have not been articulated, this further feeds into this idea. If this is the situation, it is time to sharpen up your pencil and undertake the due diligence to identify potential costs. This will prove to council that the costs associated with implementing the plan are not insurmountable. And in the course of doing this, you may well find that there are ways to cut costs and time. For instance, you might use volunteers for some of the implementation steps or maybe identify stakeholders and organizations that could sponsor (financially or in-kind) parts of the implementation phase.

Process — Implementation tips and troubleshooting

5. ELEVATE THE PRIORITY OF THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC PLAN



Why is this important?

You might think of economic development as a facilitator (jobs and taxes) for the community in that it provides the resources (financial and human) to allow the other municipal plans to be implemented. The economic development strategy complements other municipal plans such as those for arts, culture, and heritage; the environment (including infrastructure); municipal administration; recreation; land planning; and many others. In the end, all the plans work together, accounting for the needs and desires of the community.

How do we know if economic development is not a high priority to our community?

In a perfect world, economic development would be one of the highest priorities for your community. However, communities must make tough choices on a daily basis related to municipal priorities and fiscal realities. So how do you know that economic development might not currently be one of the core functions of your municipality? Here are some signs to look for:

- There is no economic development function within the municipal or regional government or no one is directly responsible for activities related to economic development.

- There isn't an allocation towards economic development in the annual municipal budget and there hasn't been one for a number of years.
- The economic development committee set up by the municipality has not met in several months or their meetings are consistently very poorly attended.
- There are a number of unfilled spaces on the economic development committee and the committee doesn't have a terms of reference or a regular reporting time back to council on their activities.



Troubleshooting

Let's say that at one point economic development was important enough to your municipality that a strategy was completed. Now for one reason or another (perhaps another issue has taken up your municipality's time and resources), your community's priorities have shifted away from the strategy and its implementation. The following chart might be useful to figure out why this has happened and what you might be able to do about it.

REASONS FOR AN APPARENT LACK OF ACTION

IF IT LOOKS LIKE:	POSSIBLE ACTIONS
The economic development strategic plan was approved by municipal council a long time ago but I am not sure. How do I find out if that is really the case?	Often once the plan has disappeared off the local media's and municipal council's radar it's hard to find out its status. It might be useful to have a conversation with your councillor or relevant municipal staff regarding the strategic plan. They should be able to tell you what actions have taken place and about other municipal priorities.
The municipality is not adequately communicating with stakeholders and the community even though the economic development plan is in the implementation phase.	Enlist the help of municipal staff, community volunteers, or perhaps the local media to get the word out regarding the plan.
The municipality is focused on a few parts of the plan and has put other things on the back burner.	Sometimes things fall between the cracks. See if you can review those items on the implementation plan that haven't moved along in the last six months. Perhaps there are other municipal activities that need to be completed first before the implementation plan can move forward. If you are a member of the implementation committee it might be time to re-evaluate the relevancy of the action items or if other resources need to be brought into the project to finish off the tasks.
New priorities emerged after the economic development strategic plan was developed.	The plan will need to be updated. This is not the same as starting from scratch. The framework is already in place and it probably just needs to be modified. Go back to the group that developed the plan initially and develop a list of tasks to be undertaken and a timetable to do it.
Although there is an economic development strategic plan in place, it's less than ideal.	This might be the time to revisit the plan and rethink its direction. It will likely mean going back to the drawing board and starting the strategic planning process over again. The good news is the process will not be unfamiliar and the results will improve.



Process — Implementation tips and troubleshooting

6. PRIORITIZE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC PLAN



Why is this important?

The economic development strategic plan has been approved but there are many things to do and where to begin? For a community it can be a perplexing task to figure out which part of the implementation plan (really a to-do list) should be tackled first. When there are no priorities set, then everything appears equally important (or equally unimportant). There is also no allowance for the sequencing of activities (the critical path) in which one task leads to the next. Without priorities, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to assign resources and know where to allocate staff and volunteer time.

What do you need to think about?

Agreeing on the critical path can take a bit of time but it will be well worth the effort. Before you rush out and start on a project you might want to consider the following:

- **What if** the plan has been approved, but many actions are marked “high priority” or “immediate action” and no one knows which tasks should really be tackled first?
- **What if** decision makers cannot agree on what should happen first?
- **What if** advocates of “pet projects” run off and work on them without coordinating with other actions in the strategic plan?

