

THE COMMUNITY VISIT MAY WELL MAKE YOU DECIDE TO STAY

Perhaps more than any other step in the site selection process, the community visit can sway the balance when choosing among a short list of locations.

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You've completed your preliminary site search activities and narrowed your choices down to a few communities and states you feel are best suited to your new business venture. You are preparing to contact the communities and states to arrange visits. What should you do while you are there? With whom should you meet? What information are you trying to gather? How can you establish an agenda to accomplish all of your objectives during the visit? Where do you start?

PLANNING THE VISIT

Planning is the key to having a successful community visit. It is important to provide as much advance information about the project as possible to state and community officials, enabling them to understand and address project criteria and requirements. Local and state representatives must be allowed sufficient time to plan, organize, and schedule meetings and activities. They will need to contact the people and agencies you wish to meet and develop a schedule and agenda to fit the time available.

It is generally appropriate to schedule a visit with state officials just prior to visiting the community. In many instances, these officials will work closely with community officials to develop the visitation agenda and schedule.

STATE VISITS

There are several important factors that should be covered during the state visit, the most important being the attitude of the state officials. A positive and aggressive attitude is necessary to convince you to bring your business to a

particular state and community. If official representatives are not aggressively trying to attract the new business, you should focus on a different location.

Meetings held at the state level should include discussions on state permitting. It should be noted that while various states may have similar permitting requirements, the manner in which states administer the permitting process may be significantly different. Permitting is normally on the critical path of a

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project; the ability of a state permitting agency to process and approve required permits within reasonable time frames can make a significant difference in the final selection from among alternative locations.

Meetings should also be held with state tax and incentive experts. Most states will provide a computer model of the various state taxes and incentives by type and applicability if the owner is willing to supply specific information on project characteristics. Caution should be used in evaluating and interpreting the results of the tax and incentive models to ensure their applicability

to a specific project. Many states will focus on presenting the "maximum available" incentives versus an actual model of incentives applied against a specific project profile.

Often, owners may be eligible for incentives (i.e., they may be qualified to receive the incentive), but, in fact, may never realize the benefit due to limiting factors. In many states there are strict eligibility requirements, application procedures, fees, and specific time frames that must be met in order to be approved. Normally, application and approval must be completed prior to any public announcements concerning the final location decision.

State assistance in recruitment and training can be highly significant to most new businesses. Many of the state presentations will sound similar, but there are considerable differences in the capability, resources, and funding levels available. The owner should meet with the appropriate state training representatives to gain an understanding of what the state and/or local training systems can and will provide.

If highway improvements and upgrades are a part of the incentives being offered, a meeting should be held with state highway authorities to review plans, schedules, and cost offsets. Be sure to clarify responsibility for the costs of any infrastructure improvements being offered, as well as the ability to complete the work within the project schedule.

MEETINGS WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS

Meeting with elected and appointed community leaders is essential. The

evaluator should meet the mayor, the chairperson of the county commission, the chairperson of the local economic development board, and other community leaders as appropriate. Assessing the attitude of local officials is just as critical as evaluating that of state officials.

Meetings should be held with local representatives who can discuss and explain local taxes and incentives. The discussions should define all taxes that would be applicable to the project, including special assessments, property taxes, inventory taxes, payroll taxes, and local sales tax. The evaluator should request information on trends in local taxation to determine whether taxes in the community are increasing or decreasing. Taxation and incentive models should be developed based on specific project characteristics.

