

Effective collaboration at the local level

By Josh Markham, PCED

The concept of collaboration seems very straightforward. The term has gained a great deal of traction among community and economic developers as organizations and cities seek to build upon existing networks to accomplish initiatives; however, in practice, effective collaboration at the local level consistently presents challenges. As organizations, local governments, and community leaders seek to adjust to the new normal of ever tightening resources, a regional approach to community initiatives will be necessary.

Any regional initiative will require the collaboration of multiple parties. As a result, effective collaboration at the local level is now more important than ever. Successful collaborative approaches must be able to recognize that collaborative efforts are a complex process that involves connecting the unique motivations of various organizations with a clear common goal.

People often cannot agree on what it means to collaborate. This confusion is one of the most common challenges that face cities when working collaboratively. The concept of collaboration is intuitive, but the process at the local level is complex. This complexity is due in part to the nature of community and economic development.

Collaborative approaches can differ based upon what perspective a group is taking. For example, a more sociological perspective might be used by groups working on a community development initiative; these groups would emphasize a collaborative process that is based heavily upon equality and shared decision making with outcomes that seek to build awareness and better community relationships. In contrast, economic development

initiatives often utilize a more business minded perspective of collaboration focused heavily upon maximizing resources for increased profit or to market an area to broader audience for business attraction.

Effective collaborative efforts at the local level must be able to bridge these two perspectives. Collaborators must seek to build relationships, maximize resources, and bring various organizations together toward a common goal. For this process to take place, local leaders must also recognize the motivations of the organizations they are seeking to work with.

Most community organizations listen to the same radio station: WIIFM (What's in it for me?). Whether you are working with state organizations, city government representatives, private businesses, nonprofits, or community-based organizations, each group is going to have unique motivations. Understanding these differing motivations and being able to connect those motivations to a common goal can lead to successful relationships and successful collaborative efforts. A common link between these organizations is the desire to maximize resources. With the consistent pressure of limited resources and the push to work on a regional level, the necessity to collaborate becomes clearer.



Josh Markham, PCED, is assistant director of UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development. Its mission is to have a positive impact on communities by equipping leaders with economic tools and resources, building consensus to achieve community goals, and bringing UCA resources and communities together.

Elements of Successful Local Collaboration

- ◆ A clear common goal
- ◆ Understanding of participants' motivations
- ◆ A small, diverse group of core participants
- ◆ A local, well-respected champion to promote the effort
- ◆ Small-scale initial projects
- ◆ A focus on activities
- ◆ Equal share in the final outcome