

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION



ACTION PLAN

Adopted at the Commission's
July 16, 2020 Regular Meeting

Overview

The Town of Plainfield engaged AdvanceCT in February of 2020 for support in the creation of strategic action items for the Economic Development Commission. What follows is a write-up of recommendations for long-term goals and EDC action items to meet these goals.

The EDC has dedicated many hours to engaging with the business community to determine its needs and opportunities, specifically as related to being located in Plainfield. AdvanceCT utilized the EDC's feedback to inform these goals and their respective action items. These recommendations cover approximately a three-year period.

Goals

- Increase new development and business expansions.
- Engage existing businesses to ensure retention and encourage expansion within Plainfield.
- Plan and prioritize municipal investments to support economic development, and develop community buy-in for this plan.
- Grow tourism opportunities within Plainfield.

Action Items

Increase new development and business expansion.

Inventory commercial real estate – The EDC should prepare a formal inventory of all commercial and industrial properties in Plainfield. This should include information on pricing, utilities, easements, possible subdivisions, regulations and restrictions, relevant contact information, and other relevant details. This can be done by engaging existing property owners to determine the status of their properties and also by incorporating sites listed on online real estate databases like LoopNet and SiteFinder. Additionally, through this inventory, the EDC should determine areas with high concentrations of developable property where there might be opportunities for rezoning, property consolidation, and/or marketing of a group of parcels as a group (like an industrial park or business park). As Plainfield is approached by expanding and prospective businesses, it is critical to ensure there is a strong basis of information beforehand.

This project should be completed in year one with updates made on an ongoing basis.

Prepare data package to promote business recruitment – The EDC should prepare a data package that includes information relevant to business decisionmakers, developers, and commercial realtors. This information should include:

- Distance/access to major transit networks (I-395);
- Drive time to major regional hubs (Hartford, Boston, New York);
- Transportation (freight rail and public transportation options);
- Workforce (educational attainment, unemployment rate, size of labor force);
- Key industries (number of establishments and employees, percentage labor force employed in key industries);
- Large institutions (higher education, largest employers, other relevant facilities);
- Socioeconomic factors (household income, poverty rate); and
- Other relevant data to business decision making.

In addition to relevant real estate information, this data should be provided to the groups mentioned above so they can immediately develop a strong understanding of what locating in Plainfield will look like.

This project should be completed in year one with updates made on an ongoing basis.

Promote large developable parcels – The EDC should promote key developable parcels on the Town’s website and social media channels, through AdvanceCT’s promotional capabilities, and through local and regional media sources like local newspapers and the New England Real Estate Journal.

Promotional work should be completed on an ongoing and as-needed basis.

Host a familiarization tour – The EDC should coordinate a familiarization tour of the town for prospective businesses, developers, commercial realtors, and other key local and regional stakeholders. The EDC can bring this group together for a presentation on key real estate/development opportunities and then bring them on a bus tour of these areas of the town. The firsthand look at these parcels will allow this group to envision their investment in Plainfield.

This project should be completed in year two.

Engage with the Eastern Connecticut Brownfield Land Bank – Plainfield is anticipating the approval of the Eastern Connecticut Brownfield Land Bank by the Department of Economic and Community Development. This is an excellent opportunity for brownfields that have remained stagnant to be remediated and redeveloped, as Plainfield has several. The EDC should determine a priority list for projects it would like to see taken on through this organization.

Monitor DECD Office of Brownfield Redevelopment for funding announcements – The EDC should continue to monitor the DECD Office of Brownfield Redevelopment’s website for funding announcements. Based on the needs of property owners, the EDC should inform them of relevant funding announcements.

Engage existing businesses to ensure retention and encourage expansion within Plainfield.

Support business affected by COVID-19: Over the course of 2020, and likely into 2021, many businesses statewide will be grappling with challenges related to COVID-19, particularly revenue losses and issues related to implementing safety protocols. Plainfield’s Economic Development Commission, in collaboration with the Economic Development Office, should act as leaders and advocates for the business community during this time, and this should remain the priority for the group over the course of the crisis. Team members should stay up-to-date on any business guidelines released by the Governor’s Office and engage local businesses to determine what questions they have about implementing these guidelines and about generally maintaining their operations. Questions to be anticipated include:

- Opportunities for funding/financing;
- Implementing safety protocols;
- Acquiring PPE;
- Training employees about certain protocols; and
- Pivoting business plans.

