



City leaders from Alma and Morrilton met recently to talk economic development strategies.

# Economic development: A team sport

By Amy Whitehead

**E**conomic development is a team sport. While there may be a lead economic developer (or not) in your city, the city government will always have a role to play in supporting and facilitating economic development and growth. Some of the economic development factors that a city can influence include infrastructure, state and federal policies, local regulations and permitting, quality of life and place initiatives, and local funding streams for economic development. However, economic development will be most successful when key relationships and partnerships are formed at the local level to get everyone “reading from the same playbook.”

Recently, a contingent of local leaders from Alma traveled to Morrilton to benchmark against their progress and take a driving tour with Mayor Allen Lipsmeyer. Mayor Lipsmeyer offered several key insights that illustrate economic development teamwork at the local level.

## Nurture the city and chamber relationship

Regarding his relationship with Jerry Smith, the Morrilton Area Chamber of Commerce director and county economic developer, Lipsmeyer said, “Jerry and I have a lot of trust. We talk on a daily basis regarding city, chamber and economic development relationships.”

The key features of their relationship are consistent communication, trust, and confidentiality. This allows the mayor and the chamber to reach a mutual understanding of the barriers and opportunities for people to live and work in the area, and for business investment to occur. The financial relationship between the city, chamber, and Conway County Economic Development further strengthens the local community and economic development efforts that otherwise would not occur in isolation.

## Open lines of communication with nearby communities

Economic development is also increasingly regional. Your workforce and retail customers come from the region, and your community can capitalize on many of the assets in your vicinity even if they do not happen to be within the city limits.

To better align and coordinate efforts within Conway County, a group called the Core Connection began meeting. This group consists of key leaders and organizations in the county, including the mayors, Petit Jean State Park, Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, community college chancellor, county judge, school superintendents, and state legislator.

“We knew he had to bring down barriers within the county,” Lipsmeyer said. “The Core Connection group meets monthly. We have no agenda and we are not trying to solve any specific problems. It is relationship building and a sense of togetherness, which is very helpful for economic development. There is nothing magical about this, it’s all about relationships.”

## Establish positive relationships with the city council

In many cities, there is a disconnect between the mayor and city council. Without a level of trust and shared agreement about top priorities, it is difficult to move quickly on projects. Lipsmeyer explained that having a good relationship with the council results in fewer surprises and less resistance when it comes to moving the city’s agenda forward.

“The mayor runs the day-to-day operations,” he said. “He or she should not shift the blame or push things off on the council. If a Mayor can make the council’s life easier and reduce any in-fighting, your community will be better positioned for economic development.”

“We aren’t going to wait for something to happen, we are going to make something happen,” Lipsmeyer said.

In order for that to happen, the city council should be part of the economic development team.

## Tell your story

In your community there may be positive things happening, but people inside and outside your community may not know about it.

“Things are happening, but the public doesn’t always know,” Lipsmeyer said. “When you put things down on paper and show people, it builds hope and gets people involved. They want to clean up their property, they want to invest and be a part of it. Things don’t happen immediately, but you have to celebrate the milestones as they come.”

The importance of telling its story became even clearer when Morrilton invited the Arkansas Economic Development Commission and key staff members to meet in Morrilton, which was the first time they had done so in 60 years. Once the meeting was confirmed, they worked for months preparing for the meeting. The chamber and city mapped out a tour for the commissioners and staff, stopped at local businesses with the commission, and provided them a nice meal on Petit Jean Mountain.

One of the places that AEDC saw was an empty call center in the city. Shortly thereafter, with assistance from AEDC, TeleTech announced that they would locate in the empty call center, creating 350 new jobs with the possibility of up to 500 jobs.

“AEDC only shows sites that meet the prospect’s requirements, but the more they know about your sites and your assets the better,” Lipsmeyer said. “Also, AEDC wants to know that your leadership has the ability to handle big challenges and get things done, and that the local presentation will be professional and convincing in order to make the final sale. I believe these two points about the site selection process were handled during that meeting with the commission.”

Since Lipsmeyer began as Mayor in 2015, there have been close to \$250 million in projects that are completed or ongoing in Morrilton. He is proud of these investments, but more proud of the relationships and positive outlook that the community has developed.

“Accentuate your assets, talk them up, and look at yourself in a new way,” Lipsmeyer said.



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