



Rural Alberta Municipalities

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TOOLKIT



INTRODUCTION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
IS A TEAM SPORT

Economic development has a broad mandate and can include any aspect of generating and sustaining the conditions for economic growth, resilience, and prosperity. This can be a daunting task, especially in small communities where economic opportunities can be constrained by geography, infrastructure access, and a small employment base.

This is why economic development must be a team sport.

By leveraging the capacity, insights, and resources of the broader community, municipalities can maximize their ability to generate economic opportunities and address economic pain points. **This toolkit aims to provide rural economic development professionals, Council members, and municipal staff with guidance and tools for marshaling collective economic development efforts forward.**

The Rural Economic Development Toolkit includes six chapters. Each chapter is made up of general guidance and lessons learned from other municipalities, a callout on some common municipal economic development pitfalls, and a tool designed to make managing collective economic development efforts easier. While some may find it helpful to use it as a step-by-step guidebook, it is anticipated that others will use it as more of a menu of ideas and tools to aid with aspects of delivering a municipal economic development program.

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CHAPTER 1

ALIGNING ON THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Chapter Overview

Economic development requires deep collaboration with the community. This collaboration, however, requires clear alignment among municipal leaders on the role of economic development and its value to the community.

This chapter provides guidance on:

1. Debunking economic development myths
2. Building Council alignment on the role and value of economic development
3. Identifying the right partnership structures to support economic development efforts

Debunking Economic Development Myths

Common misconceptions about economic development can prevent municipal leadership from investing in economic development programs or realizing the full value of those investments. Common examples include:

Myth 1: Economic development is solely about attracting the next big business to the area.

While attracting new businesses is one way to spur economic growth, rural economic development must include strengthening the existing business community, including supporting local entrepreneurship, business development, and succession planning.

Myth 2: Economic development is about replacing traditional local industries.

Effective economic development typically builds on established industries and resources, evolving to support sustainable growth and evolution of existing businesses rather than replacing or radically altering the local economic landscape.

Myth 3: Economic development is an unnecessary cost in an already resource-constrained community.

Investing in strategic economic development can result in a more stable municipal tax base from the business community over the long term, ensuring there are solid opportunities for employment and wealth generation in the community for years to come.

Myth 4: The government should not interfere with private sector business.

Government plays an important role in supporting the competitiveness of Canadian businesses through investing in research and development, infrastructure, and skill development.

Debunking these myths can be paramount to securing municipal resources and getting Council aligned on the role economic development can play in the community.

Building Council Alignment on the Role & Value of Economic Development

To build the case for investing in municipal economic development, it can help to:

1. **Gather Intel** – Secure one-on-ones with Councillors to understand what they see as the biggest economic challenges and opportunities in the municipality.

2. **Set the Stage** – Build a baseline understanding of your community’s economic makeup, how it’s changed over the past decade, and how it’s expected to change over the coming decade, for better or worse.
3. **Establish a Role Model** – Identify another community that has successfully implemented an economic development program that addressed similar challenges or capitalized on similar opportunities to the ones your community is facing.
4. **Host a Workshop** – Prior to proposing investments in economic development, municipal leadership should have the opportunity to debate and prioritize the economic challenges they are looking to solve. Inviting a few local business leaders to join can help ground and focus the conversation around outcomes.
5. **Build a Targeted Proposal** – It is harder to secure broad-based investment in economic development than it is to secure funding for a targeted initiatives that align with Council priorities. When the value of economic development is unclear, it is easier to start by dedicating resources to a couple specific programs and partnerships.

Sharing examples of successful rural economic development initiatives can build Council alignment on where and how to invest in economic development. See the Rural Economic Development Inspiration Deck linked below (Tool #1) for example initiatives from other small municipalities.

Tool #1

 [Rural Economic Development Inspiration Deck](#)

Common Pitfall

Waiting for a comprehensive strategy.

Many municipal economic development champions ask their Council for broad-based investment in economic development prior to proving its value. A full economic development strategy is not needed to start designing and delivering economic development projects or programs. Many of the most effective economic development efforts start with building alignment around a single issue and approach, pulling together the right partners, and proving some value or success in one domain before attempting to expand to others.

Identifying the Right Partnership Structures

In addition to building internal alignment on economic development objectives, it is critical to build internal alignment on how they will be achieved. Small municipalities may struggle to get far in their economic development efforts without the knowledge, skills, networks, and backing of community partners.

Collaboration with community partners can take many forms. A few common partnership structures are outlined below.

Economic Development Committees

These take the form of a dedicated group of local business leaders that can help guide and deliver on a wide range of economic initiatives over multiple years. Examples roles include:

- Municipal advisory, including advising on key business challenges and solutions.
- Program delivery support, including helping engage with other business leaders.

