

WHAT IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ANYWAY? (Revisited) *Looking at 2018 and Beyond*

By Dale Kroop

I was raking my leaves and an SUV pulled up and a woman asked me what stores were going into a particular property. I knew it wasn't going to be retail. I explained this but she couldn't understand why not a store, and then she suggested several options that I know were not going to happen. When I would not divulge my information, she was frustrated that I wouldn't share confidential information.

After she drove away, I thought that if you ask 10 Hamden residents what Economic Development was you might get a similar answer; that our job is to "bring stores to Hamden". We not only recruit new businesses but more importantly to help to retain our current businesses by offering services and incentives to expand right here. More than 70% of all businesses that we assist are those already here and considering expansion. Companies such as Burt Processing Equipment, Specialty Wire and Cord Sets and International Provisions are good examples of those decided to stay and expand, all taking advantage of our programs and services. Companies that we have recruited using our business incentives include Precision Grinding, Taylor Freezer and Airline Accessories. These companies were all recruited from other Towns. We are proud of our success Hamden has the lowest commercial vacancy rate in the region and has been for many years.

Economic Development is about creating opportunities where there was none before. It is not only about the transaction, i.e. the leased building or the redeveloped site, it is about the work that we do to improve the community in a more sustained way.

A good way to illustrate this is through workforce development. It is far more important to spend our efforts to train or education a young person to be employable rather than just get them a job. This way they are more willing to develop Hamden roots and become part of the civic infrastructure.

We work with businesses to help them find good employees through job training grants and helping them to gain access to retraining dollars. These are smart investments that sustain economic development in the Town. Almost all research shows that the number one need for business is finding a qualified and dependable workforce.

Economic Developers also need an active redevelopment and brownfield program to make seemingly useless properties productive again. This includes blighted or contaminated properties for which have redeveloped in to housing and commercial development. Developments such as Highwood Square, 333 Welton Street, 1409 Dixwell (Himmel Brothers) and 400 Goodrich St are examples or those that are active and productive properties again.

Economic Developers manage infrastructure projects to improve streetscapes and to upgrade water and sewer utilities as a local investment in the growth of small businesses. That type of investment in economic development helps companies expand by improving the capacity of the system of public utilities and infrastructure. Our substantial work in the East Ridge or the State Street community is a good example of this kind of investment of time and capital.

I am always reminded that Hamden is a “Town” albeit a large Town, where you can get to know a lot of people. Many of them are not only business owners but also homeowners. That means they pay two sets of taxes and have the expectation of receiving good services for their investment in the Town.

We must help small and large businesses to listen to their needs and figure what they need to help them do well. Sometimes it is a simple issue and sometimes it is a major one. The loss of Stop and Shop several years ago in southern Hamden was a strong reminder of a changing retail (i.e. influenced by the internet) and labor market. A “Gap Analysis” (what developers use to figure out what goes where) was done for grocery stores at this site. It showed *within a one minute drive*, there was nine times (\$9) the amount of available groceries available for each dollar (\$1) of market spending on groceries. This among many other factors, explains why another grocery store has not come back yet. There is

discussion going on about a real estate redevelopment plan for this site that will likely be different from the 1980s version of the center that everyone may be expecting.

Over 73% of all businesses have less 10 employees and over 80% have less than 20. So our focus is on these small businesses, many of whom also are Hamden residents and homeowners. The focus should be to raise the collective income of all small business owners so that the Town may attract larger employers and taxpayers.

So Economic Development is all of these things. Thankfully we have an Economic Development Commission that supports all of these goals for business growth and retention. So if you drive by and ask me about stores, I will probably bend your ear a little.

The Economic Development Commission has a [comprehensive plan](#) (since 1998) for recruiting and retaining businesses while trying to create more opportunities in all areas in Hamden. That plan gets re-evaluated every two or three years. Go to www.hamden-ct.com for more information. the current plan runs out in June of 2018. As we go forward in 2018, our efforts will likely involve new collaborations and partnerships, new tools and a public education process about the economic marketplace.

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