- **What if** there are lots of strategic plan-related actions being taken, too many in fact, and you've lost the sense of priorities? Or there doesn't seem to be any co-ordination of actions?



Troubleshooting

If any of the “what if” questions above seem very familiar, don't feel discouraged. One of the greatest challenges in the development of any strategic plan is to undertake a co-ordinated effort when the implementation phase comes around. There are a number of things that can be done to get everyone headed in one direction. Three questions to ask when trying to sort out the priorities for implementation are:

1. What is on the critical path?

What actions need to happen first so that other things can be done? These actions should be candidates for the top of the to-do list.

2. What will lead to visible, demonstrable results quickly and easily?

Otherwise known as “low hanging fruit” or “quick wins,” these will be things that are easy to do and will lead to tangible and positive results relatively quickly. They will demonstrate momentum and success to the community. These types of projects should be considered as things to be done first.

3. What activities have the broadest community support?

The actions which have the most support (from council, staff and the community) are those that should be considered first. This will develop momentum and create enthusiasm for the projects.

Here is an example of how the prioritization process might work:

Anytown's Strategic Economic Development Implementation Committee has identified six actions that need to be taken in the near future in order to move economic development for the community forward. Those actions are:

- Determine feasibility of a new community multiplex sports centre
- Create a committee to review the new highway entrance into town
- Promote the annual agricultural fair
- Create a website for local tourism attractions
- Develop a new event based on the local farming heritage
- Create a new policy for industrial land use

Based on the discussions at the Implementation Committee meeting it was determined that four of the projects were part of larger project and therefore were deemed to be critical path projects, one was seen as a quick win, and four had a great deal of popular support in the community.

The first step is to develop a chart to assist in the ranking of the projects.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS	IS IT PART OF A CRITICAL PATH (IS THIS STEP NEEDED TO MOVE FORWARD WITH THE PROJECT)?	IS IT A QUICK WIN (LOW HANGING FRUIT)?	IS THERE POPULAR SUPPORT?
Determine feasibility of a new community multiplex sports centre	YES		YES
Create a committee to review the new highway entrance into town	YES		
Promote the annual agricultural fair			YES
Create a website for local tourism attractions	YES	YES	YES
Develop a new event based on the local farming heritage			
Create a new policy for industrial land use	YES		YES

With three “yeses,” the committee determined the website was the first priority. In addition, the committee decided to work on the feasibility study for the sports centre and the industrial land use policy as they were part of a critical path to moving other projects forward.

Although this example is rather simplistic it does provide a framework to guide the prioritization of projects. In more complicated situations you might need to develop a more sophisticated ranking system, perhaps incorporating the time horizon of the project (for example short term, medium term or long term). Ultimately, you should look at the example as a way of organizing your thoughts and your committee members to prioritize actions.

Process — Implementation tips and troubleshooting

7. MAKE ACTIONS SPECIFIC AND CONCRETE



Why is this important?

Economic development strategic plans often start with a vision for the community and the goals the plan sets out to achieve. Sometimes the vision is too broad so it may not provide any real guidance on the types or implementation steps that need to be taken. Vague statements of actions in the implementation plan are also possible even if the vision is clear. This can result in priorities being abandoned, conflicting demands for resources, or lines of communication becoming twisted or non-existent. To make sure this doesn't happen to you, state your actions concretely and specifically so that you can actually implement them.

What do you need to think about?

When developing a workable implementation plan, there are a number of things to consider:

- **What if** the plan is full of grand-sounding statements of intent and potential action that people can endorse and support, but when you start thinking about them, it is difficult to wrap your mind around what would actually be done?
- **What if** the strategic plan is being implemented on a piecemeal basis with no co-ordinated effort?
- **What if** the economic vision for the community is so broad and covers so much that no one really understands what strategies and actions are in scope?

Troubleshooting

Moving a plan into actionable and achievable steps can be a difficult task that takes time to complete. Below are some tips that might make this task a bit easier or provide some direction if you are stuck.

How do I figure out if our economic development strategic plan actions are too vague?

