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IEDC Interview Conducted with Tye Libby on December 8, 2010

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

There are now more professional development opportunities and a greater emphasis on professional development. In the past, one of the things that we focused on was promoting and reinforcing professional development and the technological applications that came along with it. It wasn’t too many years ago that we were not using the internet…imagine that! We did not have access to all of these wonderful tools that we now need to learn how to use. This includes using social networking to promote and improve our abilities to market from the economic development perspective. These technological changes—these internet applications—are what have become hallmarks of the economic development profession.

Jim Devine suggested that I ask you about the role of regional economic development organizations and how they have evolved. Can you speak to this?

It is rather interesting. The reason Jim Devine probably recommended that I address that issue is because, for a long time, I was a proponent of the regional development models. As we know, the changing economy has changed how people are able to access professional development opportunities…whether they are regional, national, or international opportunities. The regional economic development model can certainly appeal to people who have less resources, because they are less expensive to belong to, less expensive to attend, and have fewer qualifications to maintain the necessary interaction and contact. The Southern Economic Development Council (SEDC) is one that I am most familiar with as I have gone through the chairs and served as SEDC President. At about the same time, I was heavily engaged and involved with the American Economic Development Council, and I was a member of CUED, both of whom merged to form IEDC. It helped me to be a working member of these groups, along with Jim Devine and others, which pushed for streamlining the professional economic development organizations. If we were asking the government to streamline, then we as non-government organizations ought to do the same as a leading example. So, CUED and AEDC merging to form IEDC was obvious.

The regional professional development organizations were not as effective as time wore on. At a point in time, SEDC was a most revered and powerful organization because of its membership. Over the years, they lost their luster as a result of becoming only a networking tool, although they offered annual meetings and some professional development meetings. They never went to the next level where they got into more specific professional development and the challenges of the professional development process. There was no way, in other words, to earn a professional certification. In recent years, they have introduced some certification programs that are not equivalent of the IEDC CEcD. In other words, they’re not quality, and they’ve really muddied the water in regard to the identification of professional ED certifications. This includes the individual certifications of the profession and the certification of organizations as well. Although, I still think IEDC has not embraced the promotion of the AEDO as AEDC intended. I think we’ve fallen short on delivering that to our members and our member organizations. There
still seems to be, in my opinion, a need for it. I have been a proponent of the Accredited Economic Development Organization (AEDO) as much as I am a proponent of the individual becoming certified.

The role of the regional professional development organization should be as a first-tier steppingstone to the next tiers, which are the national and international professional development organizations. This is how, in my opinion, the regional organizations were intended to function from the beginning. However, this depends on the economic circumstances and the resources of the individual organizations. If you go to the state economic development organizations, you’ll find hundreds of people who are members in each state. Those people belong to the state organization because it is affordable and accessible. Then, if you go to the regional organization, you’ll find less numbers rather than a caste of hundreds. Then, measure how many of the regional members are also members of IEDC? Suddenly, that number shrinks as well. That has to do with limited resources and the availability of funding. Some of that is driven by individual professional development wants, needs, and desires.

I think all organizations need to find a niche in terms of what they can offer to the professional economic developer or the community developer. For instance, both Louisiana and Mississippi—and I’ve worked in both states—have combined their chambers of commerce and economic development groups into one organization. They have recognized that the convergence of community development and economic development has become more of a “level playing field.” People may specialize in community development, but it’s all economic development in the end.

So, we have to find our niches. All of the organizations also need to be aware that they have to change with the environment around them. Certainly today is a great example of that change. I do not think that we have reached out enough to the regional economic development groups, or the state economic development groups, in the manner in which we should embrace and encourage them. It’s almost that we’ve taken more of a competitive position, and I don’t think that is what will be important in the end. That’s not the endgame. The endgame is to help these organizations and their professionals to become better at what they do and to keep them informed, bring value to them as members. Today, it is very difficult to keep informed and to go through the multitude of information that is out there given the technology that is available to us.