While the EDC does not need to know the answers to all these questions, members should know where to direct businesses to find these answers. The state’s website (ct.gov/coronavirus) is a strong resource that directs users to a number of different topic areas. EDC members should take time to learn about this site and other relevant resources to be able to provide adequate guidance to Plainfield’s businesses. AdvanceCT and the Department of Economic and Community Development are also resources for information on questions related to specific business needs. The Town should also consider creating a page on its website dedicated to COVID-related resources for businesses.

These efforts should be ongoing past the completion of the COVID-19 crisis and until the business community starts experiencing new growth.

Participate in ongoing business visitations – The EDC should continue to engage with Plainfield’s businesses by visiting them periodically. This is one of the most critical roles the EDC can play in supporting the Town’s economic development staff. As ambassadors to the business community, the EDC must have an understanding of their needs and who to involve to address any specific issues. After each visitation, EDC members should do the necessary follow-up in

connecting business owners with relevant municipal staff and/or outside organizations like AdvanceCT, DECD, SBA, SBDC, and more.

These visitations should be completed on an ongoing basis. The EDC must determine its capacity and set a monthly goal for visitations.

Engage with economic development partner organizations and connect them to local businesses – The EDC should develop an understanding of the types of resources available to businesses in Plainfield so that it can best serve them. The EDC should work with the Town’s economic development staff person, who is the point of contact for local issues. The EDC should also stay up to date on the following organizations and how they support businesses:

- AdvanceCT;
- Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD);
- Connecticut Main Street Center (CMSC);
- Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board/Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline (EWIB);
- Connecticut Small Business Development Center (SBDC);
- US Small Business Administration (SBA);
- Regional chambers; and
- Northeast Connecticut Economic Alliance.

Additionally, the EDC should seek to proactively make connections that may support the business community. For example, as the group develops an understanding of the workforce needs of local businesses, it might connect with the local school district or regional community college to determine ways to incorporate teaching these skills into existing lesson plans. Another opportunity might lie in connecting local farmers with restaurants that may want to serve farm-to-table meals.

These engagements should be completed on an ongoing basis.

Engage remote workers: Perhaps one opportunity to arise from the COVID-19 crisis for Plainfield is the increase in remote workers who live in town but whose offices are located elsewhere. As some companies are anticipated to make their work-from-home policies more lenient as a result of this crisis, the EDC should look to engage these individuals to better understand their needs, both in the short-term and in the long-term. This information should be collected through an online survey, created and distributed by the EDC. Survey Monkey is a good tool for this purpose. Perhaps these results spur a discussion on broadband and the ways the Town can work with the State to provide better and more consistent access to Plainfield residents. Perhaps this represents an opportunity for the creation of a coworking space in town, as more home-based workers want to escape their home offices periodically. Perhaps the EDC can bring together these remote workers for networking events after the crisis has subsided, representing an opportunity for increased

business connections and collaboration among these individuals. The EDC should connect with Plainfield's remote workers through its website, social media, and other public locations to determine what their needs are, what resources can address these needs, and how this might best benefit the local economy.

Initial outreach should occur in the second half of 2020, with ongoing engagement occurring frequently beyond that.

Engage home-based businesses – Home-based businesses can be a major component of a municipality's economic base without municipal officials even knowing it. To determine how to best support this segment of the local economy, the EDC should work to draw these business owners out of their homes. There should be at least one event per year coordinated with a topic of particular interest for these types of businesses. For example, the EDC can partner with the CT SBDC to host workshops on topics like growing your customer base, obtaining financing, and more. By advertising this on the Town's website and in many public spaces (community center, grocery store, public park, etc.), the EDC can reach the most people. Once the EDC has interacted with these businesses, it should determine what the greatest needs are. Perhaps some are ready to graduate to commercial space, while others may be interested in seeing a coworking space in town. The EDC should work with these businesses to ensure they are positioned to growth their economic impact on Plainfield.