The vision or goals stated in the economic development plan are the starting point. If they are written clearly, they tell you what you need to do and, possibly even, in what order. If the goals are all over the place, you can pretty well count on your actions being all over the place too. If the vision and goals in your plan are clear and the actions prioritized, then go on to the next question below. If the plan is too vague, here are some concrete actions that would help you refocus and bring the implementation process back on track:

First, make sure you have the leadership you need (see Chapter 1 - *Identify a leader to drive implementation*) and that it is okay with the municipality that you review the strategic plan.

Second, gather together the people who were originally involved in the preparation of the strategic plan along with any new people who now want to be involved. Make sure municipal staff are involved.

Third, hold a meeting. Topics for discussion could include:

- Some history of the circumstances that led to the provisions of the economic development strategic plan. How did we get here?
- Any major changes to the community since the economic development strategy was finished that could have a significant impact. For example, has the population grown or is there a new industry in town?
- Do the vision and the goals underlying the strategic plan still make sense? Consider throwing out those that don't or modify those that need some tweaking. Decide whether each goal is important, not so important, or not important.
- Does the economic development strategic plan, in its current state, have any good points? There is no need to reinvent the wheel. The strategic plan might very well have many good points that just need to be reorganized. So for the goals that are important, sort out the implementation steps that relate to those directly. Add any other steps that are now necessary.

Fourth, summarize your deliberations in a very short, action-oriented brief so that everyone understands the priority of the actions. Distribute to the meeting participants, municipal staff, and other stakeholders. **Remember you are not re-writing the strategic plan.** You are putting it into order so that it is more concrete and is more relevant to the community.

Some of the strategic plan is being implemented but it's done in bits and pieces. Is there anything we can do about this?

The first question you need to ask is if you really want to do anything about this. It isn't really all that unusual for people to take on their pet projects. It is the reason that many people get involved in the economic development strategic planning process to begin with. What it does mean, however, is the following:

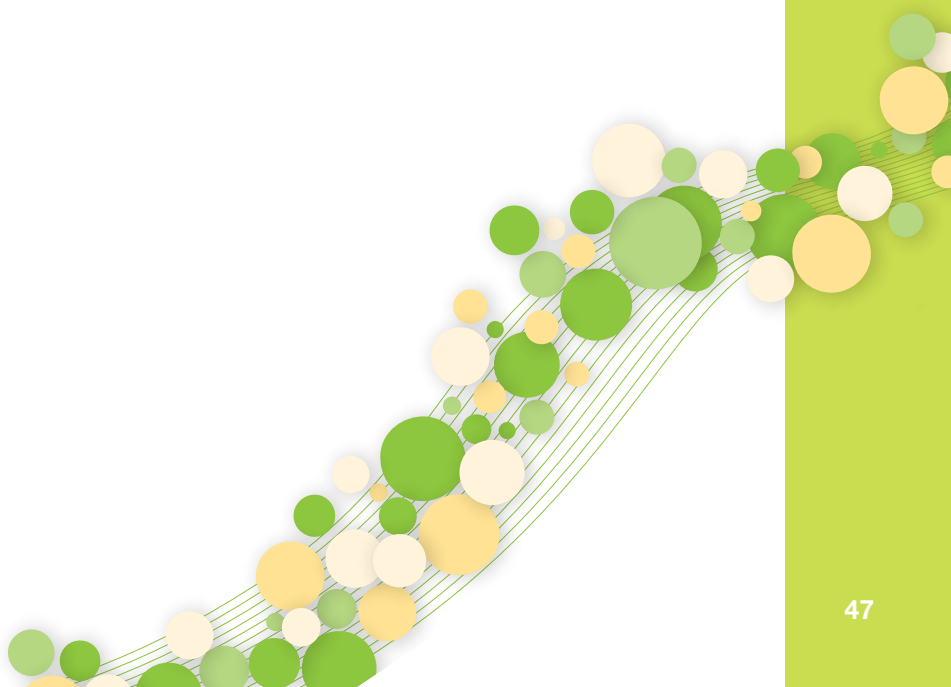
- Municipal staff may not be able to assist in the priorities outlined in the strategic plan because they are tied up with providing supports to the pet projects rather than working on the larger, more strategic action items.
- Pet projects may take financial resources out of the system that might have been spent on higher priorities.
- The sequence of events may get knocked out of order.
- Funding is finite and so it becomes an either-or decision. Since the pet project is already underway, the priorities may have to wait until a new round of funding comes about.