Project Delivery Partnerships

These usually include a small set of partners with specific capabilities, capacity, and/or resources to help deliver on a single project or initiative over a set period. Example roles include:

- Service providers, such as infrastructure providers or educational program providers.
- Program delivery partners, such as industry associations whose membership have an active interest in a specific economic development project.

Regional Advocacy Coalitions

This usually takes the form of a coalition of municipalities with a similar set of challenges that can leverage their collective influence to secure policy change or funding from other levels of government. Examples roles include:

- Funding advocacy, including advocating for investment in specific sectors, programs, or types of infrastructure.
- Policy advocacy, including advocating for provincial policy change.

Selecting the right partners and partnership structures is critical to the success of economic development efforts. The subsequent chapters of this toolkit focus on crafting and leveraging these partnerships to maximize impact.



CHAPTER 2

IDENTIFYING PROSPECTIVE PARTNERS & INVITING PARTICIPATION

Chapter Overview

Not all economic development partners are created equal. Establishing an economic development committee or set of project partners requires deliberate and proactive selection of participants to ensure a the right mix of skills, perspectives, and personalities are at the table.

This chapter provides guidance on:

1. Identifying the right partners
2. Articulating a compelling case for private sector participation
3. Inviting, vetting, and prioritizing prospective partners

Identifying the Right Partners

When selecting economic development committee members, it is worth considering:

1. **Business Sector & Size Representation** – Representatives from different sectors and sizes of business can be helpful for understanding the range of issues impacting the local business community.
2. **Geographic Representation** – For counties with a wide geographic distribution, it can be helpful to aim to have representation from different physical locations within the county.
3. **Specialized Skills & Knowledge** – Crafting successful projects and programs requires individuals with

diverse business development, project development, and funding/financing skillsets.

4. **Embeddedness, Influence, and Trust** – Individuals and organizations that are well-trusted in the community and have significant influence (such as large landowners or employers) are likely to be stronger economic development partners. In addition, individuals that are ‘connectors’, such as those that play an active role in industry associations, Boards of Directors, or local business associations, are likely to be great assets.

When establishing an Economic Development Committee, participation cannot be left to chance. Identifying community leaders with the right influence, skills, perspectives, and networks takes time. It requires municipal economic development leaders do their homework to find the best candidates for specific partnership roles.

Developing a Compelling Case for Private Sector Participation

Prior to inviting participation in a committee or project, it is important to identify the motivations of prospective partners and make a compelling case. Motivations for participating in municipal economic development can be wide-ranging.


Example motivations for committee participation include:

- Representing the needs of your business and your peers,
- Influencing municipal policy, project, and program priorities


- Expanding your personal and professional network,
- Developing new skills, knowledge, and insights into the local economy, and
- Building the profile of your business.

Financial compensation is offered by some communities to help cover the cost affiliated with attending meetings, participating in training, and contributing to program delivery. This compensation, however, is rarely the primary driver for participation. Most municipal economic development committees across Canada rely on volunteer participation, with compensation used to offset costs to participants.

For economic development program or project partnerships, benefits realization can be more complex. Below are some ideas on how to structure program or project partnership benefits.

 **Programmatic Partnerships**, including delivery partners for skills training, succession planning, or entrepreneurship programs benefit from:

- *Mission alignment* – for instance, a school or academic institution may support the development and delivery of a new education or skills training program if it aligns with their educational mission.
- *Increased profile or business development opportunities* – for instance, a law firm or financial institution may support the delivery of a succession planning program in exchange for getting in front of an audience of business owners that will eventually need legal and financial support to transition their business to new ownership.

 **Infrastructure Delivery Partnerships**, including infrastructure developers and/or operators with whom the municipality might partner to deliver affordable housing, digital infrastructure, or power benefit from:


- *Opportunities to secure a contract for services once project funding is in place* – for instance, a construction company might partner with the municipality to help structure a downtown revitalization program knowing that there will be significant opportunities to bid on the work once funding is secured.
- *Opportunities to benefit from increased infrastructure provision once project is complete* – for instance, a large industrial business might partner with a municipality to help fund increased power, water, or digital infrastructure if they are likely to be one of the main beneficiaries.

Inviting, Vetting, and Prioritizing Prospective Partners

Municipal committees and partnerships typically require an open and fair process for soliciting participation from community members. While a transparent and fair process is needed, merely releasing an RFP or broadly advertising committee roles is not reliable for finding effective partners or committee members. In most cases, municipalities will want to identify prospective partners or participants (based on the characteristics mentioned above) and extend a personal invitation to apply.

A simple expression of interest process is often sufficient to gather critical information from prospective partners or committee members. The information shared can then be used to vet and prioritize prospective partners. The tool linked below (Tool #2) includes an example expression of interest form and evaluation process for identifying and selecting economic development committee members.

Tool #2

 [Example Expression of Interest Form & Evaluation Process](#)

Common Pitfall

Not being selective.

