

Regional economic councils are yielding benefits already

With three meetings under our belts, enthusiasm is running high among members of the Finger Lakes Regional Council.

It's not that we've drunk the Kool-Aid on New York State's future. We realize there are a lot of challenges ahead on the road to economic resurgence, some of our own making and some imposed by the national and global economies. And the recent flooding in parts of Upstate certainly didn't help.

But the regional council, one of 10 in the state, has been given the task of drafting a strategic economic development plan for our area. And if we can make it better than the other nine councils' plans—more comprehensive, more engaging, more strategic, if you will—the Finger Lakes could win a significant share of the state's economic development money.

As part of the process of creating this plan, we've been assessing our nine-county region—its strengths, its struggles, its unfulfilled promise.

That part has been pretty easy, because the truth is there are a lot of positive attributes of life in the Finger Lakes, attributes that the regional council is hoping to capitalize upon in its economic development plan.

Many of these are noted in our regional council's vision statement, which we're still tweaking in preparation for our final report, due to Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Nov. 14. The statement refers to our region's sustainable natural resources, its assets as a tourist destination, its expansive arts and cultural offerings. Even more importantly for stimulating job creation, it talks about our diverse, well-educated and dedicated workforce. Put these together with our proven history of community collaboration, our celebrated entrepreneurial spirit, the unparalleled intellectual capital and products held by local businesses and our institutes of higher learning, and the result is a great recipe for success.

But what has also sparked our enthusiasm is the process. On this council, I am one of 21 representatives from across the region, people from business, labor and government, all coming together to share expertise and ideas. There have been some complaints that there isn't sufficient representation on the committee, but I don't agree.



ON BUSINESS

Sandra Parker

is that the ideas that emerged from those public meetings were virtually identical to those the committee had been discussing.

I've heard some criticism of that, too—people complaining that it's the same old ideas being put forth by the same people, calling it a sign that the region lacks the creativity needed to succeed in economic development. But I disagree with that, too. What this really demonstrates, I believe, is that as a region we have clearly identified our assets and our obstacles and that we are focused on our vision—creating jobs and growing our economy.

While I don't want to give the impression that this council process will solve all of our region's economic problems or those of any other region in New York, I do believe that we need to give state government credit for an important change in course. This process is designed to increase communities' engagement in their own future, to make the state more nimble and responsive, to invest taxpayer money more wisely. It is a coordinated approach, so that when a project comes to the regional council, the people who can make it happen—the regional leaders, the economic development professionals and the state agencies—will all be in one place, poised to act.

Once the committee has a draft plan, there will be three more public sessions to get community input. We're working on a tight timeframe, so those are expected to be held in October. I encourage you to get engaged, attend a meeting and offer your ideas. Or send a message through the special website, www.nyopenforbusiness.com.

That website has much more information on all the councils' activities, as well as their operational guidelines. And there is a link to the new Consolidated Funding Application, which will serve as the single entry point for access to economic devel-

The committee includes major stakeholders, and their task is to oversee a regionwide process with many opportunities for community engagement. In fact, several hundred people turned out at three public brainstorming sessions last month, one in Geneva, one in Batavia and one at Monroe Community College. What the committee members found very heartening

development funding from the state—a major shift away from the previous model, which typically had applicants dealing with multiple state agencies on a single project.

Perhaps you have a project in mind? Now is the time to share your vision.

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