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How to Prepare an Economic Development Action Plan for Your Community

Case Study 1: Rural County, Florida

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Case Study 1.

RURAL COUNTY, FLORIDA

For many years Rural County, Florida consistently ranked very low in job creation and capital investment in state rankings. Until recently, the county had not given any indication that it wanted to exert any influence over its economic development future. County leaders now seem to understand that the lack of progress was a result of no dedicated, in-county effort, but they cannot seem to get any development effort started. The reason why they have not been able to get an economic development effort started seems to be a lack of goals and a program for managing those goals.

Control of local economic development is currently in the hands of a multi-county, regional planning alliance, but there is no in-county organization charged with keeping in step with the regional alliance group. Several county representatives serve on the regional alliance's board of directors. When the regional alliance was formed, about ten years ago, the county disbanded its development board as a cost saving measure. The regional alliance lacks the staff, and possibly the will, to devote any development effort primarily intended to support Rural County.

In order to improve the county's economic development effort, the Board of County Commissioners has just approved the funding for a local planning organization. Funding for the first year was set at \$100,000. You have been hired as the county's economic development professional and provided office space in the County Center located at the county seat, Citrus Corners. You have named your planning organization UPWARD, United People Working to Assist Rural Development. A critical key to the organization's future success will be how it is perceived in the county and how it grows its participation base. Your first task is to prepare an economic development action plan for the county.

At the outset you have the support of a majority the Board of County Commissioners and the Board has encouraged county staff to get involved. A county administrator manages the county government's day-to-day activities. Additionally, the sheriff is an elected official and he presides over a law enforcement budget that is slightly more than the \$200 million budget controlled by the Commissioners. The mayor of Citrus Corners has also expressed strong support for a local economic development effort. (Citrus Corners is the only incorporated city in the county.)

Rural County's population is estimated at 21,130 and the county is comprised of 585 square miles. The school age population, ages 5 to 17, is about 4,300. There are eight public schools, including one high school, in the county. Oversight of the public schools is conducted by a five-member, elected School Board. There are also nine private schools, which are affiliated with various religious denominations. There is no post-secondary educational institution in Rural County, however each of the three adjacent counties has a community college.

The average price of a single family home in Rural County is \$75,000. All residences,

except for two apartment houses - 59 units - in Citrus Corners, are single-family homes or mobile homes. There are also two nursing homes in the county. The nursing homes are locally owned and operated.

An Interstate highway passes through the county, but there is no interchange located in the county. U.S. 837 runs parallel to the Interstate, but since the Interstate's opening 20 years ago most businesses and buildings on U.S. 837 are abandoned. Citrus Corners is about 20 miles east of the Interstate and U.S. 837 along State Road 20.

The major industrial sector in the county is agriculture, principally citrus crops. There are three large land owners, all privately held corporations, that operate 90% of the groves within the county. None of these corporations are headquartered in the county. Furthermore, there is no citrus processing plant in the county, so when fruit is harvested it must be transported to adjacent counties for processing.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture staffs a community development office in Rural County. This office maintains census tract data and is a gateway to federal programs involving loans and grants for the development of buildings and industrial parks.

All the major retail chains have a least one store in the county. There are also many small (Mom & Pop) business owned and operate by county residents scattered throughout the county. There is a Rural County Chamber of Commerce, but it has been virtually dormant over the past few years. The last executive officer at the Chamber was dismissed about a year ago and not replaced. The current head of the Chamber's board is Mr. John Dickel, a life-long resident of the county. Mr. Dickel runs the roller skating rink in Citrus Corners. On weekends, the rink attracts teenagers from all around the county.

There are three banks in the county, all located in Citrus Corners. Two of the three are branches of nationally recognized bank holding companies. The other, Central Citrus Savings Bank, is locally owned. Central's president resides in an adjacent county to the south of Rural.

A daily newspaper is available from a neighboring county. The paper routinely includes a 4-page Rural County section. The *Citrus Corners Chronicle* comes out every Wednesday. The owner, publisher, editor, and lead reporter is Ms. Nancy Koch, who graduated from the University of South Florida's College of Mass Communications two years ago. Ms. Koch is the daughter of one of the three large landowners in the county.

Rural County's quality of life is generally considered by its residents to be superior to that of most other counties throughout the state of Florida. And, although the high school graduation rate is only around 75%, the young people that remain in the county after leaving high school join a very capable labor force for the jobs available in the county. Average annual wages for full-time work are about \$28,500. The unemployment rate is 5%, which is a little above the state's overall rate. Most county residents seem content in their work, but like people everywhere would like to have the chance to make more money and get better benefits from their employers.

(This case study is partly based on Estes, 1999.)

Questions for Case Study 1.

1. Make a list of the community's leadership and explain how the economic development professional can engage each stakeholder or stakeholder group to participate in the process of formulating the county's economic development action plan.
2. Prepare a list of the county's economic development strengths and weaknesses. Draft a vision statement for the community's leadership to consider during the process of formulating the plan.
3. Suggest three goals that should be included in the plan. Provide rationale for these goals. Do you need to prioritize these goals?
4. Propose actions and responsible agencies for achieving these goals. Discuss the funding implications for each goal.
5. Briefly explain some problems that may need to be overcome in order to achieve the goals.