

# BUILDING BETTER CITIES

by Joe Lauber

*The following article is the second part of a two-part feature sharing ways to build a city's strength and keep a city on the path to success. The first installment of this feature was published in the September 2014 issue of the MML Review Magazine and covered goal-setting and the analysis of internal resources. Find the September 2014 issue of the MML Review at [www.mocities.com](http://www.mocities.com).*

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES ANALYSES

Once an internal review has been completed, it is time to look beyond the walls of city hall and out through the community to your city limits. This is what I refer to as the external resources analysis. It is how the outside world sees and perceives your city. It reveals things a city can work on to improve the factors that drive those perceptions.

## JURISDICTIONAL BOUNDARIES

The first external review topic I recommend is to address where you are, or better yet, where you are not! Increasing the size and shape of the community's boundaries has a direct effect on the ability to collect sales tax, franchise, utility, administrative fee and fine revenues – but will also cause additional need for services. Think about whether the city's boundaries have been extended in the most strategic manner possible. To get at this issue, some questions are appropriate:

- How do people come into contact with your community (are they driving to or through or passing by)?
- Do you have a historically strong source of potential customers flowing through your town (highway, airport, river)?
- Have you been bypassed, and if so, do you need to work to bring the new highway back into your community's limits?
- What are nearby resources (businesses, tourist attractions, major employers)? Is it feasible to bring them into your boundaries?

If boundary adjustments are needed, look for and understand strategic opportunities that are presented. The governing body may need to discuss policy decisions, including whether the city is willing to pursue voter-approved (involuntary) annexation to expand, or if it is willing to consider only petition-initiated (voluntary) annexations. Have these conversations with possible strategic partners to develop opportunities to collaborate. It may be necessary to work with owners of desirable property

by assisting with potential sale/lease of property – even economic incentives. You also may need to work with neighboring communities to establish ground rules for targeted areas.

## COMMUNITY BUSINESS REVIEW

An analysis of the community's businesses is another important consideration. Just as with a city's infrastructure, it is a good idea to take an inventory of the businesses operating within the jurisdictional boundaries. Every city should have a good understanding of all types of businesses, whether large industrial employers, small businesses or home occupations. Ask if there are ways to incubate these smaller businesses into larger, more successful enterprises. Are there ways to connect these businesses to create a better draw to the community?

Another consideration is whether the community's critical needs are being met. Some smaller cities are feeling the pinch that comes after losing businesses like a pharmacy or grocery store. A market study is a great tool for a city to understand where its sales tax dollars are leaking when residents drive out of town to conduct business, and also from where others travel to your community to shop. A market study can also help identify the types of businesses that are best suited to the city's demographics. These studies can be immensely useful when developing an economic development policy as was discussed above. With the information provided in a market study, your community has the best information to determine where gaps exist and what types of businesses should be recruited to the city.

Finally, a business inventory can also assist in developing crucial relationships with the business leaders in the community. These entities need to thrive to keep the employment base stable. Additionally, keeping tabs on business activity can be beneficial if problems develop that tax the city's ability to provide services. Understanding these connections can help to reduce the likelihood that businesses will over-exert services and infrastructure, or be damaging to systems; specifically, the city's sanitary or storm water sewers or water infrastructure.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STATUS

An external analysis should also include a review of the city's economic development status. Elected officials or city staff members need to take a good, honest look at the community to determine in which direction it is heading. Is it growing? Stagnating? Constricting? How does it compare to the closest "competition" or similar-sized cities in the area?

Another thing to think about is the approach to economic development. Is the city proactively marketed to attract a good mix of manufacturers, service providers and retailers? Or are you sitting on the sidelines hoping someone will find you? Are you reactive in your approach - meaning that developers come with their ideas (usually seeking public money to assist their efforts), or are you proactive, meaning that the city knows what it needs and can make good business decisions about the types of businesses for which it will consider incentives. This is exactly where a well-planned economic development policy can be employed.

It is also important to ensure that economic development efforts are well balanced. So many times a community gets caught up in the new, shiny retailer to be the savior to the extent that it neglects the core businesses that formed the backbone of the community for generations. It is critical that when a city grows, it maintains the existing businesses in the community. If you are putting new businesses on the outskirts, consider how to entice the traffic flow visiting those establishments back to the downtown area.

Earlier in this segment of the article I used the term "competition." The reason for my use of the quotations is that although jurisdictional neighbors may be a rival on the football field or basketball court, they do not necessarily need to be a rival on economic development terms. Sometimes the whole can be greater than the sum



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of its parts ... if the community is "too small" on its own to attract tourists or employers or whatever is desired, perhaps neighboring communities should band together to market cumulative resources. When viewed in the aggregate, communities may be able to achieve demographic benchmarks and the drive times among the component areas may not be any more than would be found in a typical metropolitan area.

