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Report Assesses Milwaukee's Economic Development Landscape

Right parts are being assembled but master plan needed

In a new report seeking to shed light on the activities of Milwaukee's major economic development players, the Public Policy Forum commends City and private sector leaders for adding "strength and focus" to the community's economic development efforts, while suggesting that a strategic economic development plan is needed to "bring additional precision, cohesion and accountability" to ongoing efforts.

"From city government's successful efforts to spur revival in the Menomonee Valley, to the ground-breaking work of business-led groups to build industry clusters and support entrepreneurship, to the bold plans of university leaders to establish world-class research institutions, there is a bevy of impressive action that holds great promise for the future," says Forum President Rob Henken. "Yet, our research suggests that while we're assembling the right parts, we may be missing the blueprint that is needed to build a well-oiled machine."

The report – "Assembling the Parts: An Examination of Milwaukee's Economic Development Landscape" – analyzes and "maps" the budgets, activities and tools of eight prominent economic development players in Milwaukee. It uses that analysis – as well as interviews with dozens of local economic development experts and the strategies used by several peer cities – to determine strengths and weaknesses of the community's overall economic development approach.

The first two findings to emerge from this research are positive: Milwaukee has a growing number of skilled and determined economic development organizations that possess a healthy array of economic development tools; and those organizations generally exhibit good teamwork and effectively leverage each other's strengths and resources.

Other findings, however, indicate room for improvement. For example, while there is plenty of project-specific teamwork, the report cites an overall lack of calibration and cohesion among the major players with respect to the twin pillars of economic development: job creation and tax base growth. The report also cites tension between economic development leaders who emphasize large business attraction and expansion as top citywide priorities, versus those who support greater focus on local start-up companies and existing small and micro businesses.

“The report also finds there is general confusion among the public and participants themselves about accountabilities and outcomes,” says Henken. “This is particularly true for the city’s Department of City Development and the Milwaukee 7, each of which is regularly cited as leading local economic development efforts, but neither of which appears appropriately resourced or responsible for the broad spectrum of economic development activities that ultimately will influence overall job growth - or loss - in Milwaukee.”

According to the report, a true city- or metro-wide strategic economic development plan would help address those issues by establishing clear economic development priorities, linking those priorities to specific strategic objectives, measuring each objective with performance indicators and benchmarks, and naming the person or entity responsible for meeting the objective. It cites examples from other cities in which such planning is being used “to meaningfully enhance collaboration and coordination, create new tools, and foster accountability and innovation.”

The report concludes by stating that Milwaukee’s elected and business leaders “should be proud of their efforts to build an economic development infrastructure that has assembled many of the parts needed for success.” It asks, however, whether they now “have the patience, skill and camaraderie to transform those parts into a cohesive and strategically organized whole.”

The full report can be downloaded from the Forum's Web site at www.publicpolicyforum.org.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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