

Economic councils unveil draft plans as deadline looms



Written by

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ALBANY -- With a critical deadline looming and \$200 million on the line, 10 regional panels appointed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo have started unveiling the steps they hope will jump-start their local economies.

The Mid-Hudson, Finger Lakes and Southern Tier economic-development councils have all unveiled "draft strategic plans" within the past 10 days, sharing a common focus of promoting a regional economy and removing economic barriers.

"This is a plan for the future," said Sandra Parker, president of the Rochester Business Alliance and a member of the Finger Lakes council. "What we wanted to find out is what are we now, what do we want to be, and how do we get there?"

The plans have to be finalized by Nov. 14. By the end of the year, the Cuomo administration says it will select four plans that will receive \$40 million each, with the remaining six councils each splitting the remaining \$40 million.

In the Southern Tier, Tompkins County Legislature Chairwoman Martha Robertson said she's confident in her council's plan, but the connections created between panel members will be beneficial regardless of the outcome. Each of the roughly 30-member panels includes local government officials, business people from a variety of industries and higher-education leaders.

"Whatever happens with state grant funding, I really hope the momentum continues and that we can figure out how to make some of these ideas happen," Robertson said.

The state grants won't go for projects related to the natural-gas industry, however. The council issued a statement saying it wouldn't seek state grants to foster the industry "at this time" because both federal and state agencies are reviewing the high-volume hydrofracking technique, which companies are eager to use to tap the Southern Tier's vast gas reserves.

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Elmira Mayor John Tonello said the council process helped identify the region's strengths and weaknesses, which are reflected in the Southern Tier's draft plan.

The strategy calls for an increased emphasis on improving rail infrastructure, for example, which the council found to be lacking and hindering the manufacturing industry.

"We got some good results, and not just how we can put together competitive strategies for economic development but to really recognize some of the shortcomings," Tonello said. "I think that's as valuable as the recommendations."

In the mid-Hudson region -- which encompasses seven different counties with vastly different economic profiles, including Dutchess, Sullivan and Westchester -- emphasis was placed on coming up with goals that satisfied urban, suburban and rural residents, said SUNY Rockland President Cliff Wood.

"To do something that develops 20 jobs in Sullivan County may be as important to that region, which is the poorest in our area, as one that brings 200 jobs to Westchester, and I think we have to weigh that," said Wood, a member of the council. "It's a complicated issue."

Some of the initiatives included in the Mid-Hudson's draft five-year plan include strategic investments in six of its burgeoning industries: biotechnology, global high-tech manufacturing, information technology, distribution, professional services, health

care, and food and beverage.

Across all of the regions, the goals of the strategic plans are addressed, but often in broad strokes. The Finger Lakes council, for example, identifies goals such as "modernize infrastructure" and "align work force development efforts with sector needs," but offer little about what needs to be done to make that happen.

That's drawn criticism from some members of the public, who have spoken out at various public hearings that the proposals are too vague.

That will change by the Nov. 14 deadline, Parker said. The council is still soliciting public input and will use that to add more detail to the plan before submitting it to Cuomo's office.

For her council, the effort is placed on debunking the myth of the Rochester area being a Kodak-only town, she said. The executive summary of the Finger Lakes plan quickly points out that the film giant

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employed 60,000 in the region in 1982. Today, that number is closer to 7,000.

"I think one of the things that we've tried to do is tell the story that Kodak is still a force in this region, but it's not the only force," Parker said. "We've diversified. We have small companies and different kinds of companies, and quite frankly we are a region that is reinventing itself."

While \$200 million of Cuomo's economic-development competition will be awarded based on the strategic plans, an additional \$800 million in tax breaks, grants and other incentives will be handed out for specific projects.

Private developers, companies and local governments have until Oct. 31 to submit an application to one of the 10 councils for a specific capital or economic-development project.

The local councils are tasked with coming up with criteria to rate those applications, which will account for 20 percent of the project's score. The other 80 percent will be determined by state agencies, with the highest rated projects receiving **funding**.