CHAMPIONING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Executive Summary
CHAMPIONING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
International Economic Development Council

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The EDRP Program is the “think tank” component of IEDC, designed to help economic development professionals weather the challenges and grab opportunities from economic changes affecting our communities. EDRP members are leaders in the field of economic development, working through this program to improve the knowledge and practice of the profession. IEDC would like to thank the Economic Development Research Partners program for providing the impetus and resources for this project.

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This paper would not be possible without their contributions and expertise. In particular, we would like to thank Linda DiMario, Andy Levine and Brett Doney for their time and dedication to this project, and their additional assistance to the research team.

We would also like to thank the various economic development professionals who shared their experiences through surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. While too many to thank individually, their insights were crucial to this research.
Executive Summary

Economic development is a noble calling. The opportunity to make a positive difference in a community and in people’s lives makes for a personally fulfilling profession for many people.

Economic development is also complex, sensitive work, involving the high-profile balancing of multiple stakeholder interests. As such, economic developers must respond to questions about or challenges to their strategies and practices as part of the job.

Some of these challenges or issues are unique and some are perennial. Broadly speaking, common challenges include general misunderstanding of economic development, its purpose and impact; transparency and accountability; and ideological opposition.

In response, IEDC’s Economic Development Research Partners (EDRP) program chose to examine the reasons behind various challenges to the profession and develop resources to help economic developers address them. This report is one piece of a larger initiative to elevate the profession and support economic developers in helping their investors, partners, clients and other stakeholders to better understand, support, and act on behalf of the work of the organization (EDO).

The paper is based on focus group input, survey results, interviews, prior IEDC publications and web research. Five recommendations came through as clear priorities to help economic developers champion their work and respond to challenges:

1. **Do good work.** This work is the foundation on which organizational and professional integrity are built. It means diligently executing your role as an economic development professional: planning the EDO’s actions with the guidance of its governing body; executing the plan; measuring the results and reporting them.

2. **Listen. Engage. Adapt.** Economic developers must be willing to listen and evaluate criticism. Whether objections to economic development or an EDO come from a place of ideology or misinformation, or whether they raise valid questions, economic developers must be prepared to engage and respond accordingly.

3. **Make transparency a core tenet of your work.** Transparency fosters trust, which is the foundation on which economic development is built. EDOs that act transparently – e.g., in regard to their strategic plan, return on investment, compensation and expenditures, deal-making criteria and processes – foster trust in their community relationships.

4. **Communicate and connect.** Part of being an economic developer is to know that constant communication is a core function of the job. The audiences for these efforts to educate and engage are extensive – council and board members, state legislators, other governmental partners, local civic, neighborhood or special interest groups, service delivery partners, clients, the general public – nearly everyone.

5. **Build and enlist allies.** All successes in economic development are born of partnerships working in varying combinations. These partners are also an EDO’s greatest allies. Doing good work in
the context of these partnerships means understanding the motivations, goals and needs of these partners as they work with the EDO, and being flexible and creative in finding win-win solutions.

Following the recommendations, the paper provides tools, strategies and examples economic developers can use to champion their work (through proactive communication), or respond in the face of higher scrutiny or challenges. It includes extensive sample documents, case studies, brochures, and more to help economic developers communicate, measure results, and respond effectively in a range of situations.

Ultimately, as they contribute to the economic vitality of their communities, economic developers must also embrace the role of educator. They must be prepared to explain, describe and build consensus for their work and for its impact, and constantly articulate its value and processes to others. This paper intends to provide economic developers with the tools, strategies and tactics they need to champion their work every day, as well as to manage and mitigate challenges that may arise.