Your committee is going to need a strong sense of the future and how the pieces will fit together eventually if you are going to avoid stopping a project in its tracks. It may mean that the time to reach the goals of the plan will be longer. In the meantime, the committee needs to make the economic development strategy's implementation plan more concrete and better supported by municipal council and staff. In the end it is a balancing act between harnessing enthusiasm and focusing on the economic development strategic plan's priorities.

How do we keep track of what is going on?

As part of the design of the economic development strategic plan, you need a way to assess your progress, successes, and failures. Make sure that your monitoring and evaluation system has the following attributes:

- Be specific about the outcome that you are trying to achieve for each of the implementation projects. What are you really trying to do by working on this particular project?
- Set a timeline with milestones for each implementation project. This keeps people on track.
- Identify who is responsible for leading the particular implementation project.
- Set a financial budget and where these resources are coming from for each implementation project and track how the budget is spent.
- Identify a way to measure outcomes to determine whether success is achieved for each implementation project. Some examples of concrete and measurable outcomes include:
 - » For projects to attract new industrial investment: year-to-year increases in new jobs, increase in commercial and industrial building permits, increase in number of inquiries, decrease in vacancy rates in the industrial park.
 - » For a business recruitment and retention projects: the decrease in the number of retail vacancies in your downtown shopping area, number of secondary uses on grade-level premises.
 - » For branding- and marketing-related projects: number of press clippings over a period of time, mentions in regional or provincial media, number of inquiries from a promotion.



Context — Implementation tips and troubleshooting

8. ACCOUNT FOR CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES



Why is this important?

The world never sits still. It follows that any economic development strategic plan is an attempt to respond to a bit of a moving target which means plans are living documents that adapt to changing realities. There is a reasonable likelihood that some of the conditions or opportunities facing the community when the economic development strategic plan was originally conceived have changed considerably and the plan is, or may be, no longer relevant. New priorities may have arisen that occupy the time and attention of the economic development staff, and possibly other municipal workers and politicians as well. It may mean that while you have an economic development strategy in place, it is not being implemented (or fully implemented).

What do you need to think about?

Consider some of these possibilities:

- **What if** circumstances change dramatically and it is no longer possible to follow the plan completely?
- **What if** there has been a dramatic change within your community that is an opportunity that you can capitalize on?
- **What if** different actions are taken that respond to the new urgent priorities but are not in the plan?
- **What if** the change in the environment causes everything to freeze while people try to figure out what to do and how to do it?



Troubleshooting

When you are reviewing a strategic plan that has lain dormant for a while (perhaps a year or so), then you should review the premises of the strategy. This is often laid out in the **S.W.O.T.** (**S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, and **T**hreats) section of the strategy. It might also be called the context, situational analysis, or environmental scan of the strategy. Then if you find the premises for the original plan are no longer applicable, go to the next questions. If the premises haven't really changed, you should be able to continue on with your existing implementation plan.

What if the circumstances that led to the strategy changed significantly or completely?

In this case, everything has ground to a halt because the new circumstances are dramatically different from the old ones. In some respects, it is a whole new reality and no one is really sure how to respond. Here you need to develop, in essence, a new plan. It might be useful to pause at this point and reflect. Have things really changed that much? Is it truly a completely new world out there? If so, then read on. If not... then it may not be the overall circumstances that have changed as dramatically as you thought but there may be other reasons that the implementation is stuck.

If everything is different and the implementation has slowed or stopped as a result, we need to consider revisiting the economic development strategic plan. But don't throw out all your work. There will be elements of the old strategy that still have merit and that can be salvaged in the new plan.

The same is also true if a new opportunity has arisen (e.g. a new major employer has set up business in your community). For instance, it may change your priorities from job creation to business recruitment for the downtown to meet the needs of the new residents. In this case too, don't

throw out all the elements of the old plan. It may only be a matter of changing the order of the priorities.

Where do I start?

