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What does it mean to New England communities to be development-ready?

May 21, 2008 - Retail

What does it mean to New England communities to be "development-ready"? Even in these challenging economic times successful businesses are expanding and repositioning. How can you identify a community that will be an advantage to your client rather than a hindrance? Having experience in N.H., N.Y., Minnesota and Florida, I can say that there are vast regional and local differences that will affect the development process as well as long-term success.

Master Plans: Ask the prospective community about their master plan or economic development plan. If they don't have one, can't find it or don't remember what's in it you may want to reconsider your interest in the location. Communities with regularly updated plans and, more importantly, are planning for increased growth and development will be more prepared and focused for your project. These documents may include land use, transportation, economic development, zoning and other topics critical for you to be aware of. Most cities and towns have a website and post their most recent plans.

City Development Team: Find out who is on the development team and how they work together. Ask them about recent successes and denials, court cases, etc. Rochester, N.H. has a substantial development team of city staff that includes economic development, planning, the city engineer, code enforcement, fire marshall, police department, conservation commission and when appropriate the historic society and city manager. This team was able to guide a 329,000 s/f shopping center project through the planning board and zoning board to approval in 62 days. The community that wants your project can be a powerful force.

Zoning & Ordinances: Checking out the zoning and local ordinances regarding development has gotten much easier since cities and town regularly post this info on their websites. However, the regulations regarding development have gotten increasingly complicated and specific to the type of development proposed. Find out how long it's been since there has been an update. Many communities have also tightened regulations regarding wetland impacts, storm water, site drainage and other environmental considerations. Variances can be extremely controversial and difficult to get depending upon the community. Jurisdictions may also be shared, adding to the complexity of the approvals.

Impact Fees, Exactions & Incentives: I was surprised at how common impact fees and exactions were in N.E. after having spent time in the midwest. The fees and how they are implemented vary greatly by community and in some cases are entirely under the discretion of local officials. Impact fees are frequently based on a formula but can be negotiated as well. Incentives are relative and

related to job creation, location in distressed areas, investment amount and competitiveness of the project. Find out what you may be in for in advance of commitments to locations. New Hampshire's Economic Development website, www.nheconomy.com, lists the state advantages and incentives. State-to-state comparisons are also available from the business resource division.

Competitiveness: Late in 2007 Rochester economic development commission participated with Northeastern University's center for urban regional partnership on a comparison of N.E. communities regarding competitiveness for industrial development. This was a very simple enterprise and enlightening in multiple ways. First, there were very few participants, presumably because they did not have interest in being ranked or improving their position. The cost was \$5,000 per community, a very low threshold. Second, Rochester scored very well among N.E. communities. They were most competitive in property availability, business costs and speed of approvals. Third, the commission has identified specific areas to improve and incorporated them into the development strategy for the city. They have targeted public transportation, site plan approvals and zoning as priorities.

How can you improve your success among the myriad obstacles and challenges relative to N.E. development? Development ready communities also will engage a professional to aid business development and investment, and act as a facilitator to getting all necessary approvals. I tailor solutions, identify sites, and support applications for projects in the city and attend meetings, make arguments and suggest strategies to gain timely approvals.

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