In attempt to solicit private sector partnership in a fair and open manner, municipalities can easily fall into a couple common traps, including:

- Relying solely on an open call for volunteers, partners, or committee members without proactively identifying individuals that would be a good fit for the role
- Not reaching out directly to prospective committee members or partners with a compelling case for participation
- Not being 'choosy' enough about selecting economic development partners in attempt to reach a specific committee size

The most effective economic development coalitions rely on careful selection of partners that will represent the diverse needs of the community.

Example: Youth Entrepreneurship Training, Ord NE
Programmatic Partnership

In response to shifting demographics and economic challenges, the community of Ord, Nebraska launched a youth entrepreneurship and leadership initiative designed to help retain young people in the area and promote entrepreneurship as a career path. Through a partnership between local schools, the City of Ord, the Valley County Community Foundation Fund, and the SynoVation Valley Leadership Academy (a nonprofit, experiential leadership and coaching organization), Ord developed programs aimed at empowering young people with skills in business planning, financial literacy, and community development.

Students were engaged in real-world projects that addressed local needs and opportunities, including launching small ventures and tackling civic improvement initiatives. The program is credited with giving some local entrepreneurs the confidence and tools to launch and grow local businesses, demonstrating a skills-based approach to rural economic renewal.

Example: Battle River Railway, Flagstaff County, AB
Infrastructure Partnership

Flagstaff County and Camrose County partnered with a cooperative of local agricultural producers to invest in Battle River Railway—a short line rail project designed to improve access to markets for agricultural producers. The railway was purchased in 2010 to provide reliable, cost-effective rail transportation for agricultural commodities, as well as railcar storage, grain merchandising, and transloading opportunities.

Flagstaff County—with more than 800,000 acres of farmland—relies heavily on the Battle River Railway for transporting its wide variety of crops, including wheat, canola, barley, and peas. The county highlights access to the Battle River Railway short line as a key advantage for local producers, enabling efficient market access and supporting value-added processing opportunities. The short line rail project has also strengthened the agricultural supply chain by providing efficient, local transportation options for bulk commodities, reducing costs, and improving access to domestic and export markets for both Flagstaff and Camrose producers.

Example: Rural Health Innovation Hub, Grand Falls-Windsor, NL

Program and Infrastructure Partnerships

Facing economic challenges due to the decline of its traditional forestry sector, the town of Grand Falls-Windsor in Newfoundland and Labrador pivoted to investing in health research and technology to revitalize its economy and community identity. Grand Falls-Windsor established an innovation hub under its municipal business development corporation, with a clear focus on advancing health research and technology. This hub became a physical and strategic centre for fostering new ideas and supporting entrepreneurs in the health sector.

The Grand Falls-Windsor’s proactive investment in rural health innovation leveraged several strategic partnerships to aid with economic rebranding and diversification, attraction of new startups, and development of regional expertise in genomics and rural health.

Partner	Role
EXCITE Corporation - Municipal Development Agency	Lead organizer and innovation hub manager
Eastern Health & NL Health Services - Provincial Health Authorities	Health service delivery, clinical research, simulation training
Provincial Government - Ministry of Health	Funding, policy, and strategic support
Memorial University of Newfoundland	Academic research, training, and genomics research
Miawpukek First Nation	Indigenous health research and staff recruitment
Northpine Foundation philanthropic fund	Simulation lab funding
techNL & Brilliant Labs	Technology education



CHAPTER 3

STRUCTURING COMMITTEE OR PARTNERSHIP COMMITMENTS

Chapter Overview

Maximizing the impact from an economic development committee requires establishing an effective committee structure.

This chapter provides guidance on setting up an economic development committee, including:

1. Establishing committee roles and expectations
2. Defining committee parameters
3. Finalizing committee commitments

Establishing Committee Roles & Expectations

An Economic Development Committee is a small collective of business, community, and municipal leaders that represent, steer, and advocate for their communities on economic development issues. Economic Development Committees take on activities in four broad areas:

1. **Information Gathering** - including gathering insight into the local economy, such as by monitoring industry trends in their sector or sharing new reports/insights from industry associations in which they are members. By following local business news and engaging with their peers, committee members are often a good source of insight on business trends and challenges.
2. **Decision Advocacy** - including advocating for policy decisions at the municipal and provincial level that align with the long-term economic interests of the community. In some cases, this may go as far as

developing high-level policy or funding proposals for consideration by Council.

3. **Communications & Engagement** – including liaising between municipal government, businesses, and the public by helping articulate the municipality's economic development goals and providing updates to their peers on the status of municipal economic development initiatives.
4. **Mobilization** – including playing a vital role in building participation in economic development initiatives. This might look like:
 - Using their contacts and knowledge to spread the word about local economic development initiatives.
 - Organizing or hosting community events that promote local businesses.
 - Connecting local organizations with business and funding opportunities.
 - Helping build coalitions between local businesses, academic institutions, and non-profits to support economic development projects.