Plan and prioritize municipal investments to support economic development, and develop community buy-in for this plan.

Engage community members from each area/village within Plainfield to determine their priority projects for funding – Because there are several commercial corridors in Plainfield, determining the most impactful potential projects is critical. The EDC should engage residents and businesses located within each of these "village centers" to determine the most critical needs for municipal investment, grant funding, community foundations, and/or other sources of funding. This engagement can be accomplished through a community survey, focus groups, or a public meeting.

This work should be completed in year one.

Create plan prioritizing investment in municipal projects – Based on the information collected in the community engagement phase discussed above as well as discussions with elected officials on the types of projects they are willing to support, the EDC should create a prioritized plan for the implementation of key projects in each of the village centers. Each project listed should include information on approaches to funding implementation and necessary groups to involve in the process. This plan will likely be a long-term document, and may need updating, but it should serve as a guide to ensure critical projects like parking, streetscaping, placemaking, and infrastructure are in place to make Plainfield more attractive for economic development.

This work should be completed in year two.

Develop buy-in from the community and elected officials for this plan – Because of the previous work in engaging the community around the creation of this plan, developing buy-in should not be a major challenge. However, it will be critical to determine a strong methodology and explanation for the way that certain projects have been prioritized (based on maximum positive economic or public impact) in order to quell potential concerns related to the approach to prioritization. With broad support, the listed projects have a much higher chance of being implemented.

This work should begin immediately following the completion of the plan.

Grow tourism opportunities within Plainfield.

Connect the East Coast Greenway Trail with the rivers and village centers – The East Coast Greenway Trail is a major draw to Plainfield and the region. Thus, the Town should attempt to maximize its economic benefit by creating connections between the trail and other key attractions like Plainfield’s rivers and village centers. The EDC should work with local and regional elected officials to determine opportunities to create trail off-shoots that lead to these areas. Outdoor recreation enthusiasts will undoubtedly explore these new trails that lead them to additional amenities and complementary businesses, keeping their disposable income in Plainfield.

This is likely a long-term project, but discussions should begin immediately with elected officials to determine interest and capacity.

Promote engagement and activity around the rivers – The EDC should partner with volunteer organizations like the Lion’s Club, VFW, Boy/Girl Scouts, etc. to coordinate events and activities around the rivers. With the additional support of charitable organizations engaged in the community, the EDC can draw extra attention to these events. With these events comes opportunities for businesses to sponsor, promote themselves, or set up booths to sell their products. Additionally, they create excitement around the rivers, which can develop support for additional investment in outdoor recreation infrastructure around them. This infrastructure will be attractive to visitors to Plainfield.

At least one event per year should be coordinated near the rivers.

Connect tourism-related businesses to key statewide and regional resources – There are many resources available to tourism-related businesses. These businesses include recreational, entertainment, and cultural businesses in addition to complementary businesses like food service and retail. The EDC should work to better understand and connect businesses to organizations like the

Eastern Regional Tourism District, Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, CTvisit.com, and the Last Green Valley.

These engagements should be completed on an ongoing basis.

Capitalize on Plainfield's many village centers as a promotional opportunity – Plainfield's village centers make it unique and a potential draw to tourists. The EDC should help leaders in each area determine a specific identity, which they can use as a unique cultural opportunity to draw in visitors. Plainfield can be known as a town composed of many villages, each with its own unique character. This story can be promoted through many of the partner organizations described above. To support this, the Town might also consider working with the villages to create a unique set of design standards for each.

Engagement with each village should be accomplished in year one, with promotional efforts ongoing. The design standards work will likely be a long-term project.

Support farmers in growing agri-tourism opportunities – The EDC should engage local farmers to help them think through opportunities for drawing in additional customers through agri-tourism. This industry sector is growing, and Plainfield is poised in the quiet corner to take advantage of this trend. Farmers might consider undertaking “pick your own”, educational workshops on farming, tastings, farm dinners, goat yoga, weddings and other event hosting, cooking contests utilizing their products, and more. The Town should also ensure that the zoning regulations allow for public events and direct-to-consumer interactions.

Engagement with farmers should begin immediately and continue in an ongoing manner. Zoning regulations changes should be made within two years.