

ULSTER ECONOMIC TRANSITION TASK FORCE – REPORT TO THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

On November 24, 2008, County Executive-elect Michael Hein appointed representatives from labor, business, environmental advocacy and the not for profit community to serve on a transition task force to make recommendations as to how the new administration should approach economic development within Ulster County. Jonathan Drapkin, CEO and President of Pattern for Progress, a regional not-for-profit planning and policy organization, was asked to serve as the facilitator for the group.

After Mr. Hein's introductory meeting, the Task Force met on four successive Tuesdays in December. The group organized around a mandate to provide a list of both short and long term recommendations to jumpstart the County's economy and to help establish a supportive agenda and entrepreneurial tone for the newly created position of County Executive.

It was clear from the beginning that the Task Force would generate many ideas and recommendations. The collective wisdom and business acumen of the members was extensive. Collectively, the Task Force coalesced around three areas of discussion: new initiatives to be driven by the business community, how best to modify existing economic development programs, and methods for successfully integrating new concepts with valid strategies from previous studies, most especially Ulster's two year effort to project a vision for economic development – *Ulster Tomorrow*.

The group's formation also was an essential first step to action and success. In the past, there was no County Executive to take responsibility for implementing the recommendations contained in plans such as *Ulster Tomorrow*. Moreover, while

still valuable, *Ulster Tomorrow* was undertaken prior to the current National economic crisis. A fresh reinvigorated approach to economic planning for the County is now required.

LEADERSHIP AND DIRECTION

Because the Task Force believes emphatically that there is no more important issue facing Ulster County than its economic health and well-being, the new County Executive must establish leadership and set direction for stimulating the economy immediately upon assuming office:

- a) In the State of the County address to be delivered in January, there should be a clear, unambiguous message to the residents of Ulster County that the economic development is the top priority.

Among the immediate steps that should be taken to stimulate growth :

1. Redirect all county departments to accomplish their mission in a manner that clearly fosters and promotes economic development.
2. Examine the structure of economic development agencies both within and outside of county government. A Deputy County Executive with oversight on such matters has already been created and a new economic development position has been funded within the Department of Planning. *Ulster Tomorrow's* Strategy Number 5 (see attachment) shows the current structure to be too fragmented to be effective. Irrespective of who handles day to day responsibilities, the

County Executive must immediately provide coordination, focused direction, and accountability for execution of a successful strategy.

3. Clarify the structure and functions of the Ulster County Development Corporation (UCDC), restructure where necessary, and then allow the UCDC to get on with its business, with the appropriate level of funding.
4. Analyze the operations and recent applications to the County's Industrial Development Agency (IDA) to determine why no projects have been approved for two years. Possible causes for this were debated by the Task Force. Ultimately, the group determined that the County Executive must investigate why this organization is no longer performing effectively and then take swift and definitive action to remedy the situation. In light of recent announcements that the State of New York is seeking to significantly diminish the Empire Zone Program, the IDA may become the sole entity stimulating local economic activity in the near future.
5. Guide collection of economic indicators to insure the most accurate information is available on a timely basis for decision making by the County Executive.
6. Create a Council of economic advisors (representation should be broad based and not limited to individuals from economic agencies.) The Council should recommend a strategy for restructuring and integration of economic development within and between, all agencies and Ulster County departments. Unlike the current Task Force, this group of advisors will concentrate on a limited set of issues in a defined period of time

7. Review and highlight the innovation driven sectors of the county to determine what is working. Demonstrate and mobilize their creative strengths in order to expand their promise for economic development and job growth.

- b) A strong opinion was shared by the group that the fate of Tech City was intrinsic to the design of future economic development in Ulster County. For too long, the failure to find a viable reuse of this site has been a symbolic albatross around the capacity of the County to move forward. While there are legitimate inhibitors to redevelopment, it is incumbent on the County Executive to review and itemize what can and can't be done with the site. Either a plan for its environmental remediation and redevelopment must be established or the County must proclaim it a non-starter and move in new directions. The Task Force defers to the County Executive on how best to create an action plan but urges swift resolution.
- c) The Task Force seeks the County Executive's leadership to have the legislature adopt *Ulster Tomorrow*. This action plan should provide guideposts for progress but need not be viewed as etched in stone. As mentioned earlier in this report, the *Ulster Tomorrow* document was drafted in a different economic climate. That said, a great deal of valuable data was compiled, action items enumerated, and general creative thinking volunteered by more than 200 participants from many different sectors of the Ulster community. This body of work must be considered a touch point for the future of the County.
- d) Create a comprehensive sourcebook of what economic development programs and assistance are available to the business community and to municipal governments designed to facilitate "getting your project approved." Even among the most well informed constituencies, it is

clear that all could benefit from a clearinghouse or resource guide to programs and assistance. The sourcebook should include, contact information, descriptions of what each agency or program does and the answers to frequently asked questions. The importance of such a tool will be even more pronounced in the challenging economic times expected in 2009.

- e) A new level of commitment should be reached by the County to work with its city, towns and villages for a collaborative approach to growing the economy. There are resources that can be leveraged to assist towns with large economic development projects. The County should select those projects with the greatest probability of community acceptance and success and provide the host municipalities with a team of experts to augment limited local resources. The Task Force recognizes that not all local governments wish to undertake economic development initiatives. Therefore the county should endeavor to learn where support for development exists and provide resources and assistance to help them grow.