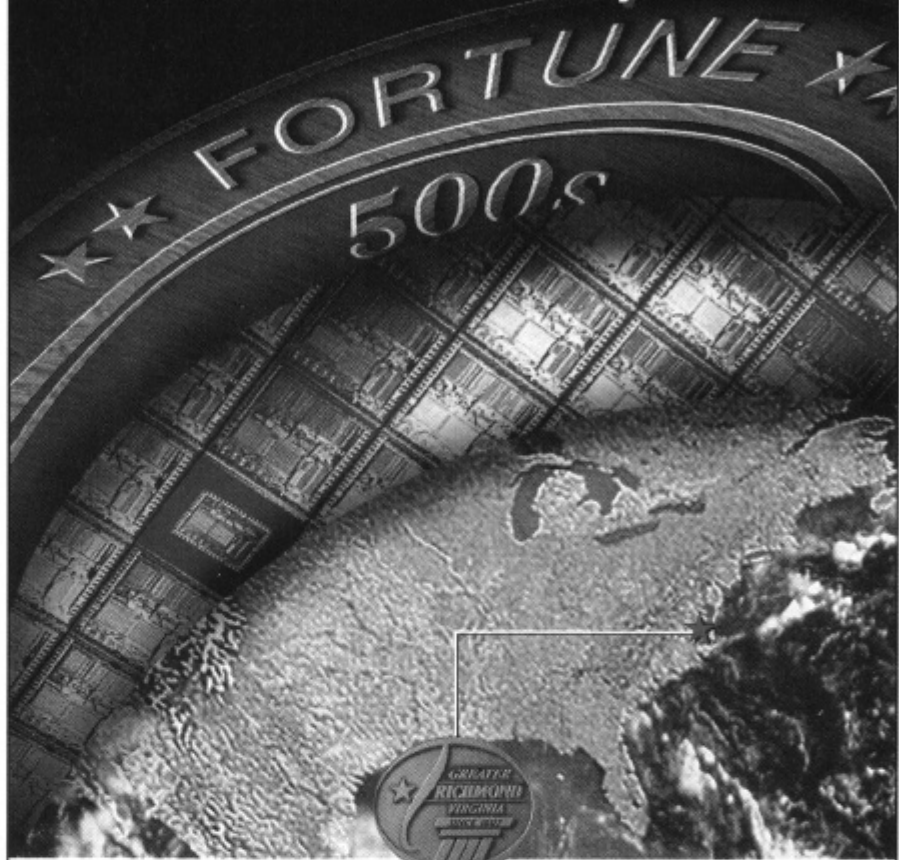
The evaluator should interview representatives of at least three, and preferably more, existing industries in the community. The purpose of industry interviews is to gain insight into the nature of the local work force (e.g., productivity, absenteeism, work ethic, attitudes, wage rates). The interviews also enable the evaluator to assess positive and negative attributes of the region, the support and attitude of local government after a company locates within the community, and other critical factors defined by project objectives.

A windshield tour should be made of the entire community. During the tour the evaluator will have the opportunity to observe the downtown area, shopping areas, existing businesses and industries, housing, schools, and medical facilities. It is also a good time to observe transportation routes into and out of the proposed site. It is always appropriate to ask the local representative to take you to the "best" and "worst" parts of town. Inquiries should be made about quality-of-life features of the area including country clubs, social clubs, sports teams, cultural and recreational activities, and regional vacation spots.

UTILITY SERVICES EVALUATION

A crucial part of the community visit is to meet directly with appropriate local utility representatives. It is advisable to meet with the water and sewer representatives to verify location, routing, sizes, and capacities of services to the site. You should also inquire about tap fees, capacity fees, surcharges, quantity charges, discounts, and line extensions to the site. Chemical characteristics of

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the water source(s) and sewage discharge limitations should be documented. Water pressure, flow rates, and back-up systems should be defined to address insurance requirements. If water is to be furnished via an on-site well, or if sewage is to be discharged outside a municipal sewer system, other considerations and permits come into play and should be identified.

Meetings should be held with electrical and gas representatives. These meetings should focus on delivery of services to the site, defining alternative rate schedules for optimal pricing, economic development discount rates, responsibilities for establishing on-site services, and other related information. If capital investment is required to bring services to the site, responsibility for the costs should be reviewed and clearly explained. Information should be provided on the reliability of services, i.e., the number of interruptions and their cause and duration during the past several years.

THE SITE EVALUATION

The site proposed for the new business venture should be carefully evalu-

ated during the community visit. Local representatives should provide the following: aerial photograph, topographic map, boundary map (showing current boundaries, easements, right-of-ways, etc.), flood plain map, and tax maps showing all property owners on and adjacent to the site. A copy of the deed and property-transfer documents should be obtained. Current zoning status should be confirmed. If rezoning is required, the process and estimated time frame should be specified.

The evaluator should walk or drive around the entire parcel to the extent it is accessible. An aerial evaluation by helicopter is recommended if the size of the property makes it too large to be evaluated completely from the ground level. Boundary lines and corners of the property should be identified. Careful attention should be given to the direction of surface water runoff, both on and adjacent to the property. Any information available on potential wetlands, protected species, or other environmental concerns should be obtained, as should information on subsoil conditions (i.e., water table depth, depth to rock, soil compaction ratings, and other

geotechnical conditions).

Evaluation of surrounding land use should be conducted. This includes such factors as physical characteristics (building and landscaping), air emission activities (smoke, steam, particulates, odor, etc.), outside storage practices, and in-bound/out-bound traffic patterns (i.e., frequencies and quantities of employees and trucks).

IN SUM

The community visit is perhaps the most important part of any site location study. It provides an opportunity for the site evaluator to have direct interaction with a broad range of local officials and industry leaders. Moreover, it offers the opportunity to develop both personal and professional relationships, and provides the forum to validate all information and data previously received.

The results of a community visit can be a critical part of the decision-making process, especially when two finalist locations are rated nearly equal. It is not uncommon for the final decision to be made based on relationships and synergies developed during the community visit. □

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