

Retail recruitment critical for community development

By Shelby Fiegel

One commonality among all communities in Arkansas is that we all want our communities to grow, thrive and prosper. To achieve that vision, each community sets its own unique community and economic development goals. Yet, retail development and recruitment are critical pieces of the puzzle in every community. Consider these statistics:

- One in four jobs in America are retail related.
- 98 percent of small businesses are retail related.
- 78 percent of consumers prefer to shop in-store.
- A typical quick service restaurant (QSR) brings 15 jobs to a community.

Retail is a foundational piece of the economic ecosystem in our communities, and it's often a place to begin to build your local economy. But if you want to get serious about retail development and recruitment, where do you start?

Retail Strategies is a retail recruitment and downtown revitalization firm headquartered in the South, and Clay Craft, vice president of client services, and Jenn Gregory, president of downtown strategies, shared with us some tips and tricks cities and towns can use to bolster retail recruitment and downtown development:

Focus on increasing quality of life and place. In simple terms: Make your community a better place to live. Know where your community stands in education, crime rates, infrastructure and other key areas. Focus on beautification, walkability, connectivity and accessibility, especially in your downtown area. Business owners want to invest in places where they and their families can live, work and play. You need to entice them to come to your community.

Create residential density. Consider zoning that supports mixed-use development. Imagine spaces in your community where people work, shop and eat in the same place creating a 24/7 ecosystem of commerce and activity. If mixed-use development is not the right fit for your community, focus on connecting neighborhoods to surrounding downtown or commerce-rich areas.

Know your market. Identify your assets and positive attributes and communicate them effectively. Familiarize yourself with the language that national retailers speak. They want to know specifics: your population numbers, the traffic count in specific areas of town throughout the day, and household income.



PHOTO BY ANDREW MORGAN

Recruiting retail is essential to building a stronger, more diverse local economy while improving quality of life and place.

Craft a 30-second elevator pitch. To effectively communicate with retailers, you need to be able to get your message out fast and hit the high points. This pitch should convey what your community has to offer. And if you're emailing? Keep it short, sweet and to the point—three sentences or less. Make yourself stand out and don't waste their time.

Get rid of the red tape. Ask yourself: How easy is it to set up a business in your community? The easier it is, the better shot you have at recruiting. Also consider creating an A-to-Z development program that retailers can utilize when they come to your community.

Develop local incentives. Yes, "incentives" is a scary word in some places, but in many cases, they make the retail world go 'round. From a developer's perspective, rents have historically stayed flat, but building costs have gone up astronomically, making new development more challenging. Leverage local policies that can assist in new development.

Develop a vision and a plan. How do you achieve everything mentioned above? Get everyone on the same page and generate buy-in. It is important that all community-focused entities in your community (city, chamber, economic development, university/education system, merchants, etc.) are moving in the same direction, leveraging and connecting their different resources.

While these are just a few examples of next steps you can take to create a more robust retail recruitment and development strategy, Retail Strategies also offers a variety of resources, such as “10 Tips for Retail Real Estate,” on their website at www.retailstrategies.com.

Communities across the state have recognized the importance of retail and have already begun to invest in these kinds of strategies to retain and recruit business. One example is Magnolia in southwest Arkansas. “The city of Magnolia is continuously looking at ways to enhance the quality of life for its citizens,” Economic Development Director Ellie Baker said. “We have recently completed a 20-year zoning plan through Garver and are currently working on a new brand for the city. In order for us to get to the next level, it is imperative that we make connections with real estate developers and retailers.”

Wynne is also establishing plans to develop and recruit more retail. Through the Community Catalyst program in partnership with Entergy Arkansas and the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community

and Economic Development, the Cross County Chamber of Commerce and Wynne Economic Development recently hosted a virtual small business support training program called “E-Tail Strategies: Get Your Business Online” for local, established retailers and small businesses. The city is also making moves on the recruitment side, partnering with Retail Strategies to identify and fill retail gaps.

“In Wynne, we rely heavily on our retail sector to drive sales taxes that fund many city services and quality of place initiatives,” Wynne Economic Development Corporation CEO Cody Slater said. “As the city continues to invest in itself, a strong retail and service economy will be crucial to completing next steps.” 🏛️



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