

Reading Economic Development Committee Strategy

Introduction & Purpose

The Town of Reading, Massachusetts is a desirable suburban community, located at the junction of two of New England's busiest interstate highways. Reading and several of its neighboring towns have welcomed an increasingly affluent and well-educated residential population over the past several years. Recently, the town has been able to capitalize on the strength of this market and the convenience associated with its excellent highway access to attract several major retail developments to a redeveloped landfill site in the Walker's Brook Crossing area adjacent to Interstate 95/Route 128.

Reading is also blessed with an active and attractive downtown. Downtown Reading maintains a comparatively high level of retail occupancy and enjoys the anchoring presence of a highly successful community grocery store. Several institutional and office users, including the town government, a major post office, and multiple financial institutions, as well as a busy commuter rail station provide daytime activity throughout the downtown. A handful of new restaurants and specialty stores have increased evening activity downtown as well. A major capital improvement project in partnership with the Massachusetts Highway Department will soon transform Main Street.

Despite these assets, Reading faces some challenges to economic development. The vast majority of land in Reading is zoned to prohibit business and industrial uses and most of the available commercially zoned land in Reading has been developed. These conditions result in a tax base that is dependent on residential property for nearly 95% of total valuation.

Although unemployment rates are comparatively low, the limited local employment base is dominated by service and retail jobs, and only 30% of the jobs in Reading are held by Reading residents. Over 80% of Reading residents commute to other communities for employment.

Unlike many residential suburbs, Reading has embraced a proactive approach to economic development. A new Economic Development Committee has been appointed and the Town Administration is genuinely engaged. Significant opportunities exist to enhance the downtown through additional development, including new mixed-use projects, stakeholder organization, and improved parking management. In addition to the Downtown, several vacant or underutilized properties, most notably the Addison-Wesley site on South Street, provide opportunities for additional economic development.

This document is intended to help guide the work of the Economic Development Committee, as well as other key players, to help the Town of Reading protect their assets, and effectively capitalize on the available opportunities. It includes a discussion of economic development priorities for Reading as well as a prioritization of specific work plan activities with measures to evaluate success.

Economic Development Committee

The 2005 Reading Master Plan recommended the creation of an Economic Development Committee (EDC) and in March 2006, the Board of Selectmen adopted a policy establishing such a committee to advise town officials on economic development. The five-member EDC is appointed by the Board of Selectmen and includes representatives from various key stakeholder groups including the Chamber of Commerce, utility companies, downtown Reading, and the School Department. The EDC's advisory responsibilities are particularly focused on the following areas:

- Develop an Economic Development Strategy consistent with the Master Plan and goals and objectives established periodically by the Board of Selectmen;
- Within the Economic Development Strategy, work with staff to obtain additional State and Federal economic development grants;
- Explore the need for and the legality of forming a "property-based" or "business-based" Business Improvement District(s) funded by assessments on all businesses within the individual districts;
- To the extent feasible, encourage commercial development and office leases of downtown space consistent with the traditional atmosphere of a New England Village Center;
- Advise the Board of Selectmen, Community Planning and Development Commission, and any other Town agency or official as appropriate, on matters related to economic development in the community;
- In order to achieve the above, review options to funding economic development activities in cooperation with other civic organizations.

The EDC receives staff support from the Town Manager and the Town Planner in the Department of Community Services. However, staff resources are extremely limited and the recently-hired Town Planner is responsible for a broad range of activities, including providing staff support to multiple boards, committees, and commissions.

The EDC also does not have a local budget appropriation. Any consultant assistance or project funding must be supported either with grant sources or future Town Meeting appropriations. Both of these funding sources will require demonstration of measurable success. Finally, the EDC enabling policy requires renewal in 2012. As a result, the committee must be both self-reliant and capable of effectively and succinctly demonstrating their effectiveness in a comparatively short period of time.

The current membership of the EDC appears to include an excellent balance of skills and experiences needed to successfully introduce a new group into a well-established community. Key assets for this purpose include deep and broad connections with the political, business, and residential constituencies in Town, breadth of education and work experiences, strong communication and technical skills, along with a willingness and ability to devote significant time and energy to the mission of the committee.

