



FOSTERING ECONOMIC VITALITY AMID A NEW ECONOMIC REALITY
Douglas County, Nevada

BY LISA GRANAHAN AND KAREN CRAIG

As the nationwide recession that began in 2008 lingered, Douglas County, Nevada, needed to combat the reality of being a rural community in a state with one of the most battered economies in the country. Its response was to create a plan. Of course, citizens are often skeptical about planning; much more familiar with the private sector's emphasis on action, they can become frustrated with government's focus on process. When a public entity announces that it will conduct a study and deliver a plan, the public it serves is sometimes less than impressed. But Douglas County used an unusual process to develop and implement a plan that has provided rapid, measureable, and, in some cases, astounding results.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

In 2010, the Board of County Commissioners approved the Douglas County Economic Vitality Plan. It is the synthesis and culmination of 10 previous plans reaching back more than a decade. Each of those plans was developed through an extensive public process, with input from a diverse group of stakeholders. Each plan included community visions, strategies, goals, and recommended actions — a total of 900 recommendations. Respecting the work already done as well as the community's desire for progress, the county compiled the findings of the previous plans into a single database and searched for patterns and commonalities, seeking — and finding — inspiring vision statements, greatest assets, and guiding principles. County staff also identified specific projects that had been completed, those still in progress, some that were no longer relevant, and others that were still on the horizon. They also provided concrete proof of the significant accomplishments in answer to those who persisted in saying nothing was getting done.

Analyzing the earlier plans revealed a consistent theme: the desire for “a community to match the scenery.” This is the vision of the Douglas County Economic Vitality Plan. It unequivocally recognizes the community's greatest asset — its spectacular natural environment. The plan's stated goal is: “By 2022, Douglas County will be recognized as a best place

to live, work, and play because of our community commitment to education, recreation and innovation.”

THE 'HOW': GETTING THE JOB DONE

With the vision and goal statements crafted, the “what?” defined, the real work lies in the “how.” How to meet the vision and achieve the goal? The county, and the plan, recognize that economic development cannot succeed when led solely by government. Nevada in general, and Douglas County in particular, are very affordable places to do business. Yet this isn't necessarily enough to attract new companies. Chasing the relatively small number of firms that might relocate is probably not a magic bullet, either. The county therefore developed a strategy based around the sense of place. The plan identifies the unique qualities that give the community its sense of place and sets a path for building on those strengths and communicating them to both locals and people from other places. And the people best equipped to make those things happen are in the private sector. They are passionate and generally have some skin in the game to help achieve success.

The earlier plans and studies yielded a warehouse of public input, ideas, and answers in the form of those 900 recommendations. In organizing and analyzing these recommendations, the county developed guiding principles to prioritize projects and help shape future policy decisions. These principles include:

- Improving the business climate.
- Enhancing education and the workforce.
- Preserving the natural environment and infrastructure.
- Maintaining an exceptional quality of life.
- Attracting businesses that are unique and marketable.

Three areas of focus emerged from this analysis: education and innovation, outdoor recreation and lifestyle, and historic and distinctive downtowns. The plan then identifies 12 projects that meet the vision, goal, and guiding principles, and fit into the three focus areas. These projects surfaced via top recommendations, a five-star rating system, constituents' comments, projects in progress and on the horizon, tim-

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Exhibit 2: Projects Organized by Focus Area

Education and Innovation	Outdoor Recreation and Lifestyle	Historic and Distinctive Downtowns
Maximize Western Nevada College facility	Plan and build tremendous trails	Mobilize Tahoe Revitalization
Retain and recruit business in the Energy Science Park cluster	Recruit outdoor recreation and lifestyle manufacturers through Ascent Douglas	Build on the Minden Momentum
Explore experiential education in K-12	Develop the sports aviation destination	Complete Genoa as a Destination
Build a community and senior center	Plan for inspired mobility	Support Main Street Gardnerville

Project teams communicate regularly and openly with stakeholders in the private sector, non-profit organizations, government agencies, volunteers, community groups, and the local Native American community, the Washoe Tribe. The county's role is to set policy, provide overall leadership, facilitate communications and progress, and provide resources.

Project champions have formally accepted their roles as leaders by signing a written champion agreement that includes a job description. Champions make long-term commitments that are likely to outlast the terms of elected officials, and will see and endure changes in county management and staff appointments. Each team developed an action plan showing the vision, goal, objectives, and actions to achieve success. The Economic

Vitality Plan articulates the overarching plan for the community and contains the 12 action plans led by the project champions.

