

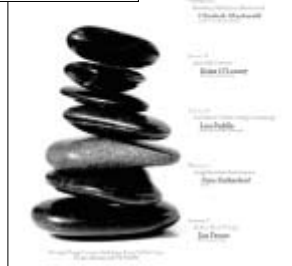


“Our Feature Speaker Is ...”

Many planning departments will sponsor an occasional lecture or talk about some planning-related issue of particular concern to the community. But few match the breadth of the lecture series regularly sponsored by the City of Farmers Branch, Texas, Planning & Zoning Commission. Just this past Spring and Summer, for example, you could have heard talks by business leaders, health professionals, academics, and others on:

- multifamily marketing trends;
- excellence in development;
- consumer shopping and spending;
- public health care;
- the Trans Texas Corridor highway; and
- retail targeting.

As Kaizer Rangwala, Farmers Branch’s planning director, relates, “the lecture series was developed out of adversity, as travel and training funds had been slashed.” But it was soon realized that offering lectures would allow not



Poster for this Winter’s lecture series.



A talk by Lucilo Pena, President of Development for the Billingsley Company in April 2004.

just planning commissioners to learn, but other community residents as well.

According to Rangwala, it’s not that difficult to organize a lecture series. As he modestly puts it, “anyone can do it!” All it takes is “a little time, effort, and creativity.”

A key step in developing a lecture series is assessing your community’s needs. This will lead to relevant topics for the series. When trying to pin down speakers, Rangwala stresses that it is important to “contact them personally.” Rangwala has found that most people approached about speaking are honored by the invitation, and don’t seek a fee.

After the speakers have been scheduled, the next step is, as Rangwala emphasizes, “advertise!” Farmers Branch planners design attractive lecture series posters for posting and distribution at various city facilities and at public events. Planners also work with the city’s communications director to get the word out. In addition, information on the lecture series and speakers is posted on the city’s website; broadcast via the Farmers Branch information radio and city television station; and distributed via an e-mail list-serve. “And don’t forget press releases to local media,” Rangwala adds.

The Farmers Branch lectures are open to anyone in the community, at no cost. The cost to the city, Rangwala reports, is modest – besides the cost of the posters, a small amount of money for a thank-you gift to each speaker.

Audiences have generally ranged between 15 and 20 people, often including elected officials. The talks are also videotaped and made available to those unable to attend. ♦

If you’re in the Dallas area, try to catch one of the talks. The schedule’s posted at: <www.farmersbranch.info/Planning/>.

For more information, contact Kaizer Rangwala at: Kaizer.Rangwala@farmersbranch.info



Hidden Tech

Planners in Western Massachusetts have been focusing on a sector of the economy that’s been largely under the radar. It’s being called “hidden tech.” As Tim Brennan, Executive Director of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission explains, “we were increasingly hearing from folks like local builders about more people moving into our region, people who were working out of their homes or very small offices, but were still working for big firms in New York City and elsewhere.”

Amy Zuckerman, an international market researcher who works out of her Amherst home has reported on this trend

(in fact, she coined the term, hidden tech, in 2002).¹ As Zuckerman points out, the growing number of “virtual companies,” where business is being done over the internet, has become “a driving force in the region’s economy.”

Interestingly, Zuckerman reports that many hidden tech workers have a quite entrepreneurial mindset. A 2002 survey of hidden tech businesses in the Pioneer Valley region found that “almost 70 percent favored growing their company or business ... only 20 percent are opposed to growth.”

Zuckerman also notes that “it’s impor-

¹ See “Tracking and Leveraging the Hidden Tech Population to Promote Economic Development and Build Social Capital,” by Amy Zuckerman and Mike Levin (Northeast Utilities, 2003); available online at: <www.a-zinternational.com>.



tant to recognize that many virtual workers are not home-based.” Nearly one-third rent small office space in office buildings, industrial parks, and other locations.

As a planner especially interested in economic development, Tim Brennan feels hidden tech “is something to pay attention to, and not a temporary aberration.” As he adds, “there are huge changes



Foundations for Planning

Across the country, private non-profit foundations are increasingly supporting local and regional planning efforts. Some are national foundations like The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which has developed the “Active Living by Design” program, sponsoring local projects that promote better health. But even more common are regional and community foundations that provide financial support and staff assistance for fundamental planning tasks, like developing a comprehensive plan.

