

EDRP LEADER SERIES



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Economic development organizations are working harder than ever since the economy turned upside down in March. How are leading EDOs meeting the challenges covid-19 brings to their businesses, communities, and organizations? This brief is part of a series featuring responses from members of IEDC's Economic Development Research Partners (EDRP) program.

Future Focus

The pandemic shifted the short-term goals and strategies of many EDOs to focus on the immediate survival of businesses. When asked how they expected their organizations' work to change over the medium and long term, EDO leaders acknowledged that much uncertainty still exists. At the same time, most expressed confidence in their existing plans. They noted that while the pandemic may change some strategies, or cause certain programs to be more emphasized or de-emphasized, goals remain intact.

"We will prioritize our core function: jobs and investment. That's what our investors pay us for," said Lara Fritts, president and CEO of the **Greater Richmond Partnership**. Likewise, the **Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership** will continue working on its long-term objectives for the region – population growth, per capita income, and post-secondary educational attainment – said John Sampson, the partnership's president and CEO, though some tactics may be different.

The Buffalo area came into the pandemic experiencing a shortage of highly skilled talent. The pandemic hasn't changed that, so the "Be

in Buffalo" campaign, a talent attraction program launched last fall by the **Buffalo Niagara Partnership**, is still active. "A lot of employers are still hiring," said Tom Kucharski, the partnership's president and CEO. "You still have to be bringing people in."

The partnership also has continued to focus on lining up sites and funds for development and redevelopment, as much of the area's product has been absorbed in recent years. In continuing to execute the partnership's existing plans, Kucharski credited the groundwork the EDO had laid. "We did a lot of research going in [to the pandemic]. The tenets going in still hold," he said.

Not surprisingly, nearly every leader interviewed for this series expected their EDO to spend significantly more time on business retention and expansion going forward. Leaders were interviewed for this series when their organizations were still in triage mode in terms of helping businesses survive the onset of the pandemic, and most expected the crisis phase to continue for some time.

A new or intensified focus on small

businesses. Several EDOs that previously did not work with small businesses such as retail and restaurants plan to do so going forward. At the **City of Fort Collins, Colo.**, SeonAh Kendall, senior economic manager, dealt almost exclusively with primary employers in the past, but now expects to spend more time focused on Main Street programs. “Our downtown is all local businesses,” said Kendall. “It’s what makes us unique.”

For Dan Culhane of the **Ames Chamber of Commerce** in Iowa, the pandemic has provided an eye-opening look into how many small businesses are run – essentially, out of someone’s checkbook. “I have made a list of things to do on the back side to bolster the financial and business acumen of a lot of our small businesses,” Culhane said.

Supply chain opportunities. Covid-19 wrought major supply chain disruptions, a place where many EDO leaders, such as Julie Engel, president and CEO of the **Greater Yuma Economic Development Council**, see opportunities. Yuma’s position on the Mexico border points to opportunities in logistics and manufacturing in both the United States and Mexico. At **Ann Arbor SPARK**, business retention calls have become more deliberate, aiming to explore supply chain opportunities for business attraction that weren’t on the table before.

Now is “a great opportunity to look at site readiness, as companies will want to bring their supply chains closer,” said Richmond’s Fritts. “Site readiness allows a company to make a decision quickly and execute on that decision.”

Increased digitalization. With travel on hold, many EDOs have been developing and using new digital tools and strategies for virtual business retention visits, trade missions and other marketing purposes. They have been upgrading their websites and learning how to use effective online presentations tools, such as interactive storyboards, and perfecting the art of the virtual community tour. EDO leaders expect these tools and strategies to be useful well beyond the pandemic.

Barry Broome, president and CEO of the **Greater Sacramento Economic Council**, sees his organization doing much more of its work remotely, noting that some things are simply easier to communicate digitally than in person, and that people who can be difficult to access face-to-face are sometimes easier to meet with over Zoom. As well, Broome noted that his EDO recently hosted eight site selectors for a virtual tour for a couple of hours, and how cost-effective that strategy is compared to having them come visit the community.

Broome also voiced a desire to see changes in how workforce development is done, with an emphasis on what he calls “digital inclusion.” As the pandemic accelerates the digitalization of everything, he believes a transformation in how people are trained is needed.

“The clients being served are treated more like welfare recipients than people who could be empowered to change your economy,” Broome said. He defines digital inclusion as “making sure everyone has access to the internet; that everyone has access to a device; and that everyone has the opportunity to seek work or training online.”

Internet access and remote work. The city of Chattanooga’s gigabit fiber has been a big plus for the community. Charles Wood, vice president of the **Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce**, sees it as even more valuable to their strategy going forward; Chattanooga is a mid-size city more easily reached by car than air, which could become more of an advantage if people are looking to get out of bigger metros and are wary of flying regularly.

Several other EDO leaders also anticipated that smaller and mid-size communities would be better positioned going forward to attract both workers and businesses. In Oklahoma, the Tulsa Remote program began several years ago to attract remote workers to relocate to the city. Mike Neal, president and CEO of the **Tulsa Regional Chamber of Commerce**, sees this time as a “golden opportunity” to build on the program’s early successes and bring more workers in.

Increased fiber optic capability is something Michael Meek, president of the **Greater New Braunfels Chamber of Commerce** (Texas), has been working on for several years. The pandemic “really magnified” the need for fiber to the premise, said Meeks, whose organization is working now on grants to begin increasing capacity in the downtown core.

Generally. Several economic developers voiced concern about the future of state resources for economic development, or resources for their own EDO. But overall, EDO leaders were optimistic about the future.

“This is an incredible opportunity to make change and to show everyone that without economic growth and development, there is no chance to advance our communities in any

substantial way,” said Kenny McDonald, president and CEO of **One Columbus**.

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