Economic Development Priorities

Economic Development is a complex and broad concept with many potential definitions that encompasses several related but not always consistent priorities. The Reading Master Plan and the Economic Development Committee's mission reflect several of these priorities.

A key tension often emerges within economic development programs between objectives and actions designed to maximize economic return to the community (through net tax revenues and employment) and those designed to enhance the quality of life in the community. Often developments that yield significant tax revenue, particularly in the short-term have the potential to have detrimental impacts on quality of life factors if they are not managed carefully. These impacts can include "cannibalizing" customers and sales from existing businesses elsewhere in the community, increased traffic congestion and utility service impacts, unattractive architecture and site designs, environmental impacts, and potentially unsustainable economic outcomes over the long-term.

Based on a review of the Town of Reading's Master Plan and discussions with Town Manager Peter Hechenbleikner and members of the Economic Development Committee, Reading clearly recognizes this potential tension and has firmly placed maximizing the quality of the community in a sustainable manner ahead of merely achieving the maximum short-term economic return.

As a result, the following were established as the overall priority goals for the activities of the Economic Development Committee. The priorities are listed in order of importance to the committee and the community.

1. Improve the quality of life for Reading residents by increasing the available retail, restaurants, and other amenities in town, particularly in the Downtown
2. Ensure the stability and success of existing businesses in Reading that contribute to the quality of life in the Town
3. Expand the commercial property tax base

The following were identified as secondary goals for the activities of the EDC:

4. Create additional opportunities for Reading residents to work in town
5. Create additional employment opportunities in Reading

Current and Proposed Activities and Initiatives

The following is a listing of some of the initiatives and activities that the Economic Development Committee is currently considering and/or may be appropriate. This list was generated during meetings with members of the EDC and the Town Manager in February and April 2007.

Business Recruitment

- Web site upgrade
- Listing of available Real Estate
- Buxton study
- Marketing packet(s)
- Technical assistance to businesses
- DHCD-funded market study
- Survey businesses and developers

Downtown

- Business Improvement District
- Arts Organization – Arts Center
- Main Street streetscape improvement project
- Improve Main Street Alley Way
- Lynch downtown redevelopment
- Web site upgrade
- Grant-writing
- Buxton study
- DHCD-funded market study
- Technical assistance to businesses
- Downtown Parking (including proposed garage study)
- Downtown promotional events & activities
- Downtown Steering Committee
- Commuter rail depot area/connections
- Recently-adopted mixed-use and residential uses/zoning
- Banners, flower baskets, other streetscape enhancements
- Extend Main Street improvements to other areas
- Survey businesses and developers

Other Commercial Development Opportunities

- South Main Street redevelopment opportunities
- Jacob Way - Addison Wesley property
- Walkers Brook Area
- Web site upgrade
- Grant-writing
- Marketing packet(s)
- Buxton study
- Improve quality of retail
- Beautification of commercial developments
- Participate at CPDC hearings

Business Support and Stabilization

- Chamber of Commerce Meetings
- Web site upgrade
- Promote/organize South Main Street Business Association

- Grant-writing
- Communication with existing businesses
- Communication with property owners & brokers
- Technical assistance to businesses

Taxes

- Tax Classification Discussions

Economic Development Committee Development

- Articles in local newspapers
- Breakfast event to present Main Street improvement project & EDC
- Web site upgrade
- Develop an “elevator pitch” about EDC
- Communication with existing businesses
- Communication with property owners & brokers

Work Plan & Measures of Success

As the list above demonstrates, the Economic Development Committee has energetically embraced a broad and diverse set of potential activities. As a new entity in the community, it is easy to be drawn in many different directions but important to focus energy on a more limited scope with the following specific objectives:

- Introduce the EDC and it's mission;
- Establish the committee as a valuable resource;
- Demonstrate measurable success.

The following section is an outline of a work-plan that will help the EDC achieve these objectives. Most of these tasks relate to both Downtown and Economic Development initiatives throughout the community. Each item listed below includes a description of the activity, a listing of specific actions for the committee, possible measures of accomplishment in terms of activity (did it get done?), outputs (how much was done?), and outcomes (did it work?) and a schedule.

