Mr. David C. Sweet, PhD, FM, HLM
IEDC Interview Conducted with Nancy Moorman
AEDC Chairman, 1983-1984

How have you seen the economic development profession evolve over the course of your career?

In 1984, the American Economic Development Council (AEDC) published a report, [titled] Economic Development Today: A Report on the Profession, in which an old member of the American Industrial Development Council (AIDC) states, “In spite of the increased sophistication of the field, the basic economic development process has not changed over the years. The economic developer, whether he or she practices a profession from a public, private or nonprofit sector, or from a hybrid public-private agency, still must focus ultimately on influencing private-sector decisions and attracting investors with the objective of retaining jobs, expanding jobs, creating jobs, and promoting the community’s financial health.”

While the observation above remains true today, the economic developer requires a greatly expanded skill set to be successful in the field. The issue of private sector investment obviously remains a very important component. [But] the modern economic developer must also be a broker of public and nonprofit resources, whether they are financial, professional, or otherwise. Globalization has accentuated the role and responsibility of the economic developer. The profession has a basic origin in attracting private-sector investment while creating, retaining, and expanding jobs. That remains a critical component, but the set of responsibilities and skills required have greatly expanded.

In 1984, I was Chairman of the American Economic Development Council (AEDC) and resided in Cleveland. Gary Conley was President of the Council for Urban Economic Development (CUED) and also resided in Cleveland. We had talked about the logic of trying to merge the two organizations in order to enhance the profession and give professionals in the field greater clout in Washington and elsewhere. This vision took seven more years before it became a reality. The evolution of the profession has been greatly enhanced by the ultimate merger of CUED and AEDC into IEDC.

How have you seen the financing aspects of economic development change throughout your career?

Earlier I said “brokering resources.” One example [of that] is [brokering] financial resources. These include public-sector dollars, private-sector dollars, and the leveraging of both on expansion, retention, and creation projects. Over my career, the basic sources of jobs for communities have not changed. The largest source is the retention of jobs or the expansion of jobs from existing companies and organizations. In baseball jargon, the attraction of jobs has always been “the homerun.” But, as we know, ballgames are won by singles and doubles. You have to be involved in the attraction of jobs, but the reality is that the “bread and butter” of the economic development professional still resides in the retention, expansion, and diversification of the economic base that is currently in existence.
Another component that has expanded in its importance is the creation of jobs. That is the brokering of new technologies and the kinds of linkages that exist between universities, the private sector, and the community’s job base. This can be through incubators that we have for new businesses, or it can be through other kinds of vehicles for getting both basic and applied research into a production model that allows for a spinoff company to create and expand jobs in a community. Financing is obviously critical to all of this, but it has taken on a little different purview than things, like the purchase of land and local community tax abatement, that were once the bread and butter of many economic developers’ activities.

Can you describe your personal career path? How has it evolved as the economic development profession has evolved?

I have somewhat of a unique background. I received my Masters degree from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Planning and economic geography were my primary fields of interest. I took my first professional position at Battelle Institute, which is a research institute in Columbus, Ohio. I developed a group called the Regional Economic Division. I headed up the efforts in terms of working with communities to develop strategies and targeted economic development efforts. Along the way, while at Battelle, I studied for a PhD at Ohio State University, which I obtained in 1970. My thesis was a computerized model focused on targeting specific industries for specific geographical areas. I often say that my dissertation, rather than ending up on a dusty bookshelf in the library, was applied subsequently when I became state economic development director in 1971 for the newly elected governor of Ohio. I served for four years and greatly expanded my economic development activities, because the state development agency had a wide range of programs that included tourism promotion, international efforts and community development programs. We had a multi-faceted agency.