That is why I belonged to both CUED and AEDC. I belonged to CUED because I needed the information that CUED gave me on the federal programs from Washington, DC. Did I attend CUED conferences? No. I got what I needed in written format that I could read it when I needed it. I didn’t have to go to Washington and spend money to have somebody tell me what I just read. AEDC, on the other hand, was more of a national networking opportunity. It offered the ability to mix and mingle with, not only peers, but also with consultants in the economic development world. There were also people who were engaged in other economic development niches like military affairs and federal affairs. So, you had the ability to access this information, not only at the annual meeting, but at multiple other meetings that were held on specific subject areas.
Then, there was the elite opportunity to attend a conference with other Certified Economic Developers. You had to be a CED to go to that conference. IEDC changed the format and opened the sessions allowing access to anyone. So, it lost its luster and appeal. I know that people can talk on both sides of that issue, but it truly did lose its appeal. There was a very good participatory level when they were holding these conferences that were designed for CEDs only. You had to be a CED to qualify to attend, and it was another level of aspiration that propelled people to want to get the CED. Looking at it over the years, I still think that the examination success rate is around 30%. We are still not encouraging more people to take the examination or helping people to take to successfully pass the exam. Because we have such a poor examination success rate, we have caused other people to seek these other less stringent certifications that are easier to attain. The “man on the street” knows no difference.

You mentioned how Louisiana and Mississippi have each combined their respective chamber of commerce and economic development office. How has this worked so far? Has it been beneficial?

It has been beneficial in both cases, because they recognized that they couldn’t sustain both. The community development aspect of chamber work needed to cross-fertilize with pure economic development. They needed to have that interaction. In some cases—probably 30% of the cases—the economic development aspect of the community was embodied in the chamber. You also had other economic development activity that was done by a port, an airport, a utility company, a railroad company, an engineering firm, etc. So, the best way to bring all of these together was through one group. It’s probably happened in other states, but that’s what I saw happen in those two states. They realized that they could sustain a one-entity model better than separate entities and get more bang for their buck.

You also mentioned that you saw the larger entities taking a more competitive stance against the smaller organizations instead of including them. How can this be rectified in the future?

There are still only about five regional [organizations] that exist. We need to have a team of people address their leadership and ask them, “What can we do better together?” This is as opposed to posturing ourselves competitively. Right now, for instance, the Southern Economic Development Council has a real tension with IEDC. IEDC no longer has their certification examination at SEDC’s Annual Conference. That was a tradition. AEDC, and then IEDC, held its certification examination at the annual SEDC meeting every year for many years. That has been curtailed as of about four or five years ago. There may be some legitimate reason, I don’t know, but my point is that it has caused a great deal of consternation. SEDC members feel in opposition to IEDC in some regard. I think that may impact their decision to join IEDC, participate with IEDC, and go forward with IEDC’s certification programs. It may have led to SEDC creating its own certification.

You mentioned being a member of CUED mainly because you wanted their publications. Were the AEDC publications on par with CUED?
No, AEDC did not have publications that were focused and centered on federal programs. That was CUED’s lifeblood. They had a federal grant that provided the funding necessary to read the legislation, translate it, and offer this information to their members. Remember, CUED came out of AEDC. It was a group of urban economic developers that wanted to focus on federal programs. This was in the days when many of the federal programs were targeted towards reinvigorating cities. In my case, and in the case of many others, I belonged to CUED not for their meetings but more to get their information on federal programs. AEDC did not have that focus, but it was CUED’s biggest focus.

Were CUED’s publications focused on both rural and urban economic development?

They were rural as well. They provided information on all federal legislation that impacted economic development. This included information from EDA, HUD, the Department of Commerce, and the TVA (more rurally focused). My point was that CUED became the center of economic development information on federal programs that were available for economic and community development. AEDC wasn’t even located in Washington, DC at the time. That was part of the consideration for streamlining and merging as well. It was to take the best of what CUED offered, the best of what AEDC offered, merge them into one, and then move it to a place that was most appropriate, Washington D.C.

Why wouldn’t more AEDC members want the information that CUED was publishing?

