

# BR & E leads to NWA success

By Joshua Markham, PCED

It sounds simple enough—implement a Business Retention and Expansion program, or BR & E. However, a successful BR & E program is challenging to establish. Factors such as the manpower needed to conduct site visits, establishing trust with businesses, and analyzing data while maintaining confidentiality are just some of the many challenges that accompany any BR & E program.

Despite these issues, many cities in Arkansas have found success with BR & E, and Northwest Arkansas is leading the way with a regional approach to BR & E.

A successful BR & E program is a systematic, long-term method to learn about local business opportunities and challenges. BR & E is also a process of building trust and sustaining relationships with local businesses. Building collaboration between local businesses and the community so that both groups can more efficiently grow is the ultimate goal of any BR & E program.

Bentonville, Fayetteville, Rogers, Springdale, and Siloam Springs all work together to achieve this goal through their regional BR & E program, which these cities refer to as an Employer Retention and Expansion program. According to Michael Harvey, executive vice president and chief operating officer for the Northwest Arkansas Council (NWAC), “Since 2011, a desire to regionalize business retention and expansion began to take hold. By NWAC working with the chambers, the ERE program supports each community individually, but can also aggregate on the regional level to see the overarching picture.”

NWAC and the Northwest Arkansas Chambers of Commerce work together to contact 450 employers in each of the five participating cities. They interview a diverse set of employers, ranging from small, local businesses to Fortune 500 companies. Despite this range, the purpose of these interviews is the same: to demonstrate a genuine interest in the well being of local businesses. The program allows employers to share the challenges they face that may need special attention by community leaders. Each year, the NWAC uses the data from the program to publish a report on the region’s business climate.

While the benefits to focusing on retention and expansion are obvious, the process can be difficult. For many cities, developing trust and relationships with businesses can be most challenging. Meghan Kenney, director of economic development and membership with the Siloam Springs Chamber of Commerce, has been conducting site visits for over two years. Kenney noted that “buy-in from CEOs ... when being interviewed

was our main problem. However, after proving that this program was completely confidential, buy-in quickly followed.”

Siloam Springs Chamber President Wayne Mays agrees with this statement.

“It took two or three years to establish the credibility needed to establish clear lines of communication and trust,” Mays said. “Once the community leaders saw that the information they shared was used only in confidence and to verify common needs and concerns, they welcomed the site visits.”

This focus on BR & E has paid off, according to Siloam Springs City Administrator Phillip Patterson. The city established the Career Academy of Siloam Springs (CASS), which focuses on industrial skills, and was started out of the need for workforce development for local industries.

“After a few years of conducting BR & Es, the common challenge of having a trained workforce kept coming to the forefront,” Patterson said. “Our industries have high turnover and struggle to keep their plants fully staffed. The CASS program was a direct response to the challenges heard from our industries during BR & Es. In a January 2015 meeting, local industry CEOs pledged financial support for a \$1 million plus school facility for training high school students in various industrial skills.”

Bentonville Mayor Bob McCaslin has also seen benefits in his city through this focus on retention and expansion. According to Mayor McCaslin, “The Bentonville/Bella Vista Chamber of Commerce visits businesses within our city for the purpose of quantifying future expansion plans. We intentionally direct our city plans to make our environment more conducive to business recruitment and retention (i.e., trails, community center, cleanliness, landscaping, public safety, library services, and exceptional customer service).”

It is clear that the work of the NWAC and the participating cities is paying strong economic dividends for the region. For Michael Harvey, a focus on retention and expansion is essential to economic development. Harvey stressed that retention and expansion “is not easy work, but if you do anything do this.”



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