Website Enhancement

The internet has become the primary gateway for the dissemination of information regarding economic development. In many cases, a community's or business's web presence now provides the "first impression" to potential investors, customers, developers, and others. This is particularly true among the better-educated and more-affluent demographics that increasingly constitute Reading's population.

On the other hand, a poor website, one that is difficult to navigate or find, or one that does not provide a clear contact for additional information may also be the "last impression." As a result, it is essential that the website be attractive, welcoming, clear, and informative. It is also critical that the website clearly indicate a single point of contact for further inquiries. It is also important that the website present current information.

The existing web presence for Economic Development in Reading is limited. It includes a reasonably helpful outline of the permits required for business development. It is part of a page of Town Planning information which also provides some general demographics and descriptive information and a substantial amount of additional permitting and regulatory information as well as application forms that would be helpful for visitors interested in development projects. It appears to most effectively cater to citizens interested in learning about development processes and projects or participating in hearings.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to find and, because it is part of a fairly busy page it is a bit confusing to locate specific information. It also does not appear to have been designed with the two key economic development audiences in mind:

- Developers, entrepreneurs, and their representatives and agents
- Customers and visitors to Reading

The Town of Reading and the Economic Development Committee are currently working with Virtual Town Hall to develop a new website. This company has

designed many attractive and effective websites for similar communities in Massachusetts and elsewhere. The EDC should participate actively in this process to help ensure that economic development objectives are achieved by the new site.

The following are some of the content and experience criteria that should be addressed as part of the redesign with respect to economic development. A good model of an economic development website for a smaller community in the area is Nashua, NH's site.

- A. The page a visitor finds first when searching for the Town of Reading on Google or other search engines should be visually attractive, should provide a brief but compelling description of the Town's assets, and should provide a clear and direct link to an economic development specific page. The economic development page should also be accessible from a list of options that emerges when a visitor follows links of "information for businesses," "information for visitors," or "information for residents."
- B. The economic development homepage should have a brief "boosterish" description of why Reading is a great place that appeals to people interested in proposing a development, starting a business, looking for a commercial site, or just interested in shopping or visiting. This page can also include a one sentence mission statement for the committee, whose primary benefit is to let visitors know that Reading is interested in promoting and assisting with economic development. This homepage should also name a specific contact person for inquires and provide email, telephone, and other contact information for them (this contact should be repeated on all economic development pages). Finally, this page should link to the following (preferably on separate pages so the homepage is not too busy):
 - Community profile – This page will continue the theme of promoting the community's assets, but will also provide demographic and market information, and a listing (with links if available) of businesses in Reading. These links will be helpful for potential customers but also help those representing potential developers and entrepreneurs see that others have chosen to invest in Reading.
 - Resources for Businesses – This is the page for permitting guides, applications, and regulations, listings of available sites (or a person to contact about sites), and assistance that is available for businesses (including both technical assistance and funding).
 - News, Announcements, and Events – This page can include links to positive press on Reading, announcements of programs, events, promotions, and accomplishments by the EDC, the Chamber of Commerce, Downtown group(s), individual businesses, etc. Information on this page should make the visitor to the site more interested in learning more and following up with either a visit or at least a call or email to the contact person.
- C. All information on the website should be current. It is better to avoid information that will expire like upcoming date-specific events if it is not feasible to regularly update the site. Outdated information conveys the impression that no one is really paying attention to economic development.

- D. While the main “portal” pages should be Reading specific, there is no harm in linking to external sources of information (from state agencies, the Chamber of Commerce, etc.) provided that the links stay active and accurate and the information is relevant to Reading.

Specific Committee Activities:

1. Work with Virtual Town Hall and Town Officials to guide the creation of a site similar to what is described above.
2. Arrange for site content to be easily updated from any computer with internet access and designate and empower a committee member to maintain and enhance the site.
3. Document visitor activity on the existing site and track activity on the new site.
4. When communicating with economic development stakeholders, obtain feedback about the site, document use of the site, and seek content for the news , announcements , and events page.