In 1973, while serving as the development director, our first energy crisis—the Arab oil embargo—took place and the governor appointed me as Chair of the Energy Emergency Commission. I obtained a deep understanding of the role of energy in economic development. Subsequently, the governor appointed me to the Public Utilities Commission, and I gained experience working with and regulating a wide range of industries that support a state’s economy, such as: motor transportation, telecommunications, and the traditional energy industries like electric and gas. During my four years at the Commission, I saw both the plusses and minuses of regulation as it impacts both a community and a professional’s responsibility for economic development.

Then, I proceeded to become an academic and became the founding Dean of the College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University. We developed a unique set of programs that focused on planning urban and regional economic development. The College developed a curriculum, and I recruited faculty and staff that had real estate development [background] and a wide range of planning, development and public administration related skills. We were a unique college in that we had no departments. We had a blend of economists, planners, geographers, lawyers and engineers. We had the ability to bring together a variety of disciplines and focus on a set of geographies, such as the city, and identify ways to redevelop or revitalize them.
In 2000, I was appointed president of Youngstown State University in Ohio. All along, planning and economic development have served as the continuous thread that has woven through my career. When I was elected as AEDC Chair, I was the first academic to hold that office. It was unique for a person with an applied background to enter a university in a leadership position and then continue to be active in a professional association.

During my university career, I worked very closely with the mayors of both Cleveland and Youngstown to see how the university could be an effective collaborator in terms of developing plans for the future of the community, revitalizing the community, and at the same time undertaking research so that the new technologies ultimately get transferred to a corporate setting to grow new companies. We’re proud that Youngstown has been rated among the top ten cities to start a business and ranks highly as one of the fastest growing industrial areas. We have the fastest growing small-software development companies housed in the Youngstown Business Incubator.

**What skills did you come to acquire over time?**

My background is in geography, economics, and planning, so I consider those to be an excellent set of skills for the work of an economic developer. Economics is obviously important, but it lacks a spatial dimension. A supply and demand curve has no spatial component. When you get into geography, you then look at these various phenomena over space. You seek to understand why they are there and what you can do to enhance their presence. In a conceptual fashion, that is what the economic developer is doing. You have to have a plan. If you don’t, as Will Rogers said, “Any road will get you there.” So, I’ve been a very strong advocate for both the university and the city to have a vision and plan. Then, it is equally important to develop the will to implement that plan.

**What are some of the challenges that you have had to overcome throughout your career?**

My entire professional experience has been in Ohio. Early on, during my career at Battelle and as the state’s development director, I had the opportunity to work with all aspects of Ohio’s economy. In my experiences in Cleveland and Youngstown, we were working in cities with declining populations and economies in transition. I recently wrote an article titled *Growing a University in a Declining City*. It’s all about “right-sizing” the community. As economic developers, we have a propensity in this country to think of success being tied to the population growth of a community when we all know that that may not necessarily be the case. The enhancement of a community and its economic base can often more effectively be accomplished by increasing the incomes of that community and accepting—as we have in Youngstown—that we are going to be a smaller city, but we are going to be a different city in the sense of our economic structure.

**Can you go into more detail of about your role in AEDC? How did your involvement with the organization affect your own career development?**

Early on, when I first began my career as a regional economist, I attended the annual meeting of AIDC in St. Louis. The Executive Director of AIDC was a gentleman by the name of Richard
Preston. I got to know Dick, and I intuitively recognized that being associated with a professional association was very important in terms of my career, education, and networking opportunities. I became an active participant in AIDC and was elected to the board in the mid-1970s.

In the late 1970s, I got into the chairs. I started out as Treasurer, and we were encountering some very difficult financial times. We also had some turnover in terms of the executive director position. Working with the officers, I was involved in trying to fortify the financial base of the professional association. We were successful in doing that, and the organization continued to grow in the 1980s and made for a fitting partner when the opportunity arose for a merger conversations. As I mentioned, back in 1984 Gary Conley was President of CUED while I was President of AEDC, and we had conversations regarding the logic of a merger. Among other things, I think those conversations led to a rational conclusion that the profession would be enhanced by us joining together. Jeff Finkle has been a masterful integrator of the two professional organizations into IEDC. Now there is one strong voice for professionals in the field of economic development.

