

Why communities fail; A Q&A with Danny Games

By Amy Whitehead

As director of business and economic development for Entergy Arkansas, Danny Games understands that local governments have an active role to play in the economic vitality of communities. Recently, Danny was the keynote speaker at the Malvern Chamber of Commerce annual banquet, and his comments about why communities fail were timely. He explained that economic developers often talk about the keys to economic success, but it is equally important to identify why some communities fail.

Danny reached out to his professional network to find out what his peers in the field of site location consulting and community and economic development had to say about why some communities fall behind. Seven main reasons rose to the top:

1. Leaders who do not lead.
2. We don't plan, strategically.
3. We're not ready to work.
4. The *commnity* is missing *U*.
5. Not taking care of business.
6. The shelves are empty.
7. The economic development organization's leadership.

In a follow-up question-and-answer session, Danny explained a little more about the survey and its results.

What made you decide to reach out to your network to ask why communities fail?

I find that in the business of economic development, the most overlooked—and hardest—part is good community development. Ribbon cuttings and other celebratory moments are usually preferred, whereas meaningful community development requires making difficult decisions, tackling problems, working together, and having real endurance to do the right things. Getting everyone together on the easy things is, well, easy. But, we too often ignore the big challenges. I liken it to going to the doctor for an annual physical and insisting that we only hear the good news. Choosing ignorance is not good self-medicating, and neither is sweeping our communities' problems under the rug. The findings of our survey don't make for a picker-upper chamber banquet speech, but I hope the results prove to be useful for those who are genuinely interested.

Who responded to your request?

We sent a simple survey question—What are the 3-5 reasons communities fail?—to leading site location consultants, economic developers, and a few opinion leaders across our state and the country. We received more than 50 responses from some seasoned veterans who have literally seen it all, and I am grateful for the candid feedback we received. It was pointed and helpful.

Were there any surprises in the responses you received?

Our intention was to find some common groupings among the responses that might give us some summary points, and honestly, I was surprised at just how easily the responses lined up. There was a lot more consistency than I originally expected, which told me that we asked the right question.

What were some of the most commonly listed reasons why communities fail?

One of the issues that came up several times was the need for a renewed focus on our public K-12 educational systems. Local public school systems are a significant reason why people choose—or don't choose—a community as a place to live. People will drive long distances for a good job, but you have to live near your local school if you have school-age children. Local leaders from city hall and the business community should be actively investing time and resources into the school district. Survey responses revealed that education and business often operate in silos, but the success or failure of one of them will most certainly impact the other.

Additionally, workforce development is now the number one issue in economic development for the state of Arkansas, so business and education leaders working together has become essential to ensuring we have a skilled, prepared workforce to meet the changing demands of the labor market. We need candid conversations at the local level to address this issue head on.

Another issue that came up several times was the need for additional community engagement and leadership development. One comment in the survey spoke to the fact that while we are more connected than ever [digitally], we are still very disconnected. Finding new ways to meaningfully engage citizens is important for effecting positive change and improving civic involvement.

What advice would you give local elected officials about economic development?

Throughout my career, I've had the privilege of working with many elected officials, from members of Congress to city council members. Their jobs are often challenging and they are faced with innumerable priorities and challenges. My primary advice along these lines is to take an active role in helping shape the economic future of your community, which directly impacts your tax base, income levels, funding for public services, and your future.

To learn more about Entergy Arkansas' business and economic development work, visit

www.entergy-arkansas.com/business-economic-development.



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