Each action plan was developed using SMART criteria — they must be significant, measureable, action-oriented, realistic, and trackable. Each plan pinpoints a goal, sets milestones, identifies resources, and commits to a timeframe and measures. Once the plan is completed, the project team sets it in motion. Measurements are tailored to each project — some projects measure job growth and higher wages, and others measure educational achievements, commute times, or physical beautification efforts. This approach accepts and embraces the reality that economic vitality means different things to different people.

Exhibit 3: Tangible Results and Measurements of Success by Focus Area

Education and Innovation	Outdoor Recreation and Lifestyle	Historic and Distinctive Downtowns
<i>Results</i>		
More jobs that pay well	Job growth	Success of locally owned restaurants and boutique shops
Workforce expansion across all skill levels	Business exports	Variety of arts, culture, and entertainment
Nationally competitive K-12 education	Visitor imports	Pedestrian-friendly and traffic calming improvements
Local access to higher education	Local resources networked	
<i>Measures</i>		
Wage growth	Job growth	New business
Employer satisfaction with employee skills and availability	Lower commercial vacancy rates	Higher occupancy rates
Educational achievement	Increase in the 25-44 year-old demographic	Beautification projects completed

The Douglas County Economic Vitality Plan was presented at a meeting of the Board of County Commissioners in September 2010. Before a full house of community members, the board approved the plan by a unanimous vote, signaling a united vision that crosses the political spectrum.

Before the plan was developed, Douglas County did not have a staff position dedicated to economic development. As the plan took shape, however, it became obvious that a staff member was needed to shepherd its implementation by fostering partnerships, communication, and cooperation and to make the best use of resources. This would require at least a half-time equivalent position, and ideally a full-time position. Because of budget challenges, the county wasn't able to fund a new position, but the board was committed to implementing the plan. The existing position of assistant to the county manager was reclassified as economic vitality manager, and many duties of the former position were reassigned to other departments. This new position is housed in the county manager's office and has a strong emphasis on community relations and improving partnerships with local and regional economic development players. With the champions, the team members, and the economic vitality manager in place, the infrastructure for implementing the plan was already up and running when it was adopted.

Organizations don't make projects happen; people do. Therefore, each of the 12 projects is led by a passionate private-sector volunteer champion.

ACHIEVING RESULTS

In the 15 months since the plan was adopted, the results achieved are remarkable and an inspiration to the community, especially during difficult financial times.

The team tasked with finding a way to build a \$14.4 million, 63,000 square-foot community and senior center has declared its mission complete. After 45 years of clear community need and numerous starts and halts, the volunteer project team succeeded in a little more than a year. The new center will accommodate 500 to 600 people, more than four times the number currently crowding into the existing senior center for lunch each weekday. The four goals of the project were to:

■ **Find a Great Location.** The new center will be built on existing county property adjacent to a large park.

■ **Find a Source of Operational Funding.** The county board approved an increase of one-half of one percent in the public utility operator fee, which is estimated to generate approximately \$425,000 annually to operate the new center.

■ **Find a Source of Construction Funding.** The county is moving forward with a plan to issue bonds for construction and expects to have this process completed in the near future, pending board consideration.

■ **Form a Private Foundation to Raise Funds for Equipping the Building.** The foundation formed at the end of 2011 and will soon begin fundraising.

The plan has also delivered impressive results in the historic downtown areas. In Genoa, one of the county's three unincorporated towns, \$2.1 million in redevelopment funds have been approved for landscape enhancements and construction of a new trail. Together, the projects will provide better pedestrian access, parking, street crossing, lighting, and signage, and construct a pedestrian and bike trail to connect the downtown with a popular 19th century hot springs resort, about a mile away.

At Lake Tahoe, the Douglas County casino corridor is contiguous with the City of South Lake Tahoe, across the state line in California. With \$50,000 in funding from the existing resorts, the Tahoe Revitalization project has developed the

South Shore Vision Plan, a two-state effort to move the South Shore from its traditional dependence on gaming to an outdoor recreation-based economy. The plan offers a future with more lake access, better views, a pedestrian-friendly environment, a rerouted U.S. Highway 50, and greater opportunities for outdoor recreation within close proximity to existing resorts and accommodations. The first achievement toward these goals is \$2.5 million in Federal Highway Administration funds to build more than three miles of bikeways and trail-head facilities that will provide views of the lake while connecting the casino corridor to public beaches.

The Main Street Gardnerville program is re-energizing another historic commercial district, beginning with a \$100,000 contribution from the county in 2008. The area now hosts numer-

ous events such as a popular monthly summer wine walk that consistently draws 400 to 500 residents and visitors. While downtown, they enjoy new flower baskets hanging on new decorative street light poles, new pedestrian benches, and new sidewalk flower pots. Main Street Gardnerville obtained a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and used the money to create a revolving loan program for small businesses. To date, it has loaned out almost \$56,000 to existing businesses and helped attract new ventures to the area. The team is now turning its attention to maximizing downtown parking.