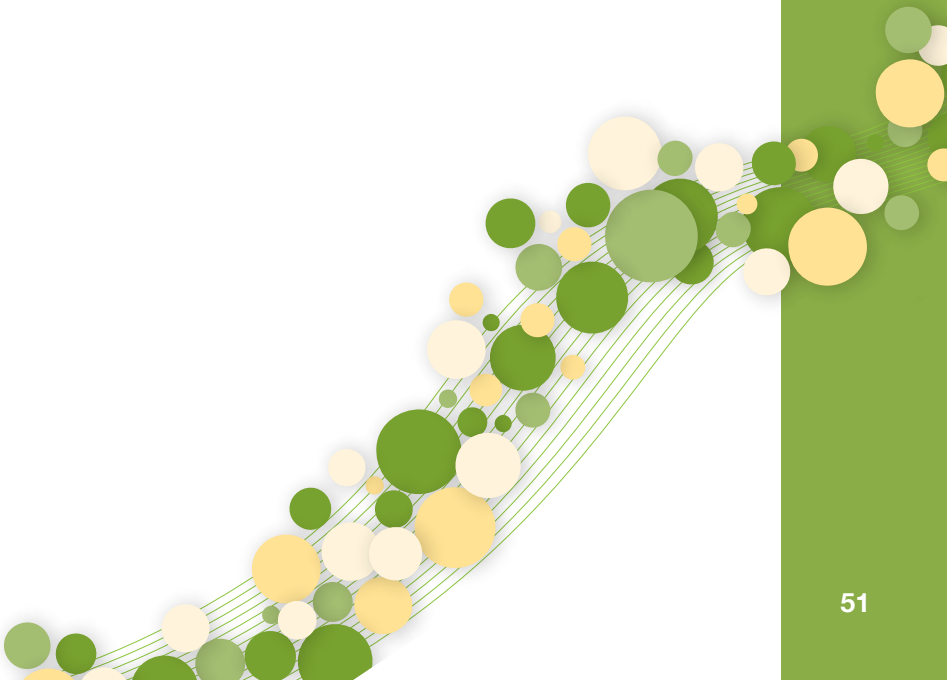
Once again, do not throw out your existing plan in its entirety. Much of your previous work on the economic development strategy is still worthwhile. It will be a matter of adjusting and accommodating rather than starting over. What you should do is update your plan to take into account the new priorities and any re-ordering of the existing priorities that new priorities may cause. Then adjust your implementation plan accordingly and present the result as the updated strategy.

One possibility to help you get started on the revision is to call upon whoever did the old economic development strategy. They will be familiar with the old plan and have the capacity to update it.

Another option would be to bring in someone new—a fresh approach or a specialist who understands the new circumstances and can help the community respond. If it is a consultant, this will likely require a financial outlay. Still another and probably less expensive approach would be to identify other communities that have faced the same challenges. What did they do and why did they do it? Would that approach work here? How might it have to be modified or adapted to fit your community? Municipal staff may be able to network with colleagues in other communities to find examples similar to the situation you now face and gather valuable information for free.

With your new insights and strategies and what you have

recycled from your old strategy, create an updated plan. At this point, armed with your new plan, you'll need to get approval through the normal municipal channels before you can begin implementation.



9. IDENTIFY PEOPLE POWER



Why is this important?

The availability of “people power,” especially municipal staff time, is crucial to implementing your plan. While it is very important to involve community residents in the development of a strategic plan, the implementation of that plan is typically dependent on the work of staff. They often have the expertise, the mandate, and the interest to complete the actions outlined in the plan. Notwithstanding staff contributions, an implementation steering committee is needed and should include community stakeholders to: guide the process, assess the outcomes, act as a conduit of information to stakeholders groups and other residents, and give the work some public legitimacy.

What do you need to think about?

Your community might face the following when it comes to finding the human resources to implement the strategic plan:

- **What if** it appears the municipal administration sees the implementation as too large of a challenge to accomplish
- **What if** there are more actions that need to be completed than there are people to take them on?
- **What if** some of the actions are beyond the experience (or interest) of the people on your steering committee?
- **What if** members of the steering committee who worked on the strategy are not interested in carrying out implementation of the plan?

What should we do?