I can’t answer the question. I didn’t mean that a lot of people with AEDC didn’t belong to CUED. I think that there were many people who had dual membership. But, sometimes it comes down to, “Can I afford two memberships?” Economic developers would say, “OK, I can afford AEDC. I can afford SEDC. I can afford my state economic development organization. But can I afford a fourth one called CUED?” We all have to make choices. When it comes down to those tiers of economic development groups who have less funding, they are going to choose their state organization first. Then they will perhaps consider the regional ones, because it is less expensive than the national one. But can they afford and justify two national memberships? CUED came out of AEDC because of a growing need to focus on urban economic development. It became the crux of federal program information dissemination. Then, we found ourselves with AEDC and CUED merging.

Can you describe your personal career path? How did you become involved in economic development?

My first work after graduating was at the same university from which I graduated. I got involved with student personnel. The department administered intramurals, fraternities, sororities, and other student groups. I ended up with international students. I learned that I could take the academic programs that were appealing to students from OPEC countries and go to those student offices that were typically located at the consulates of that country in the US. I would go to the consulates in Houston, Atlanta, Washington, and New York that were representing the student departments of OPEC countries. For instance, the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Program of Venezuela was based in Washington, D.C. Mobile International Consulting Services, in New York, ran the Saudi Arabian program for Aramco. I would go to these groups and make them
aware of the programs that we had at the university. I helped implement an English for Speakers of other Languages (ESoL) program so that we could admit these students, help them to learn English and successfully pass the TOEFL, and then get them into an academic curriculum in an area of their interest. These programs were typically engineering, petroleum engineering, and computer science. Then, I learned that they needed more beyond that. They needed assistance with buying a car, renting an apartment, and going to a supermarket, so I developed programs to orient them to life in the US.

You don’t make a lot of money at universities. As a result of marriage and children, I decided I needed to make more money. I got a job at the local chamber of commerce, and that’s how I got in to economic development. I later took the economic development unit out of the chamber as a separate stand-alone entity and created an ED organization which still exists today. I was recruited from there to go to another state, and my career path was continued in economic development. At the same time, I began the process of going to the Southern Economic Development Council programs. I was introduced to the American Economic Development Council through SEDC. I got engaged in EDI at the University of Oklahoma through AEDC. I attended the institute, completed the three year program, took the examination, passed the examination, and in that process got onto the chairs of AEDC. I came through the chairs until I became AEDC Vice President. The next year I would become President; but, to accommodate the merger, some of the Executive Committee allowed for the CUED leadership to take a role in the merged organization.

Today, I am Chief Executive of a nongovernmental organization called the Committee of 100 here in Louisiana. It is comprised of 150 chief executive officers of private-sector companies and university executives, who are interested in public policy issues that affect economic development and wish to support economic development through private-sector activity. That activity can include marketing as well as working on public policy issues that can be influenced in the legislative process.

What are some of the most important skills that you’ve come to acquire throughout your career?

Everyone has learned a lot about technology and the use of technology. But, more importantly, we’ve learned how to use personnel. We learned a lot about succession…how to interview and select the right people, direct the right people, and move them forward so that there is a succession path—call it career path if you wish—and to manage that career path. We’ve learned things about economic development marketing, and as important, about closing the deal. I know a lot of people go through the process of marketing, but some people never really got the grasp of closing the deal and the nuisances involved with closing. Today, I think that is still something that may escape people. I see a lot of people spending a lot of time—and they look like they are doing the right thing—but they never quite make the deal. And the reason they never make the deal is because perhaps they don’t know how to close.

What challenges did you have to overcome in your career?
You always have to deal with organizational challenges. That can be board members who are not as cooperative as they need to be. Or, perhaps they are jealous of the fact that you have reached a plateau of success. The human equation sometimes leads people to do strange things. So, you may find yourself bogged down with some of the subterfuge from others, and that can become an obstacle.

The other thing is that some people have not really embraced technology and learned to use it to the fullest extent—especially in the last decade. It has been very fast paced, in terms of its introduction and many uses. Some people are still trying to catch up, or they have just given up. I still have some friends who are my age who do not use email, and that just amazes me. They have a personal assistant print out their email and they read it every day. That’s a helluva way to do business, and I don’t know how they do it.