The Minden-Tahoe Airport is on its way to becoming a sports aviation destination. The Sierra Wave, a rare atmospheric condition that enables record-breaking glider flights, allows local and visiting pilots to regularly set, break, and reset soaring records. The airport hosts a full calendar of events including soaring wave camps, educational days for elementary school children, a national cadet glider flight academy, and an aviation open house and air show. Amid this activity, a local soaring club that had been dormant for some time has reactivated and is attracting new members. Recreational flying has increased at the airport, which was recently selected to host the 2012 Open Class Soaring Competition. Businesses continue to inquire about hanger space, and a non-profit foundation is being created to help develop the educational



About Douglas County

Douglas County is home to approximately 47,000 people on 710 square miles of land and 28 square miles of water, most of which is Lake Tahoe. The community is on the frontier of the Sierra Pacific “megapolitan” area, which stretches more than 200 miles from the San Francisco Bay Area on the California coast to Reno, Nevada, about an hour to the north. The landscape includes the clear, cold waters of the lake at 6,200 feet above sea level, mountains that reach above 10,000 feet (with world-class skiing), and the sagebrush sea of the western Great Basin.

museum, exhibit, and meeting space for the east side of the airport, with a significant focus on soaring. The complete project is expected to cost approximately \$20 million and would enable the airport to host events on the scale of the annual AirVenture Oshkosh in Wisconsin, an event that brings more than \$110 million to its community.

One of the targets identified in prior planning efforts is the outdoor recreation and lifestyle industry. Douglas County is already home to the world’s leading sail maker, a motorized scooter company, and other outdoor manufacturers. The team responsible for building this cluster created a brand for the effort, AscentDouglas.com, and uses social media to reach out to those who influence the industry. It also actively develops personal industry contacts through a significant presence at the largest outdoor industry trade show. This outreach revealed that a majority of outdoor manufacturers outsource their production to Asia and many would like to find a way to bring that production back to the United States. Therefore, Ascent Douglas is rapidly moving forward with plans to bring a contract cut-and-sew manufacturing facility to the county. Its potential customers are the large numbers of companies that produce technical soft goods such as backpacks, bags, and tents for outdoor enthusiasts. Working with the Northern Nevada Development Authority and a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from the USDA, the team has nearly completed a feasibility study that will show the potential market for a contract manufacturing facility and begin to shape its capacities and capabilities.

To showcase the county’s great outdoors, the Tremendous Trails team is conducting an inventory of existing trails,

building new trails, and planning additional trails for the future. Community groups such as the Carson Valley Trails Association are making trail access a reality. A Flagship Trails Map and a 100-mile loop trail system called the Carson Valley Discovery Trail are in development. Volunteers contributed more than 4,000 hours building trails and installing signs and kiosks, mostly on trail projects above Genoa, which now boasts 16 miles of new trail that is almost ready to open in the spring. One of the connectors links the town with the world-famous Tahoe Rim Trail.

Work is also underway in the energy, science, and advanced engineering sector. More than a half dozen leaders in these fields are already located in the county, which has created and funded a formal program to identify and reach out to additional employers in this sector. Working with the Northern Nevada Development Authority and its Dream It, Do It program, a career ladder will be developed that begins in the local school system and gives future employees both an academic degree and a nationally portable, industry-recognized skill credential.

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Communicating these successes is also important. To that end, Vital Progress, the quarterly economic vitality newsletter, is distributed by e-mail and is available on the county's website, along with quarterly champion reports and agenda items. In February, the project teams will update the board and celebrate their accomplishments.

CONCLUSIONS

The Douglas County Economic Vitality Plan has delivered significant results, and a few lessons for improvement along the way. Starting a new program during a period of staff reductions is challenging, and several of the projects are still barely past the starting gates, partially because of fewer staff positions to support their progress. The county will need to work out realistic staffing estimates.

Working with the private sector can be hugely rewarding, particularly when it comes to making the best use of funds. Private-sector business people who have a vested interest in success make great champions, but they expect progress at a private-sector pace — few entrepreneurs have the patience for public-sector process. Staff members need to help these partners understand that working with the public sector will take time, but that the relationship can be rewarding.

Finally, once developed, a plan should be put into action as quickly as possible. It can be too easy to put it on the shelf, next to other great plans. Despite reservations from some critics, this plan actually got projects moving even before its final adoption. With most projects well underway, Douglas County looks forward to achieving its economic vitality vision of creating a community to match the scenery. ■

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