### BUILDING STOCK INVENTORY

The final consideration for external analysis I suggest is that of the community's building stock. This issue gets to the heart of the message that the community sends to the outside world based on its appearance. As the saying goes, you only have one chance to make a first impression. Consider when a plant manager or building site selector drives through the town for the first time, does it look like a place in which

they could be excited about making an investment? Is this a place they can tell their workers that they need to live and raise their families?

It is important to have building and property maintenance regulations in place, and even more important to enforce them. Communities should have policies in place that support pride in ownership and investment in property maintenance. When this doesn't happen, it is very easy for the lowest common denominator effect to take root. Over time, it becomes more difficult for citizens to "do the right thing" if a neighbor's property or the house on the corner always looks terrible. Subdivision, planning and zoning regulations should be in place and be enforced. Subdivision regulations help to ensure that as land is developed, it is done so in a way and at a pace that makes sense from the standpoint of providing governmental services. Zoning regulations allow a



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Just as was the case with infrastructure and building stock, it is important to have an inventory of the structures in the community. What percentage of the structures are industrial? Commercial? Residential? In what condition are those properties? Are they owner-occupied or leased? What is available for sale or lease ... would you know if a potential investor asked today? If property owners in the community know they should communicate with you when space becomes available, you will be better suited to inform the development community of these opportunities. If it is applicable to the community, do something to improve its self-image. Do not allow a self-fulfilling prophecy of "we can't do it" to take hold. Make changing the expectations of how the community appears a priority.

## ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

I will close this article with the topic of encouraging community involvement. I credit MML and the fantastic keynote address given by Peter Kageyama in 2012 at the Annual Conference for my passion about this subject. In his book *For the Love of Cities*, Mr. Kageyama challenges

communities to do things to elicit the emotion of love for those communities. As community leaders, it is important for each of us to consider whether our communities are places that people truly want to be. Do people love where they are?

This is not a question about which to speculate. Instead, ask everyone at every opportunity possible. Do this in person and do this in surveys. Constituents can sometimes be most vocal when something is going wrong. While it is important to address those problems, it is just as important to know what is going right, and to trumpet those successes. The stronger a person feels about his or her community, the more likely they will be willing to invest their time in it.

If you create a place that people love, it adds to the community's sustainability. If people love where they grew up, young people won't be straining to get out and will even look to home to raise their own family.

When the community is a place that people love, it will be easier to attract businesses and employers that in turn provide more to offer constituents: success begets success! Celebrate those successes. It's easy to complain and pile on, but don't let the negatives define the city. Provide positive reinforcement to those who are working hard in the community and encourage others to do

the same. Have a yard-of-the-month award, recognize a citizen or business of the month or year. Do resolutions to show gratitude for service or good citizenship.

Finally, provide as many opportunities as possible for citizens to gather together and celebrate the community. Hold funky parades on Halloween or Groundhog Day. Project a movie on the side of a building on the downtown square. Hold tricycle races or host the local band in the community gazebo.

In the past, when speaking on this topic I told the very sincere story of how I picked the community in which I live to be the place where I'd "settled down." In the end, it is a story of how I fell in love with my community. I close with a challenge to you in the form of a question: What are you doing that will make someone fall in love with your community today?

Oh, and you might be wondering about the community I wrote about at the beginning of this article. I am happy to report that they are doing very well and achieving goals on a regular basis. Since the discussion nearly two years ago, they have annexed land to bring the bypassed highway back within city limits; they obtained voter approval for a fire protection sales tax to offset costs that were previously being covered out of the general fund; they hold regular live music events; they have adopted their first zoning code; a new restaurant has opened in town, and the local convenience store and gas station has decided to relocate and expand. Things are really looking up! □

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**Joe Lauber** has dedicated his entire career to the practice of municipal law on behalf of public entities. In 2010, he established Lauber Municipal Law, LLC, after years of practice representing public entities at larger firms in the Kansas City area. Joe has experience representing municipalities statewide regarding a wide variety of economic development tools and is a regular speaker, author, and contributor for MML. He can be reached at 816-525-7881 or [jlauber@laubermunicipal.com](mailto:jlauber@laubermunicipal.com). To learn more about Joe and Lauber Municipal Law, LLC visit the firm's website at [www.laubermunicipallaw.com](http://www.laubermunicipallaw.com).