**Can you give some specific reasons for the merger?**

When you think of a professional association, you think of the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association. And while there have been fractures off of those significant professional associations, those are always viewed as the core. With CUED and AEDC, professionals never knew what the focal point was for the profession. CUED had its roots in urban economic development and AEDC had its roots in the old railroad and utility-focused industrial development. Over time, CUED began expanding its focus and AEDC expanded its focus until those organizations had great overlap. The merger took some artful negotiations, because the issue of merging any kind of entity where there are two directors and two boards is very complicated. Over time, I believe the merger has been very successful. Now you have one organization. Obviously, there are other splinter organizations, but IEDC is the primary affiliation for professionals in economic development.

**What positives and negatives did you see resulting from the merger?**

Honestly, I see all positives. I see economic development working to speak with one voice and having a presence in Washington that AEDC never had. That is very important in terms of federal policy and related issues. I am sure there are some old-timers that yearn for the “good ol’ days” when the utility and railroad folks were the primary drivers of AIDC. But, I think the real world is better served by an integrated organization that has a mission that embraces those working not only in rural areas, but in urban areas, and working in different dimensions of the economic development field. Another plus is that, as an individual who wants to be involved in both organizations, you do not have to pay dues to two organizations or feel the tug of competition. I’m sure there are negatives, but I would not articulate any because I think it is important for the profession to have a single voice, and that’s the role that IEDC should be playing.

**Do you see any emerging trends in the economic development field?**
You see the expansion of basic trends like creative financing tools. There will be a better understanding of technology transfers. Universities, economic developers, and businesses don’t come together easily. Over time, it is essential to have the generators of technology be a part of the economic development strategy of a region. In my view, it is wise for a university or university president to reach out, engage the community, and seek to support the needs of the economic development component of that community wherever possible. I think that trend will continue.

We are in an era of technological revolution. Who would have predicted the emergence of the internet as such a major economic engine for both communities [and] employment sectors? Here in the Midwest, we are hopeful that some of that innovation and technology can be applied to our basic industries—such as auto and steel—in order for the economic base of our region to revitalize itself. In Youngstown, we have a major General Motors plant that will build the Chevy Cruze and compete with Honda, Toyota, and other producers of small-line cars. We are betting that automobile manufacturing can be retooled further, made more efficient, and have an outstanding record of quality so that our region will benefit from the transformation of this basic industry. There may be fewer jobs because of robots operating on the production line, but those robots ultimately have to be operated and programmed by skilled professionals. We hope, as an educational institution, that we are the ones preparing those highly-skilled individuals to join in the continued effort to maintain and enhance both our local and national manufacturing base. That is a critical issue in this day and age.

How do you see IEDC changing in the future?

IEDC will be keeping a pulse on what is happening in this country and globally and will be involved in trying to elevate the awareness of practitioners in the field regarding trends that are going to have an impact. IEDC needs to be communicating more effectively to college audiences about opportunities in the field of economic development. I see IEDC continuing to elevate the standards of the profession, continuing to be an advocate for the profession, and continuing to be an educational resource that is equipping professionals in the field to be more competitive both as individuals and in helping their communities to become more competitive.

Do you have any other stories or anecdotes you would like to share?

Well, I guess I do, but I think I will keep it on a professional level here. We had a conference in Hilton Head, South Carolina in the mid-1980s, and the organizers didn’t fully understand the economics of offering a conference. We all learned about “corkage fees,” because we had a group that liked to socialize and imbibe. They almost bankrupted the organization because of the corkage fees at the Hilton Head conference. That’s the one anecdote I’ll pass on. When you are hosting an IEDC conference, be aware of the various hidden costs—and the difficulty of tracking those costs—to assure the organization remains as viable at the end of the conference as it was at the beginning of the conference!