Setting participant expectations early and often can ensure committee members seek out and identify these opportunities throughout their tenure.

Defining Committee Parameters

Committee Size

Size matters for effective decision making. Economic Development Committees should be composed of 5-10 members. Committees on the higher end of this range

may be appropriate when the municipality has:

- A larger population.
- A diverse economy with several prominent industry sectors.
- An enthusiastic and relevant pool of potential committee members.
- Local academic, non-profit, or quasi-public organizations (e.g., airports, hospitals, universities) that meaningfully contribute to the local economy.

Committee members are typically appointed by the municipality and are expected to act in the best interests of the entire rural community, not as advocates for themselves or specific interest groups. Committee structure and membership should be reviewed at regular intervals and adjusted as necessary to meet the economic development needs and aspirations of the community.

Member Composition

An economic development committee should include:

- One elected official and at least one municipal staff representative, such as an Economic Development Officer, CAO, or Planning Lead, to ensure alignment with local government policies and objectives.
- Business leaders from prominent local businesses, industries, or industry associations to provide valuable insights into economic trends and business challenges.
- Leaders from local academic, non-profit, or quasi-public organizations (e.g., airports, hospitals, universities) to bring expertise and connections that enhance the committee's understanding of economic drivers (if applicable).
- Leaders from local First Nations that share land, infrastructure, and/or economic development interests with the municipality (if applicable).

Member Roles & Responsibilities

Member roles and responsibilities should include:

- **A Chair** - The Committee will elect a Chair who is responsible for overseeing meetings and helping resolve conflicts.
- **A Municipal Staff Representative** - This leader will be responsible for the administration of the committee, including:
 - Organizing sessions.
 - Setting agendas and preparing facilitation materials.

- Taking notes on key outcomes and action items and communicating them back to the committee at the conclusion of each session.
- **A Municipal Councillor or Mayor** - This person will represent elected officials and be responsible to raise key issues or points of discussion with their peers.
- **Advisory Members** - All other committee members will be responsible for:
 - Providing input on committee items.
 - Volunteering to lead or contribute to specific committee initiatives or projects, particularly within their areas of expertise.

Defining Committee Commitments

For a period of at least 3 months after inception, Economic Development Committees should meet monthly to:

- Align on committee protocols
- Establish committee priorities
- Develop an action plan in line with those priorities

Once established, Economic Development Committees typically settle into a quarterly meeting cadence, with additional ad-hoc meetings scheduled as needed.

Under the Alberta Municipal Government Act, Municipalities are required to pass a bylaw to establish Council committees, including economic development committees. The bylaw provides a clear framework for the Committee's operations and serves as a formal document that:

- **Clarifies Roles & Responsibilities** - The bylaw sets the stage for committee commitments, ensuring that members understand their specific duties and contributions, preventing misunderstandings and ensuring that everyone works toward the same goals.
- **Sets Expectations for Participation** - Members are expected to regularly attend meetings, actively participate, and contribute their expertise. The bylaw holds them accountable to these commitments and specifies the duration ('term') of their membership.
- **Establishes Ethical & Confidentiality Standards** - The bylaw lays out the ethical guidelines that members must adhere to, promoting transparency, integrity, and professionalism.
- **Provides a Basis for Accountability** - By agreeing to the terms of the bylaw, members agree to the expectations set forth, allowing for clear consequences if these standards are not met.

- **Establishes Issue Escalation & Resolution Protocols -**
This includes identifying the conditions under which a committee member might be asked to relinquish their role on the committee, such as due to regular absences.

Members are expected to read and agree to the terms of the bylaw prior to beginning their term on the committee. The tool below (Tool #3) is an example bylaw for a Municipal Economic Advisory Committee. A similar type of document can be used to establish expectations for program and project partnerships, with the content edited to reflect the roles and expectations affiliated with each partnership.

Tool #3

 [Example Committee Bylaw](#)

Common Pitfall

Setting a term that is too short.

To get the most out of an economic development committee, it is important to engage partners for enough time to foster strong group dynamics and a sense of shared purpose. A four-year term seems like a long time at the outset but can enable a team to fully gel and establish effective working relationships.





CHAPTER 4

BUILDING A COMPELLING ECONOMIC NARRATIVE

Chapter Overview

Building and reinforcing a local economic identity can be a powerful tool in economic development, aiding with workforce, tourism, and investment attraction and motivating collective community action.

This chapter provides guidance on:

1. Crafting a compelling economic narrative
2. Investing in focused communications efforts
3. Building an effective case for investment

Crafting a Compelling Economic Narrative

Crafting a compelling economic narrative is critical to building the vision for a community's growth and development and for spurring collective action. Specifically, a compelling narrative can:

- **Showcase your community** to investors, partners, prospective workers, tourists, and other stakeholders.
- **Set your community apart** within the region through clear branding and highlighting what makes it unique.
- **Guide local decision-makers** in aligning planning, zoning, and policies with a clear economic vision.
- **Foster collaboration** among residents, businesses, and organizations toward shared economic goals.