Accomplishment Measures

1. Implement new site (activity)
2. Increase visitation to site relative to existing site (output)
3. Increase visitation to site over time after implementation (output)
4. Draw new businesses and developments to Reading, particularly Downtown (outcome if website was visited during decision-making process)
5. Draw new customers to businesses in Reading , particularly Downtown (outcome if website was visited during decision-making process)

[Discuss how to document and what goals to set]

Timeline

[Discuss what is reasonable and realistic based on existing contract, Town goals, and available time/resources]

Outreach Survey to Economic Development Stakeholders

As a comparatively new committee, there are two key reasons for doing outreach to key stakeholders. First, it is a way to introduce the committee to the community. Many will probably not be aware that the committee has been established and is a potential resource and partner for them. Second, it is a chance to develop databases of information about economic development in the community and learn what is important to various stakeholders to help guide future efforts and activities of the committee.

Key stakeholder groups for this exercise include:

- Business owners and managers
- Commercial property owners
- Developers
- Commercial real estate brokers

Customers and residents of Reading are also important stakeholders for economic development. However, it is more difficult for the committee to effectively survey this constituency due to its size and diversity. Additionally, a substantial amount of existing data is available from various sources that can

contribute to descriptive conclusions about the habits, activities, and interests of these groups. The market study being conducted for Downtown Reading with the Department of Housing and Community Development, if similar to the one prepared for Hingham in June 2006 by OKM Associates, will help to do this. As a result, the committee should focus on the other stakeholder groups.

Based on February and April conversations with members of the EDC, it appears that there are several projects which interest the committee that will require survey-based data collection from some or all of the constituent groups noted above. It would be valuable to combine these efforts into a single survey project that reaches all of the groups listed and also serves to introduce the committee to these groups and lay the groundwork for organization that will be required to support the potential establishment of a Business Improvement District (BID) and for other future economic development events and initiatives.

For businesses, the survey should therefore include:

- Information about the nature and status of the business
- Plans for expansion, contraction, relocation, etc.
- Benefits of and concerns about doing business in the Town
- Identification of benefits which would generate support for a Business Improvement District (group health care, collective marketing, financing parking, refuse collection/recycling, downtown maintenance & beautification, special events promotion, etc.)
- Level of interest in assisting with larger economic development efforts
- Data collection associated with the DHCD-funded market analysis

For property owners and brokers, the survey might include:

- Generating a list of available commercial property for sale and for lease
- Information about the nature and status of properties
- Benefits of and concerns about doing business in the Town
- Identification of benefits which would generate support for a Business Improvement District (group health care, collective marketing, financing parking, refuse collection/recycling, downtown maintenance & beautification, special events promotion, etc.)
- Level of interest in assisting with larger economic development efforts

For developers, the survey might include:

- Generating a list of available commercial property for sale and for lease
- Information about the nature and status of properties
- Benefits of and concerns about doing business in the Town
- Level of interest in assisting with larger economic development efforts
- Willingness to contribute to public parking garage construction in lieu of constructing privately-owned parking downtown.

Lists of commercial property owners can be generated from Assessors' records. Lists of developers active in the community can be obtained from the Town Planner's office. Lists of businesses can be purchased from various information sources; Olympia, Inc. is one example. There are probably a comparatively small number of commercial brokers active in the community, who can be readily identified.

The market research consultants being hired for Downtown through DHCD will likely be able to provide additional advice on the design of a survey(s) for the intended purposes.

Specific Committee Activities:

1. Develop lists of parties to survey from the sources above.
2. Prepare survey instruments.
3. Conduct telephone or door-to-door surveys as appropriate.
4. Compile databases of results as well as contacts for future projects.

Accomplishment Measures

1. Conduct outreach surveys to the identified economic development constituencies (activity)
2. Number of parties surveyed (output)
3. Identification of issues and priorities (outcome)
4. Organization of supporters for BID (outcome)
5. Assemble contacts for future EDC initiatives (outcome)
6. Generate list of available properties for development and occupancy (outcome)

[Discuss how to document and what goals to set]

Timeline

[Discuss what is reasonable and realistic based on available time/resources]

Other Marketing/Events

TO BE DEVELOPED

Breakfast event

Articles in papers

Elevator pitch

Build on December downtown event success

Specific Committee Activities:

- 1.