SPECIFIC ACTION ITEMS

Seek legislation to redirect tourism dollars generated by the occupancy tax to more strictly aid and reinvest in tourism and economic development promotion. The goal should be to market and brand Ulster County immediately. This must be accomplished in tandem with the development of a broader appreciation and understanding that these efforts will not simply aid tourism but will promote economic improvement in general. A marketing and promotion strategy should originate within the Ulster County Tourism Advisory Board.

Fast Trac Strategy 1– “Business Ready” . Improve the Vacant Building Approval Process. Proposal is attached.

Fast Trac Strategy 2 – “Business Expansion” . Improve business approval process for expansion or pre – approve expansion plans for existing businesses. Proposal is attached.

Kings Highway Sewer Project. Expedite the completion of this project complete with an aesthetic improvement plan.

Strengthen and enhance shovel ready efforts throughout the County including ongoing efforts, in consultation with the Town of Saugerties, for development of the Winston Farms project as well as other project sites in Wawarsing, Lloyd and the City of Kingston.

Inventory and assess municipal infrastructure needs for priority investment areas. This should help position the county for potential funding requests from the state and federal government. This also will build capacity for the County to move forward expeditiously when projects are presented.

Create a consortium of local banks to provide a targeted small business working capital fund.

Assist small business in collaboration with the chambers, on how best to utilize and promote the resources of the Small Business Development Center (SBDC).

Ulster County Fast Trac – “Business Ready”

Vacant Building Approval Process

Goal: Make existing vacant buildings “Business Ready”

Action: Seek pre-approval permits (site plans or special permits) for vacant buildings for a variety of uses that would allow existing property owners and economic development organizations to market the structure as “Business Ready.”

Desired Outcome: Existing vacant building would have all local zoning approvals and county agency approvals for appropriate uses for certain vacant buildings.

Involved Parties:

Building Owners
Municipal Officials
Municipal Planning & Zoning Boards
County Agencies State Agencies

Process Outline:

Solicitation:

Ulster County solicits local municipalities for nominations of vacant buildings within their jurisdiction (develop solicitation letter and form)

Participation:

Participation requires local governments to nominate buildings, pledge cooperation, waive fees, seek approval from current owners and submit completed nomination form.

Screening:

Ulster County screens nominations – suggest using zoning, building condition, marketability, community needs, compatible uses, and permits required.

Projects that move past the screening process would identify all of the permits needed and the owners would be notified.

Approval Process: Utilize screening to seek required permits

Local Permits: Acting as contract vendee (permission from owner) Ulster County files the necessary application with the appropriate boards seeking approval of site plans/special permits and any other needed local approval.

In the alternative – Ulster County would recommend and seek a zoning change that would allow buildings meeting certain criteria, which the one in question would fit – to be considered exempt from the local site plan or special permit process.

County Agency Permits: Ulster County provides means to get county agency review and any permits that can be issued at the time.

State Agency Permits: Ulster County would seek the required permits from the state agencies that can be obtained without an identified use.

Final Outcome:

Approved site plan or special permit for the building in question – this approval may be conditional – limited to uses having certain characteristics – traffic and sewage generation. It may also identify needed improvements prior to occupancy – curb cuts, septic, landscaping, etc.

Additional Areas of Assistance:

Ulster County would pre-approve the use of revolving loan funds for improvements for certain uses and structures.

A market sheet would be developed for the property and it would be placed on the Economic Development website.

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Ulster CountyFast Trac – “Business Expansion”

Business Expansion Approval Process

Goal: Gain approvals for expansion or pre-approve expansion plans for existing businesses

Action: Provide support for permit approvals (site plans or special permits) for existing businesses that are beginning local approval processes. Or assist businesses in pre-approval of potential expansion to allow them to respond rapidly to market forces.

Desired Outcome: Existing businesses would have all local zoning approvals and county agency approvals for appropriate uses for expansion or pre-approval of expansions of a predetermined amount.

Involved Parties:

Business Owners

Municipal Officials

Municipal Planning & Zoning Boards County Agencies

State Agencies

Business Retention and Expansion Agencies (UCDC, Chambers, Local EDCs)

Process Outline:

Solicitation:

Ulster County solicits Business Expansion Agencies for nominations of existing buildings who are considering physical expansions at their site (develop solicitation letter and form).

Participation:

Participation requires local governments where the business is located and businesses to pledge cooperation in seeking the necessary permits. Local governments may be asked to waive or reduce fees. Business Retention and Expansion Agencies will be asked to submit completed nomination form

Screening:

Ulster County screens nominations – suggest using zoning, expansion plans, community participation, site constraints, etc. Businesses with current expansion plans would be given priority.

Projects that move past the screening process would identify all of the permits needed and the owners would be notified.

Approval Process: Utilize screening to seek required permits **Local Permits:**

Businesses with current expansion plans would file the necessary application with the appropriate boards seeking approval of site plans/special permits and any other needed local approval. Ulster County would assist in the review process.

County Agency Permits: Ulster County would establish a gateway agency to coordinate the county agency review and assist in obtaining the permits that can be issued at the time

State Agency Permits: Ulster County would assist in seeking the required permits from the state agencies that can be obtained without an identified use.

Final Outcome:

Approved site plan or special permit for the business expansion. Pre-approval for expansions – this approval may be conditional – limited to building envelope and uses having certain characteristics – traffic and sewage generation. It may also identify needed improvements prior to construction – curb cuts, septic, landscaping, etc.

Additional Areas of Assistance:

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