A compelling economic narrative can include:

- **Key Sectors & Cluster Information** - An overview of

the primary sectors that drive the economy, including pockets of regional expertise.

- **Labour Data or Statistics** - A summary of the size and shape of the local workforce, emphasizing specialized skillsets or workforce attributes.
- **Community Assets & Resources** - A map of key assets that support economic growth, including any natural assets (forests, minerals, water), intellectual property (local innovations, patents), or built infrastructure (industrial parks, transportation infrastructure).
- **Institutions & Associations** - An overview of influential organizations that support the local economy, such as academic institutions, hospitals, industry associations, or transportation authorities.
- **Policies & Programs** - An overview of unique policies or programs that actively support the local economy, such as tax incentives, workforce development grants, or industry-specific programs that encourage local investment and entrepreneurship.

Grounding your economic narrative in examples can greatly enhance its impact by making it:

- **Memorable** - Providing concrete examples help make a narrative stick with people.
- **Tangible** - Examples illustrate how the community's strengths translate into real value.
- **Clear** - Referencing specific programs, initiatives, or organizations provides stakeholders with a clear point of entry to engage with the community.
- **A Source of Pride** - Showcasing local success stories builds pride and engagement among businesses.

Data Tools:

Statistics Canada and the Alberta Office of Information and Statistics are two of the most reliable sources of demographic, economic, and social statistics. Several dashboards have been created using these data sources to help make some of the economic and community data more accessible. These include:

The [Alberta Economic Dashboard](#) which includes a provincial overview of employment, demographic, and sector insights, as well as a [Regional View](#) that enables limited comparison between counties.

The [Townfolio Community Dashboard](#) and Benchmarking Tools provide a simple way to access community data and even embed it your municipal website at a cost.

Example: Food Artisans of Camrose County Guide

The Food Artisans of Camrose County Guide curates the region's rich and diverse local food scene. By shining a spotlight on the growers, makers, bakers, brewers, and culinary creatives who call Camrose County home, it connects residents and visitors alike to over 50 local producers.

Investing in Focused Communications Efforts

While a lot of municipal communications is designed for broadly sharing information with citizens, most economic development communication needs to be focused on a targeted audience and message to be successful.

Three questions can be used to help guide economic development teams to make better decisions about when, where, and how to market your community:

1. What are we trying to achieve with this communication?

For instance, a sector profile may be designed to help attract new business to the area. This means it will need to not only provide sector information but provide insight on collaboration opportunities, market gaps, and potential partnership opportunities.

2. Who is the audience for this communication?

For instance, if you are trying to promote career opportunities and quality of life in your community to attract skilled talent and retain current residents, your audience might include recent (or soon-to-be) college graduates. Knowing your audience means being able to identify some specific contacts or organizations that will receive the communications.

3. Is this the right channel for reaching this audience?

For instance, if you are trying to promote tourism in your community, it is important to know what channels tourists are using to find information, such as local travel blogs or social media sites.

How to Get the Word Out

Building and sharing economic narratives doesn't have to be expensive or comprehensive. There are lots of free or low-cost tools that can aid with profile building, such as:


- **Economic Development Websites** - A dedicated landing page with a couple statistics, success stories, and a point of contact serves as an accessible hub for prospective investors, businesses, and residents.
- **Sector Profiles** - An sector profile typically includes an overview of the size of the sector in the municipality and key players in it. These can be developed more easily in collaboration with a regional industry association, trade group, or group of local businesses.
- **Newsletters & Press Releases** - A short newsletter a couple times per year that highlights new business activity, local business support programs, and investment opportunities can help keep community members informed and engaged.
- **Conferences & Conventions** - Participating in industry events can enable meaningful networking with potential investors and partners. Municipalities can sometimes lower costs by partnering with local business leaders or neighbouring counties to send a small delegation or share the cost of a booth.
- **Community Engagement Events** - Hosting local events such as job fairs or networking mixers can help build connections in the local business community and match residents with new opportunities. Hosting events at local business sites is one way to keep venue costs low while raising the profile of a local employer.

Municipalities often feel the pressure to be comprehensive in their approach to economic profile building. A clear marketing strategy can help deliver the greatest 'bang-for-your-buck' with limited resources by:

- Matching marketing objectives with a clear audience, set of tactics, key messages, and outcomes, and
- Empowering economic development teams to say 'no' to ideas or initiatives that are not a priority.

Check out the Marketing & Communications Decision Framework linked below (Tool #4) for guidance on assembling a clear Marketing & Communications strategy.