One such group which has made a big difference across central Minnesota is the Initiative Foundation.¹ Based in the small city of Little Falls, the Foundation has developed a “Healthy Communities Partnership” (HCP) program. Its goal: “to develop the capacity of citizens to create a locally shared vision and plan – and to mobilize local and regional assets to implement that plan.”

Karl Samp, the Foundation’s Vice President for Community Initiatives, stresses that the heart of the HCP program is “equipping citizen leaders to manage change,” while “teaching them how to engage the broader community in devel-

oping and implementing the community plan.”

Each year, HCP works with teams of between 12 and 20 citizens from four to eight different communities. The teams receive training in several areas, including: community development; team building; visioning; identifying community resources; and planning and project implementation. In addition to the initial planning grant, once a team completes its training, it receives priority consideration for implementation grants of up to \$10,000.

John Sumption, Director of Environmental Services for Cass County, Minnesota, in the heart of the state’s lakes region, has found the Initiative Foundation’s program “most valuable.” The five day-long training sessions were attended by planning commissioners, members of the board of adjustment, department staff, county commissioners, and several other county residents.

As Sumption relates, the focus on leadership skills allowed the group to take a lead role in organizing community visioning sessions and then the rewrite of the county’s 12 year old comprehensive plan. “Instead of needing to find outside consultants, we were able to develop our own



Through the efforts of a local citizens group (assisted by the Initiative Foundation), the historic Reichert Hotel – in the heart of downtown Long Prairie, Minnesota – was saved from demolition and converted into 17 housing units.

plan,” Sumption observes.

Similar kudos are given by Anita Rasmussen, City Planner for Sartell, Minnesota, a rapidly growing small city of 13,000 adjacent to St. Cloud. The strength of the HCP program, as she puts it, “is building at the grassroots level.” She also sees the Initiative Foundation’s ability to provide a “one-stop shop” for just about any question as especially valuable for a small community such as Sartell. ♦

For more information, contact Karl Samp at: ksamp@ifound.org, or visit: <www.ifound.org>.

¹ The Initiative Foundation receives financial support from The McKnight Foundation, as well as from other state and national foundations, public and private organizations, and individual donors.

going on in the economy. As the economy is being revolutionized, so is our approach to economic development planning.”

One lesson Brennan has drawn for his region is that “it’s more important to chase brain power than smoke stacks.” The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission has been actively involved in a variety of efforts to support the hidden tech economy.

Brennan co-chaired a recently completed overhaul of the region’s economic development plan, the Plan for Progress. As the new Plan notes: “The importance of capitalizing on technology to boost the full spectrum of the Pioneer Valley’s economic development efforts cannot be overstated. At the heart of the Plan for Progress is technology-based economic development policies, programs, and actions that enable the region to

foster growth in technology industries, facilitate transfer of technologies that improve the competitiveness of Pioneer Valley firms, improve worker productivity, and raise the standard of living for all the region’s residents.”

One key area is to ensure the provision of high speed broadband, something Brennan considers an integral part of the region’s infrastructure. The Plan for Progress includes a series of benchmarks for ensuring the implementation of widespread internet access (for example, in classrooms and libraries) and other services important to technology-based businesses.

Brennan also stresses the importance of actively involving educational institutions. In recruiting individuals to help develop the Plan for Progress, Brennan

specifically (and successfully) sought out representatives from the region’s many schools and colleges. This only makes sense, he observes, given “the critically important role that educational institutions play in regional economic development, and in training tomorrow’s workforce.”

For Amy Zuckerman, support services and the ability of virtual workers to share business tips, find resources, create alliances, and learn business skills are essential. As such, she helped found Hidden Tech, an organization that has quickly attracted 1,000 members: <www.hidden-tech.net>. ♦

For more information, contact Tim Brennan at: tbrenna@pvpc.org; Amy Zuckerman at: az@azinternational.com. For more on the Plan for Progress: <www.planforprogress.org>.

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