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Remembering the basics can be important in economic development

October 24, 2013 - Spotlights

You know the book "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten?"

As the president of a local development corporation in the greater Portland region, those childhood lessons come into play every day as I navigate the waters of attracting investment to my community. I don't intend to minimize the complexities of attracting investment in a rapidly changing, yet slow growing national economy, but I can point to the benefits of some simple rules.

Let's start with the lesson that I believe to be most important: "Always be prepared." I have the pleasure of working in the Town of Scarborough, Maine, where the community routinely invests in quality staff, infrastructure and modern approaches to zoning. But no matter how much we try to anticipate the future, occasionally quality opportunities arise that don't fit the current model.

As a community, we have to be able to recognize the opportunity and be prepared to mobilize our resources to fix, change or invent the pathway to yes. In Scarborough, we've invested in a corridor along the Haigis Parkway creating an area with water, sewer, telecommunications and highway access for large employers. In talking with our property owners, they had ideas about zone changes that would open the door to interesting possibilities. We listened and put together a path to update the zone uses and characteristics - without compromising our original intent for the zone.

I'm pleased to say that within months of changing the zone, we now have our first post recession new building on the Haigis Parkway. Horizon Solutions, a large electronics distributor, completed their new facility in April of this year. Shown in the image, the new facility is a model for the type of development that the community envisioned for the parkway. In fact, we've just named them the "2013 Project of the Year" at our annual celebration of business in Scarborough, held earlier this month. We listened to our property owners, and we had a clear pathway to change.

Another lesson embraced by the communities in the Portland region is best illustrated in the holiday movie "Miracle on 34th St." Remember how the department store benefitted by giving the customer what they wanted, even if it meant sending them to another store? The urban communities in the Portland region realized that we are stronger by working together to attract investment.

We formed the Greater Portland Economic Development Corp. (GPEDC) to give us a formal way to collaborate. We subscribe to the notion that you have to listen the client. If I don't have the type of space or environment that a client needs, I'm going to make sure they know that my neighbor may be the perfect location. That's not to say that we don't compete to have the best product on the market, but we share techniques & strategies. We are perfectly comfortable handing a company off to our neighbor when it's in the best interest of the client. The bottom line is that the economic development folks in the Portland region all know and respect one another.

Lesson number three includes embracing the childhood quality of always being curious. While being curious is important in so many ways, I find it particularly useful in getting to know our industrial

sectors. The Portland area has a dynamic bioscience sector. Unfortunately, my strength is in economics, not chemistry, biology or physics. If I want to make sure that I have what this sector needs, I have to ask questions, lots and lots of questions.

Here in Scarborough we have the Maine Medical Center Research Institute, the Foundation for Blood Research, Alere, Maine Molecular and several other bioscience companies. I've made it a point to visit companies, ask incredibly basic questions and to pass what I've learned along to others in the community. While I'll never be hired as research associate, I'm getting better at understanding what these businesses need and how to promote a healthy environment for them to grow.

While there are many "lessons" we could talk about, I'm going to end with the idea that we should all try new things. Children are so adaptive and open to new ideas, technology and new friends. I have to give my business community credit for embracing this particular aspect of childhood. Scarborough received Google's eCity Award for 2013, which recognizes the strongest online business community in each state. Our businesses are embracing new technology to reach their customers and are sharing their new skills with their fellow businesses in organizations like our Chamber of Commerce and Buy Local.

I'll wrap up with the following advice: the next time you ask a kindergartener what they learned in school today, pay attention.

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