Of course, there are also economic circumstances like the rise and fall of the economy locally, nationally, and globally. Also, information gathering has changed. Before, you read a volume of Business Week, Newsweek, or any kind of business publication you could get your hands on. Today, you can use internet searches to find that information. The ability to find information about your prospects is mindboggling. You can do these things with such ease and access. Some of us used to pay money to services that would help us to get information on companies. Today, we either do it ourselves, or we engage one of our younger staff people to do that analysis and research.

Is there anything else you want to add about the evolution of either AEDC or CUED?

Again, I belonged to both. I was more active in AEDC as a board member and later as an officer. The model that exists today is more of a CUED model than it is an AEDC model. I am hopeful that that can be righted in some way. There will have to be communication between members and people who are engaged with some of the regional economic development groups to fix that.

What were your leadership roles in AEDC?

I didn’t become President. I was in the chairs to become President. At that time, they had multiple offices with more than one vice president. Each had their respective assigned areas. In the area that I was assigned to, I was the VP in line to assume President’s role. Because of the merger, I didn’t become President. CUED wanted their person to become President. There was a gentlemen’s understanding that perhaps the AEDC person would become President the next year. Then they would [rotate] until we finally got the merger completed and it became more seamless.

At that time in my career, that was fine with me because the Presidential role would have taken an awful lot of time. I had invested so much time and energy in the merger… it was a three-year endurance run. So, each of us had assigned roles as officers and as board members participating in different elements of the merger. But, a lot of our capital, personal and otherwise, was spent on the merger. The analysis of what we did, and the analysis of what the merger would look like, took a great deal of time, effort, and resources over those three years. I learned a lot in that process.
What have been some of the most pressing economic development issues throughout your career?

Well, let’s take the merger out of it, because certainly the merger was such a big focus. We all took our focus off other issues during that merger process. For AEDC, it was the changing economy, the global economy, and the shifting of economies. For instance, we saw Brazil, Russia, China and Mexico emerge. It used to be Japan, then Korea, then China, and then India. It was the changing global scenario, economic scenario, and political impact that affected economic development. Those are the things that we had to attend to, and these issues rained down to state and local levels.

What brought about the initial discussion of merger? What were the ultimate reasons for merger?

It was something that had been discussed off the record with CUED members from time to time. It was especially discussed between those members who belonged to both groups. In my view, it was a way of demonstrating that our profession could streamline and offer both our members and our potential members a single ED organization on a national level. We did find ourselves competing. We did find that not all economic developers could join both organizations. They just didn’t have those resources available to them. So again, we wanted to combine the best things that CUED offered with the best things that AEDC offered. CUED offered the analysis and dissemination of information on federal programs. AEDC offered more professional development and the certification of both individuals and organizations. Both groups offered annual meetings and other programs that were networking opportunities, but those were the two critical points that we wanted to bring together under one model.

During your career was there anyone who inspired you? A mentor?

Everyone has a mentor. I think IEDC could do better at providing a more robust mentorship program to keep up with a the succession theory. One of the things IEDC should do, in my opinion, is go to the University of North Carolina and ask the Bell Leadership Institute to produce a program that would inform our membership about succession. I think it would be a fine professional development element. It couldn’t be a onetime event or a one-hour course. It would have to be introduced in modules. It may have to be a standalone program, or it may have to be introduced as several different meetings in steps. But, it would be worthwhile, because not enough of us participate in a succession program or pay attention to succession. We haven’t done as well at that as we should have in our profession.