Tool #4

 [Marketing & Communications Decision Framework](#)

Building a Compelling Case for Investment

While many economic narratives are designed to showcase economic opportunities, there is also value in generating compelling narratives around the barriers that are limiting economic opportunity in the area. Building a compelling case for investment to address economic constraints can serve as a blueprint for decision-makers, helping to secure buy-in, funding, and resources.

A good business case:

- 1. Clarifies the Problem.** This includes combining data and anecdotes to clearly articulate:
 - What specific infrastructure, funding, or program gaps exist
 - How many businesses and residents are impacted by the issue
 - How this compares to more well-served communities
- 2. Demonstrates Impact.** This includes outlining the direct and indirect social and economic impacts of the gap, such as through:
 - The estimated number of businesses, residents, or employees impacted
 - Anecdotes that illustrate how individual residents or businesses are negatively affected by the gap (or could positively benefit from addressing it)
 - Survey data that illustrates impacts that are harder to quantify through central data sources
- 3. Maps the Solution.** This includes identifying a feasible path forward and mapping out:
 - Key components of the solution and how they fit together
 - Clear, actionable steps to implement the solution
 - Specific partnerships and investments needed to implement the proposed solution

- How actions or investments will be timed or sequenced

- 4. Specifies Roles, Partnership Models, and Governance Structures.** This includes identifying roles, responsibilities, and anticipated contributions of all parties involved in the project, such as:
 - Roles in project implementation and management
 - Financial and in-kind contributions agreed to by all parties (e.g. time, expertise, funds)
 - The governance structure that will be used to ensure accountability and effective collaboration among involved parties (e.g. project steering committee or oversight board, decision-making authorities)
- 5. Articulates the Benefits.** This includes outlining the expected benefits of implementing the proposed solution and how success will be measured, such as:
 - The anticipated impact of the proposed solution on business productivity, growth, or resilience, considering both direct and indirect benefits
 - How the project will address the challenges identified in Step 1, including economic and social concerns
 - Example metrics for evaluating progress over time, including data or evidence that can be used to quantify these benefits or evaluate project impact

Partnering with other regional municipalities to jointly build a case for infrastructure investment can be an effective way to stretch limited economic development resources and improve chances of success. This is because:

- **There is strength in numbers.** By uniting around shared infrastructure needs, rural municipalities can amplify their voices and demonstrate the broader, regional impact of investment
- **Funders, policy makers, and investment partners respond to a unified vision.** When municipalities align on a common goal, they send a clear message to stakeholders about the collective vision for regional development, making the case for investment more compelling.

Funding Sources:

Below are some useful resources for identifying funding opportunities for your municipality and business community.

- The [Federation of Canadian Municipalities](#)
- The [Government of Alberta Economic Development Grants & Funding Inventory](#) and [Municipal Infrastructure & Programs Grants & Funding Inventory](#)
- The [Alberta Innovates](#) Funding Programs
- The Government of Canada [Business Benefits Finder](#), [ISED Funding Programs](#), and [NRCan Funding Programs](#)

Common Pitfalls

Getting stuck on data gaps.

Accessing reliable data can be tough and can become a barrier to developing a compelling business case. In the absence of reliable, centralized data, options available might include:

- Collecting example data, such as through interviews or survey responses, and using those to estimate population-wide impacts
- Triangulating insights from multiple sources, such as using total acres of crop production in the county and average provincial yields per acre to estimate county-wide crop yields.

Over or under scoping the solution.

Proposing the right scale of solution is key. If you scope your solution too small, it might not be ambitious and impactful enough to get the attention of funders and partners. On the other hand, if you scope the solution too big, the level of investment can feel out of line with the anticipated impact. One way to hit the scope 'sweet spot' is to ask: what is the lowest investment we could make to achieve 80% of our desired impact?

By asking this question, one RMA community abandoned a multi-million dollar proposal to improve the community's fibre optic network and scoped a program to support its businesses and homeowners in purchasing satellite-based web services for a fraction of the cost.





CHAPTER 5

MOBILIZING COMMITTEE MEMBERS & PROJECT PARTNERS

Chapter Overview

Municipal economic development committees can play a much broader role than simply advising on business needs.

This chapter provides guidance on how to effectively mobilize committee members for:

1. Boosting participation in economic development programs
2. Aiding with investment attraction
3. Supporting municipal infrastructure projects

Boosting Participation in Economic Development Programs

Economic development committees play a critical role in promoting participation in economic development programs, including programs for mentorship, succession planning, workforce development, or entrepreneurship. Specific roles that committee members can play, include:

- Conducting targeted outreach to relevant business owners/operators in their network that might benefit from the program.
- Sharing their personal experiences and reasons for participating or promoting participation.
- Identifying opportunities to partner with other local organizations (e.g., chambers of commerce or industry associations) to encourage participation from their members.

- Hosting program-specific events, such as networking or mentorship events at their place of business.
- Conducting 'business walks' or informal discussions with their peers and other community business owners to understand their needs and how to best support them.