Accomplishment Measures

1. (activity)
2. (output)
3. (outcome)

[Discuss how to document and what goals to set]

Timeline

[Discuss what is reasonable and realistic based on available time/resources]

Participation in Hearings

One of the charges established for the EDC in the original Board of Selectmen's vote, was to advise the Community Planning and Development Commission (CPDC). In keeping with this objective, committee members should request

regular reports from the Town Planner as to proposed commercial and industrial projects in Reading as well as residential projects proposed for commercially-zoned sites. Depending on the volume of activity, the committee should designate a member to review each filing and identify projects which the EDC may wish to express an advisory opinion.

The EDC will want to evaluate the proposals against the economic development objectives and priorities outlined in the Master Plan, in their enabling policy from the Board of Selectmen, and those identified by the committee members. After evaluation, the EDC may want to draft an opinion letter to the CPDC or other reviewing body expressing support for and/or concerns about the project relative to these objectives.

Possible review positions that could be valuable include:

- Advocating for projects which will enhance the quality of life for Reading residents, stimulate downtown revitalization, increase the commercial tax base, and/or create employment opportunities for Reading residents.
- Encourage conditions on proposals which will help them achieve these goals if approved.
- Counter NIMBY sentiments at public hearings where a proposed project may have economic development benefit for the larger community but is perceived by immediate neighbors as a threat.
- Advocate against projects which propose to utilize commercial or industrial property in a manner which does not further the economic development goals of the Town of Reading.

Similar procedures should also be developed to review and comment on proposed zoning amendments, licensing regulations, Board of Health regulations, and other by-laws which may impact economic development.

Specific Committee Activities:

1. Work with the Town Planner to establish a procedure whereby the EDC is informed of pending development proposals related to economic development.
2. Designate a member to review all such proposals and report back to the committee on those deemed significant.
3. Review significant project proposals and prepare opinion statements and testify at public hearings before the CPDC and other Boards and commissions as appropriate.

Accomplishment Measures

1. Advise the CPDC and other Boards and Commissions on proposed development projects (activity)
2. Number of projects reviewed(output)
3. Number of quality projects approved with the support of the EDC (outcome)
4. Number of projects improved as a result of comment from the EDC (outcome)
5. Number of projects denied due to adverse impacts on economic development based in part on EDC comment (outcome)

[Discuss how to document and what goals to set]

Timeline

1-3 months - Establish a procedure for identifying and reviewing projects
Ongoing – Review and advise on projects as appropriate

Research & Self-Education

To be successful and to be respected as an advisory committee, EDC members should strive for ongoing continuing education on relevant economic development topics. This is especially true for a newly formed committee. Members should seek reference materials, training programs, and conferences on appropriate topics. Additionally, members should identify communities in the region which have successfully implemented initiatives similar to those under consideration by the Town of Reading, conduct site visits, and interview key officials in those communities. Regular communication with State officials from DHCD, and other agencies within the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development will also help committee members educate themselves about key policies and programs, and increase awareness of and the likelihood of success in applying for various grant and technical assistance programs. These contacts may also help create communication channels which can introduce potentially beneficial economic development opportunities and projects to the Town of Reading.

Topics for research and self-education may include:

- Business Improvement Districts
- Downtown Revitalization and Redevelopment Strategies
- Downtown parking strategies
- Commercial site design considerations
- Transit-oriented and mixed-use urban development
- Successful marketing and promotional events

Specific Committee Activities:

1. Open and maintain email and telephone communication with appropriate state officials.
2. Monitor websites, listservs, and other conduits of information about creative economic development initiatives and training opportunities.
3. Research and identify other communities that may be successful models

Accomplishment Measures

1. Research and self-education (activity)
2. Training participation by EDC members (output)
3. Contacts with officials from the state and other communities (output)
4. Greater credibility and success with all initiatives (outcome)
5. Greater access to funding and technical assistance (outcome)

[Discuss how to document and what goals to set]

Timeline

Ongoing.