

La Plata Comprehensive Plan

Education Forum Notes

Economic Development

Economics Snapshot and Strategy Session

September 28, 2009, Durango Recreation Center

Hosted by Gabe Preston, RPI Consulting and Jason Meininger, La Plata County Project Manager.

Presentation

Jason Meininger began the meeting by summarizing the Comprehensive Plan update process, then introduced Gabe Preston. Gabe gave a presentation on economic development, economic indicators, and the role of comprehensive planning in economic development. There was some good discussion mid-presentation and afterward about the make-up of the La Plata County Economic Base as described in the Region 9 Economic Driver Study. Some of the participants noted that if construction and second homes have dropped-off permanently, a huge portion of our economic base is vulnerable. Others noted that our housing prices are far from being in-line with the wages offered by most of the local jobs.

Some participants at the outset of the presentation expressed frustration about having lots of meetings with few tangible results, and one participant pressed the planning team to describe what will come of this effort. Gabe Preston stated that one intended outcome is the development of a land use code and another is guidance to help make decisions about partnerships on economic development.

In response to the list of local economic development entities in the presentation, one participant urged the inclusion of the Durango Industrial Development Foundation in the list as the only entity developing physical sites for business development.

Many participants seemed to agree with the statement that the main strength is the lifestyle here.

Additional comments from participants during the presentation included:

- ▶ It really only makes sense to open a business here if you want to live here.
- ▶ One participant warned that we might reach a tipping point where the level of growth begins to erode the lifestyle.
- ▶ Concerns related to water adequacy to accommodate the projected growth, and what types of trade-offs will we need to make.

Strategy Session - After the presentation and discussion, Gabe initiated a group strategy brainstorming session (about 25 participants). The two essential questions were: What are we doing right for economic development, & what can we be doing better. The results of the strategy session and discussion are summarized below:

Planning and Development Review

- ▶ The county should review its progress on implementation of the comprehensive plan and be accountable for its performance.

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- ▶ We need to re-visit the economic indicators, because how/what is measured tends to define what is successful.
- ▶ Streamlined approval process would save money, regulatory delays drive-up costs.
- ▶ Any economic development has to be financially feasible, so use the regulatory process to lower price, not increase it (as it does now).
- ▶ We need to help evolve the attitude towards growth. Currently, equating growth with negative impacts is widespread, but we need to convey that economic development can be good because it can result in good jobs.
- ▶ The community needs a place (such as a light industrial park) where small businesses can stage their operations. Currently people are doing it out in the county illegally.
- ▶ To inform the comprehensive plan, develop an economic worst case scenario in which home construction and second homes are no longer a significant part of the economic base. We may not be able to predict the future based on the past right now (referring to the growth projections).
- ▶ Take another look at the positive inputs from the natural gas industry.
- ▶ Keep the landscape and beauty in-tact because that is at the center of our success.

Research and Education

- ▶ Establish a think-tank that would be a La Plata County version of the Aspen Institute.
- ▶ Natural and cultural assets and Fort Lewis College make this a perfect place for academic seminars.
- ▶ Make La Plata County a center for solar technology.

Workforce Development

- ▶ Potential for a partnership between Mercy Medical and the Community Colleges to promote medical training

Business Development

- ▶ We need more opportunities for well-paying blue collar jobs.
- ▶ Continue to improve Ft. Lewis College and link the college to the business community.
- ▶ Develop an entrepreneurial center at the college.
- ▶ Develop a recruitment strategy
 - Target a certain type of entrepreneur (one that wants to live here and has a mobile business or skill set)
 - Reach out to specific companies that have people who can run businesses out of Durango.

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- Focus on businesses which require minimal resources
- Target tourists and visitors, they might be in mobile businesses and want to live/work here.
- ▶ Build a reputation as a place that has an entrepreneurial culture.
- ▶ Focus on base businesses that will make this place more sovereign.
- ▶ Think about income levels in economic development strategies because our housing is expensive.
- ▶ Promote our economic success stories, like Mercury Payments, and we have 28 IBM employees living here and commuting all over the world for work.
- ▶ Start a wildland firefighting school, it is in demand and it fits the local lifestyle.
- ▶ Develop a database of local businesses and organizations and map the relationship and possible enhancements of regional cooperation.

Investment/infrastructure

- ▶ We need rural broadband communications infrastructure to stimulate telecommuting businesses.
- ▶ Transportation is a barrier for many businesses that might be interested in locating here if the infrastructure were better.
- ▶ Ensure existing and future Metropolitan Districts will prosper with declining oil & gas revenues and economic uncertainties.

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