To get the most out of mobilizing committee members to boost program participation, it is important to:

- Provide guidance on stakeholder types likely to see the most value from the program and why.
- Provide resources on the goals or objectives of the program, the scope and level of commitment it entails, and the anticipated outcomes of the program.
- Establish expectations of the committee member without being overly prescriptive about how to meet those expectations.

Aiding with Investment Attraction

Community partners and business champions can also play a critical role in business attraction activities. Example roles for economic development committee members or partners include:

- Helping identify investment attraction targets, such as companies within their networks that they think would be a good fit for the community.
- Helping assemble the information necessary to make a compelling case to prospective businesses, including their own experience as a business owner in the community.
- Helping host incoming delegations, which includes

attending dinners or tours to make prospective business owners and investors feel welcome in the community.

In some cases, municipal economic developers can also leverage private sector business development efforts to support the wider economic development goals of the community. This might include:

- Partnering on a presence at a trade show or convention.
- Co-hosting business delegations with the municipality that private businesses have a vested interest in seeing land in the community.

Supporting Municipal Infrastructure Projects

Mobilizing community partners to support municipal infrastructure projects can take several forms, including:

- Helping identify success stories and best practices from similar projects in other communities.
- Supporting the development of a funding proposal that highlights the economic and community benefits of the project.
- Engaging with the local business community to identify the beneficiaries of the project and their willingness to contribute to its delivery.
- Identifying community partners, such as industry associations, service providers, and local institutions that might partner on the delivery of a project.

Mobilizing private sector support for municipal infrastructure projects requires:

- Clarifying the ask of private sector partners.
- Providing guidance on the types of stakeholders that are most likely to benefit from the project.
- Identifying the entry point to participating in a project (such as participating in a survey or short introductory meeting).

Mobilizing committee members and private sector partners requires providing clear expectations on the role you are hoping your partners will play and the outcomes you are looking to achieve while leaving room for committee members and partners to figure out the best way to deliver. See the Partnership Scoping Framework linked below (Tool #5) for some hints on how to establish clear roles for economic development committee members and delivery partners.

Tool #5

 [Partnership Scoping Framework](#)

Common Pitfall

Being too prescriptive.

When asking for community members or business owners to help with a municipal initiative, it can be tempting to lay out exactly *how* you want it done. This can limit partners and committee members from exercising their judgement and finding ways to accomplish municipal goals in a way that feels unburdensome and authentic.

One RMA member learned this lesson when they asked Economic Development Committee members to aid with “Business Walks” to gather insights on business challenges facing the community. The initial process proposed was cumbersome and suggested a dedicated script for discussions that felt inauthentic for committee members who were connecting with their peers and neighbours. After a couple weeks, the team went back to the basics of sharing the business walk objectives and timelines with committee members and asking them to ‘do it their way’. This boosted the enthusiasm of the committee to get out and gather insights.



CHAPTER 6

MONITORING IMPACTS & EVALUATING OUTCOMES

Chapter Overview

The broad mandate of economic development initiatives, coupled with the long timelines for seeing results, can make it difficult to monitor progress and evaluate outcomes effectively.

This chapter provides guidance on:

1. Establishing metrics to meet your objectives
2. Setting up effective measurement systems
3. Combining metrics and stories for impact reporting

Establishing Metrics to Meet Your Objectives

Metrics should align directly with your economic development objectives. Without this alignment, data collection can become burdensome as it doesn't provide actionable insight. Some examples of common economic development objectives include:

1. **Business Retention & Expansion** - Supporting the of growth, evolution, and resilience of existing businesses by providing resources, identifying potential barriers to growth, and creating a favourable environment to help local businesses thrive.
2. **Workforce Development** - Strengthening the skills and qualifications of the local workforce to meet employer demands, often in collaboration with local/regional educational institutions, training programs, and employers.

3. **Infrastructure Development** - Investing in physical infrastructure (roads, utilities) and community assets (cultural spaces) to improve livability, attracting businesses, new residents, and visitors.
4. **Entrepreneurship & Innovation Support** - Fostering entrepreneurship and supporting the development of small businesses to encourage innovation, resilience, and self-sustaining growth within the community.
5. **Investor & Business Attraction** - Attracting external investment and new businesses by promoting the community's strengths, incentives, and market opportunities, bringing capital and job opportunities to the area.

Setting Performance Indicators

A lot of economic development initiatives will take a long time to see results. This is why it is important to collect both leading indicators (that measure actions being taken) and lagging indicators (that measure the outcomes of those actions).

Leading indicators typically take the form of activity or participation metrics, summarizing the types and number of activities completed, or the rate of participation in economic development programs or projects.

Lagging indicators measure outcomes or impacts after activities have taken place. They tell us whether the actions we are taking are resulting in the intended outcome. These can include direct outcomes affiliated with specific initiatives or second order impacts of economic development efforts, such as impacts on employment.