If this is your situation, here are three suggestions:

First: Prioritize. (See Chapter 6 – *Prioritize the implementation of the economic development strategic plan*). Narrow down the scope of what needs to be done, so you have a more reasonable and achievable set of activities to concentrate on.

Second: Look to the community for volunteer help. Involving the community in the implementation of the plan is a useful way of both sharing the work load and educating the community about the purpose and importance of economic development.

Third: Hire help. This is likely your last resort but it may be appropriate. There may be grants and programs available to bring in outside help. Some tasks are so specialized that experts or consultants will be needed for a short period to assist.

What other resources are available?

There are a number of ways to share the workload of the implementation plan throughout the community. These include:

- **Sub-committees** — Creating a group of interested community members who are focused on a specific task, issue or question can be a great way of tapping into the time and expertise of the community. As long as they have specific terms of reference (sometimes called a mandate), a reasonable timeframe to work within, and some assistance and guidance from municipal staff, assigning a specific task to a sub-committee can be a highly successful way to spread the work around.

- **Individual volunteers** — Soliciting volunteers from within the community to undertake specific tasks is another strategy to consider. Often recent graduates from university or community colleges are looking for job-relevant business experience and would be willing to help out with specific tasks or activities. Sometimes recent retirees with specific skills could be interested in becoming involved and might be available.
- **Partnerships** — Another strategy is to develop partnerships with community organizations to assist with the implementation of the economic development strategy. Examples of these organizations are service clubs, chambers of commerce, and destination marketing organizations.
- **New organization** — Another option to consider might be to create a brand-new organization to address a specific, continuous need. This is a bit like the sub-committee tactic discussed above, except that the new organization would have a permanent mandate.
- **Community forum or workshop** — Still another mechanism to consider might be a community workshop, meeting, or forum. This can be useful in obtaining input about certain tasks or activities in a short period of time. It can be a very effective way to sort through priorities as well as solicit additional help.
- **Economic development ambassadors and mentors** — Some economic development strategies carve out specific roles for community boosters and advocates as ambassadors for their community when they are travelling outside the region. This is a way of sharing the load of promotion and marketing activity. Other individuals may be prepared to be

mentors and advisors to new and fledgling businesses in the community—another way of using the expertise of the community and thus sharing the load.

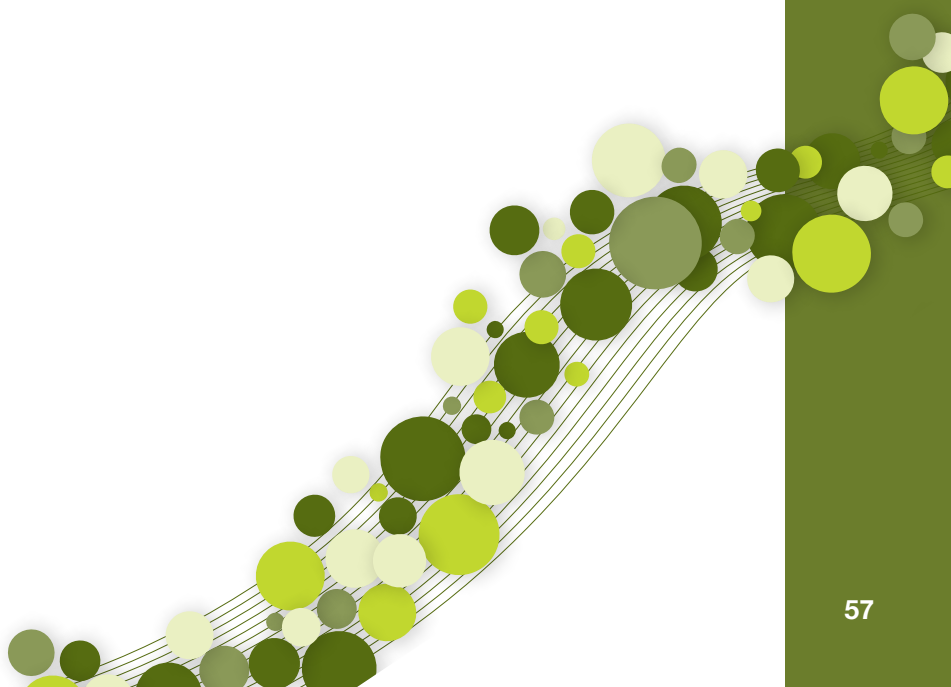
Cautions: What are the risks and downsides of involving the community? There are a few things that you must consider:

- **Managing volunteers** — It takes time to manage volunteers. Some of the strategies discussed above, such as a sub-committee and involving individuals, will take considerable municipal staff time. Volunteers have to be solicited, trained, provided with the technology and materials they will need, and assisted as they work through their tasks. Volunteer recruitment and development can be well worth the effort and contribute enormously to the community's ability to get things done but it will consume some time and attention on the part of staff.
- **Union concerns** — In some communities, the public employees union (or equivalent) may become concerned if there is a perception that volunteers are doing things that staff would otherwise do. This is typically not a problem in partnerships with community organizations, and subcommittees. It may be an issue in involving individual volunteers with specific tasks. Generally, if the task is highly specialized and clearly beyond the scope of any existing job description in the community, you should be on solid ground. But it might be worth the time to discuss this with the municipal administration.

How do we recruit good people to help out?

There are a number of options to consider:

- **Ask the advice of existing volunteers** — As a first step go to existing volunteers in the community.
- **Advertising** — Some communities advertise the availability of volunteer positions.
- **Put the word out** — Another useful strategy is to inform other community leaders (e.g. the president of the chamber of commerce, large employers in the community, service clubs) that you are looking to form a task force or host a community forum or create a new organization and see if they can suggest any names.
- **Expand the circle** — Ask every volunteer that you have recruited or that you have talked to whether they can suggest any others who might be approached. This can often generate some interesting and unexpected people.
- **Get politicians to help** — Consider asking politicians to help lead the charge. This will demonstrate the importance of the community initiative at a political level, and validate the efforts of those involved.



10. IDENTIFY FUNDING SOURCES



Why is this important?

It isn't unusual for an economic development strategic plan to result in new or revised spending. But in the world of tight municipal budgets, the question of where the money will come from becomes important. Possible sources include grants, private sector partnerships, a new municipal allocation, or perhaps the new idea might generate completely new revenue.

What do you need to think about?

- **What if** you have a great plan with good ideas and a sound strategy but you lack the money to implement it?
- **What if** people are saying that the plan is too expensive or too dependent upon grant funding?

What do I say if I hear “economic development is too expensive”?

It's important to look at economic development as an investment, rather than an expenditure like garbage removal or infrastructure spending. Some community members may mistakenly believe that, once economic development costs are spent, they're gone forever and that economic development is a sinkhole into which tax dollars are poured.

The reality is that economic development is an investment in the community and that, in principle, each dollar spent on economic development generates a return on that investment. This return may not be seen immediately.

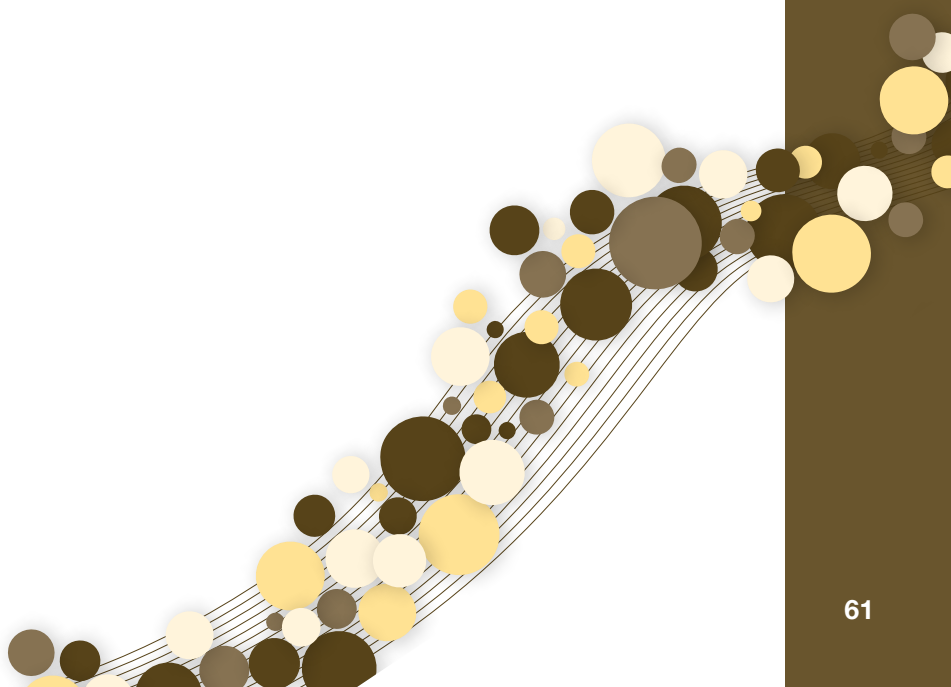
But over time, economic development expenditures will result in businesses, jobs, new residential development, and new commercial and institutional enterprises to serve residents. Economic development is an engine of community growth and development that ultimately leads to a stronger community.

