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Franklin's municipal planning dept. considers workforce development an economic priority

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As director of a municipal planning department I am fortunate to work in a community where staff time is available throughout the year to work on a variety of economic development related initiatives. The vast majority of Mass. communities don't have professional staff working to plan and implement economic development strategies. With continuous changes to the local, state and national economy, municipalities need to make every effort to retain current and attract new businesses in order to increase the commercial and industrial tax base and provide employment opportunities for its residents.

There are a wide range of initiatives available to communities, which if planned and implemented can be beneficial to businesses within a community looking to expand, as well as startups, or companies within other areas looking to expand or relocate. Franklin has planned and implemented several initiatives and has had some success in attracting industrial companies. Positioning a city or town for significant commercial and industrial growth can be a time consuming endeavor requiring several key ingredients. Franklin is fortunate to have many of the ingredients in place.

Franklin's economic health is strongly correlated to its convenient access to interstate highways, major markets, institutions, and large corporations. Franklin is within thirty miles of Boston, Worcester and Providence, and over 100 higher education and vocational training institutions. The community has two exits along I-495, is in close proximity to I-90 and I-95, and has two MBTA commuter rail stations. Location isn't everything, but it is a significant factor in attracting businesses. One central reason for Franklin's success in attracting industrial development is its low stable single tax rate. Unlike many of the larger communities in Mass., Franklin industrial and commercial property owners pay the same tax per \$1,000 in assessed value as residential property owners. This is one of the more important ingredients to Franklin's success, however, there are those that believe taxes are less important to some businesses than quality of life and well educated labor force. Franklin has that and much more, including modernized infrastructure, excellent municipal services and school system, recreation and cultural opportunities, diverse housing opportunities, and a pro-business environment.

Franklin is a business friendly community. Weekly Technical Review Committee meetings serve as a way for town staff to meet with applicants regarding proposed projects. Committee members provide advice and assistance uncovering problems, so many issues are addressed prior to attending board and commission hearings. The meetings are an important part of Franklin's recommended pre-application process, which results in a streamlined permitting process that many other communities are not able to offer.

Franklin's town council form of government is another important ingredient in the town's success. Franklin has a city form of government, and as such town council is the legislative body. There is no

need to wait for town meeting to present proposals for consideration and action. With this form of government zoning bylaw changes can be implemented or tax increment finance agreements can be executed in much less time than in communities with a town meeting form of government.

In recent years the town has approved many zoning bylaw amendments favorable to economic development, including rewrites of the sign bylaw, biotechnology uses zoning bylaw, and site plan review and design review regulations, as well as created a new downtown commercial zoning district, which allows mixed-use developments by right in downtown Franklin. In addition the town implemented three aggressive economic development initiatives aimed at creating conditions favorable for business expansion and attracting manufacturing and research and development firms. The town established three large priority development sites, created six multi-parcel economic opportunity areas, and tripled the size of the biotechnology uses overlay district. Attaching these designations to a substantial number of properties within the town's office and industrial parks is an effective business recruitment strategy.

As a member of the I-495/95 South Regional Economic Target Area, the town can offer businesses wishing to locate or expand in Franklin a local tax incentive through tax increment financing. Franklin supports the use of this local tax credit for projects that create a significant number of livable wage jobs for Franklin residents, and result in redevelopment of empty or underutilized industrially zoned properties, or development of new facilities.

Franklin's business visitation program was designed to make local research and development and manufacturing companies aware of State technical assistance programs and financial resources, and to raise awareness of DPCD as a resource for Franklin-based businesses. The Mass. Office of Business Development and MassDevelopment have been very important partners in this endeavor. One issue that few municipal planning departments have time to seriously consider is workforce development. During 2012 Franklin's DPCD made the workforce development topic a priority; the town's 2012 Economic Development Summit focused on informing businesses of workforce training resources available to assist them. More recently the town has participated in regional meetings organized by Employment and Training Resources in Framingham to discuss workforce development and related education and training issues.

The above mentioned and other ongoing economic development initiatives are very important to Franklin's economic health, but choosing which initiatives are right for specific communities can be difficult. For community leaders working to develop economic development strategies I recommend considering the following principles: economic viability and community livability are equally important parallel goals, and work to create a community where entrepreneurs will want to settle and raise their families.

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