Some examples of leading and lagging indicators are outlined below.

Objectives	Leading Indicators		Lagging Indicators	
	Activity Metric	Participation Metric	Outcome Metric	Impact Metric
Business Retention & Expansion	Number of businesses identified as candidates for succession planning	Number of participants in succession planning program	Number of businesses successfully transferred to new ownership	Year-over-year business retention rates
Workforce Development	Number of training programs established	Number of participants in established training programs	Number of training program graduates employed in 6 months	Local unemployment rates
Infrastructure Development	Number of funding applications completed	Number of project partners secured	Funding secured for infrastructure projects	Number of businesses / residents impacted by new service delivered
Entrepreneurship & Innovation Support	Number of active entrepreneurship programs	Number of attendees at quarterly founders networking event	Number of program participants launching their own business	Year-over-year change in small business counts
Investor & Business Attraction	Number of leads generated	Number of meetings held with prospective investors	Financial investment in the community	Employment growth because of new businesses

To select the most relevant metrics for your municipality, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the metric clearly tied to our objectives?
- Is it feasible to collect the data?

The Economic Evaluation Scorecard linked below (Tool #6) provides a wide selection of metrics or indicators that align with common economic development objects. It is meant to be used as a ‘cheat sheet’ to choose from or modify to establish a simple reporting framework for both regular operating updates (using leading indicators) and annual impact reporting (using lagging indicators).

Tool #6

 [Economic Development Evaluation Scorecard](#)

Setting Up Effective Measurement Systems

To effectively monitor progress and evaluate outcomes, economic development teams need systems to reliably collect, organize, and analyze data. This section outlines key steps to establish an efficient and sustainable measurement framework.

First, reliable data sources must be identified. The success of any measurement system hinges on access to

accurate, cost-effective, and timely data. Common data sources include:

- **Municipal Administrative Data** - Examples include business licensing records, building permits, and property tax data.
- **Statistical Agencies** - Statistics Canada and the Alberta Office of Statistics and Information (OSI) provide social, labour, and economic data at no cost, but are sometimes time lagged (e.g. census data) or not at the appropriate geographic scale.
- **Partner Organizations** - Examples include information on business trends from local chambers of commerce or business associations, as well as program data from local training providers.

To augment these data sources, you could consider opportunities to:

- **Establish New Data Collection Protocols** - Leading indicators often don’t lend themselves to existing data sources. Establishing protocols for tracking and summarizing economic development activities (e.g., business walk logs) or participation in municipal programming (e.g., event registrations) can help bridge this gap.
- **Survey the Business Community** - Designing custom surveys can help fill gaps in existing data sources.

To maximize response rates and quantitative data, surveys should:

- Use multiple choice wherever possible
- Be simple and short (more than 5 minutes is a killer for response rates)

Choosing a Format & Cadence That Works

To ensure data collection and reporting are manageable, it is important to define where data will be stored, how often it will be reviewed, and in what format it will be presented. Many municipalities opt for monthly operational reviews (to keep economic development top of mind) and a more in depth annual look at the outcomes of economic development efforts. A reporting cadence should be designed to match the frequency with which data or information can be meaningfully connected and acted upon. For example, leading indicators may require more frequent updates, while lagging indicators may only lend themselves to an annual or bi-annual review.

Establishing Meaningful Targets

After setting your economic development objectives, there can be a lot of pressure to move directly to setting ambitious targets. Establishing a baseline for activity and participation metrics in the first year can help with setting realistic and achievable targets for staff.

While it is tempting to set ambitious targets for economic development outcomes and impacts (lagging indicators), these tend to be heavily impacted by outside forces, such as macro economic conditions or geopolitical forces. While these types of targets can be motivating, realizing them can rely on a mix of effort and luck. Setting relational targets can be one way to keep your efforts honest while acknowledging the environment in which you are operating (e.g. achieve higher crop yields across our agricultural sector than the provincial averages).

Combining Metrics & Stories for Impact Reporting

Quantitative metrics provide a clear, objective picture of progress, but numbers alone don't capture the full impact of economic development efforts. Complementing metrics with compelling stories can make your results more relatable, memorable, and persuasive to a variety of audiences, from elected officials to community members. They do so by:

- **Humanizing the Data** - Metrics may show growth or improvement, but stories give data meaning by highlighting the people, businesses, and communities behind them.
- **Demonstrating Tangible Impact** - While metrics may reflect an increase in new businesses, a story about a local entrepreneur's impact in the community can help bring that statistic to life.
- **Strengthening Advocacy** - Stories can inspire action by appealing to emotions, helping secure buy-in for continued investment or new initiatives.

Sources of Impactful Stories

Identifying and documenting meaningful anecdotes can be a straightforward and rewarding process. It might be as simple as connecting with enthusiastic program participants, highlighting key insights from business walks, or noting valuable conversations during a community event.



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