Where can the community get funding for the economic development strategic plan?

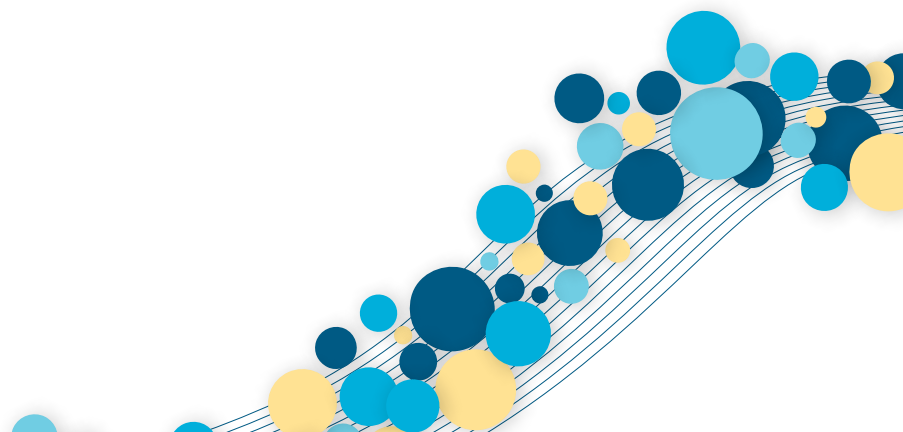
There are a number of steps to consider when investigating funding. Think through each of these:

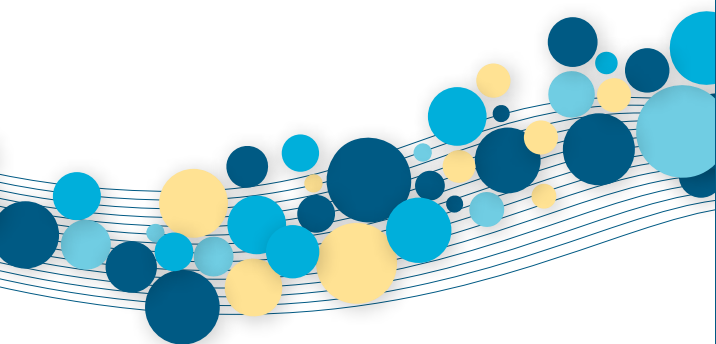
- **Is it possible to have the municipality fund some or all of the implementation?** — Municipalities have distinct budget cycles. If possible discuss how the implementation plan for the economic development strategic plan could be incorporated into the budget cycle.
- **Check out available grants** — The next step is to see what sorts of grants and funding programs are available.
- **Partnerships** — Often economic development activities are undertaken through partnerships with other economic development-related organizations in the community. These might be the chamber of commerce, Community Futures networks, destination marketing organizations, or a community foundation. There may be an opportunity to work together on an initiative through co-funding.
- **Fundraising** — In some communities, larger employers or regional organizations have helped fund certain community economic development initiatives.

- **Pay to Play** — There may be other initiatives that will be possible if participants can help defray costs. For instance, often a “pay to play” financial model is employed in the tourism industry to finance advertising brochures, trade missions or trade shows, or feasibility studies. In this model, participants may assist in financing an initiative in order to “get in the game” and receive benefits, whether it be gaining publicity through the use of their logo or some other advantage to the participant. The “pay to play” model may work well for you.



This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal blue lines across its entire width, providing a guide for handwriting or typing. The background is a clean, solid white color.





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