Having mentors assigned would be a very good start for every person. That would be one of the member benefits that would be attractive to the younger people that we want to bring into the profession and the organization. They would have true access. Some of the professional development programs, both nationally and internationally, charge people a fee to be mentored. Then, there is a coach who actually makes a call to that person every month. There are even more sustainable meetings that occur face-to-face every period. I don’t know if we could afford that, but that should be something that is offered professionally as a legacy. We should at least
have some telephone contact and establish a rhythm of contact for a year or a certain timeframe. It’s not *ad infinitum*. It should be for a timeframe. If you choose to go beyond that, fine. My point is that there is some way to connect these people appropriately. I think we can find people who have the professional skills and the professional background to offer a proper mentoring program. I think what is developed needs to be structured. That would make it easier for the individuals, and it could be done via telephone. One time, they would meet at an annual conference. The next time, their contact would be on the telephone or by email. They could set up what the questions might be and structure it to make it easy.

**Did you mentor anyone in the economic development field?**

I have mentored several people, because I had a large staff when I was Secretary of Economic Development for the State of Louisiana. I encouraged a lot of people to go beyond their existing operations level. We challenged them to go for professional development experiences. You feel good when they succeed. You encourage other people to take the certification exam. We even help them to understand the psychology of the testing. I have even sat down with people and helped them through the testing procedure. I find that too many people forget how to take tests, and the anxiousness about test-taking causes them to perform poorly.

I worked with Greater New Orleans Incorporated last November and assisted them in training their staff on existing industry retention programs. All of this was created by people who have helped me along the way. One person was a guy that I worked for when I first started at the Lafayette (Louisiana) Chamber of Commerce. To this day, we still communicate and remain friends. He is in South Carolina and runs the Palmetto Economic Development Corporation, which he has done for years. He is probably close to retirement. I have known him for a long time. I’ve had other mentors in AEDC and SEDC. That is because SEDC was a mentorship-type organization. Some people accused SEDC and AEDC of being more “club-ish.” There were people who didn’t ascribe to the “club,” but I didn’t see it that way. I didn’t see any barriers.

**Where do you see IEDC now and where do you see the organization going into the future? Do you see any emerging trends or have any predictions?**

IEDC is paying more attention to the international aspect of economic development. I think we need to continue focusing on emerging trends. Who would have thought we would be thinking of India as an emerging economic power in the same way that we thought of Japan? So, what’s next? Have you been to Russia lately? Have you been to Brazil? Don’t forget Mexico and Canada. And it goes on. Those are the kinds of things for which we need programs to help reinforce and remind us, because sometimes we get bogged down with too much information. We need to have those programs to keep us informed. That’s what the annual meetings should be designed to do: give us access to presentations and critical thinkers who present us information that helps us become better at what we do. We can apply these things to our own work and situations.

**How has the most current recession affected the economic development field, particularly in your area and region?**
More people are learning to deal with the uncertainty. They are learning that the financing side of economic development is critical. They are learning how governmental politics affect the financing side of economic development, our positioning, and our global standing. The United States continues to be a superpower, but we have to “play right,” too. We have to recognize that other players exist and have influence. I recognize that the United States continues to have significantly more influence than most others, but we need to be mindful of other countries.

Can you talk more about the financing changes that you’ve seen over the years?

The availability infrastructure financing is a good example. We have seen the slowdown of federal programs as it relates to infrastructure financing. In some cases, federal programs may exist, but the local government cannot access the financing because they can’t become bank worthy. As an example a state government knows that there is federal money available for a rapid rail transit between major commercial locations in the state, however, the federal program requires a local match. Unfortunately, States may not have the capacity to make that local match.

Do you have any other anecdotes or stories from your career that you’d like to share?

All of us who have been in economic development for a while have great stories. The best of those stories are about the camaraderie, networking, friendships, and relationships that grew among the professional economic developers. This is in addition to the experiences that have taken us in to other economies and cultures. Again, the networking opportunities have helped me personally. I was in state government for four years. Then, I went to work for a Lebanese family-owned operation in Dubai. I spent time in the Middle East for two years. What a wonderful experience that was for me. It made me more valuable as an individual and as a professional economic developer. It better prepared me for my work with the Committee of 100. The 150 chief executive officers respect my contacts globally and my abilities to get things done for them. They also respect my abilities to use their contacts, which they give me access to, in an appropriate manner. That is another thing: your credibility is what you build by what you do, not just by what you say.

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