

Fort Collins Economic Health Strategic Plan Engagement Report

Stakeholder engagement is a critical building block for Fort Collins' economic health strategy—the success of any community and economic strategy is directly dependent on active engagement from a broad range of Fort Collins stakeholders, including public and private sectors; community members; regional and civic institutions.

Understanding where the community stands currently in terms of the economic health of Fort Collins provides the basis for identifying assets that need to be treasured and strengthened; weaknesses that need to be minimized; opportunities that will enhance the community's livability and economic health, and internal and external threats that need to be factored into all facets of the City's strategic planning.

Background

The consulting team of Hickey Global and IO.INC was selected to conduct community engagement for the Economic Health Strategic Plan. Beginning in winter 2022, IO.INC began community engagement for the economic health strategic framework. They conducted one-on-one interviews, engaging various representatives of the Fort Collins public, private, and civic communities, regional leaders, and external industry experts. Each of the stakeholders represented a broad, far-reaching collection of community members, groups, and communities that hold diverse perspectives and backgrounds.

The results of the one-on-one interviews conducted by Hickey Global formed the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis and engagement report that was presented at a Council Work Session on March 14, 2023. Council asked the Economic Health Office for additional engagement to create a broader picture from the community.

In partnership with the Communications and Public Involvement Office, the Economic Health Office conducted further community engagement.

Methodology

The second phase of engagement included:

- An online questionnaire on the OurCity engagement page
- Outreach at community events such as the CSU Lagoon Concert Series and Bike to Work Day
- Three virtual small group discussions
- Multiple one-on-one conversations through ongoing business visits
- Consideration of the ongoing regional business survey

This effort added over 350 additional inputs to the Economic Health Strategic Plan from community members.

The EHO staff also reviewed and considered feedback that was provided for two recent plans:

- The 2021 Reignite Northern Colorado
- The 2022 City of Fort Collins Recovery Plan

Through these engagement efforts city staff gathered input from:

- Community members and leaders
- Business leaders representing a broad range of economic sectors
- Employees and managers working at Fort Collins businesses
- Public sector officials from local, county, and state governments
- Educational leaders from K-12 through postsecondary institutions
- Small business owners and employers
- Artists and art advocates
- Nonprofit organizational leaders
- C-Suite executives and national experts in economic development
- Hospitality and tourism experts

Results

- Interviews conducted by both Hickey Global and EHO: 22 individual interviews
- Small Group Discussion: Three virtual group discussions
- Online questionnaire: 54 responses
- Community Events: 265 community members engaged at the Colorado State University Lagoon Concert and Bike to Work Day

The following SWOT results have been updated to consider both the engagement conducted by Hickey Global as well as the second phase of engagement.

SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, & Threats) Themes

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educated workforce and strong educational institutions • Beautiful community assets and amenities • Quality of place • Diversity of economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of housing • Lack of affordable commercial space and site-ready land • Insufficient workforce size • Lack of diversity
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upskill and reskill programs • Retaining talent • Branding and messaging consistency – City-wide and regionally • Industry support of quality jobs within CHIPS Zone, life and bio science, and climate tech/circular economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception that Fort Collins is not business friendly • Fees and policies to build, expand, or open a business (cost of doing business) • Not embracing or supporting diversity in our community and workforce

Additional SWOT Results:

Strengths:

- Highly educated workforce

- Community assets and amenities that contribute to a good quality of life to live, work, and raise a family in Fort Collins
- Beautiful, safe, and friendly quality of place
- Proximity and access to large metropolitan areas
- Strong educational institutions, including public school district and higher education such as Colorado State University
- People know how to start a business in Fort Collins
- Post-Covid programs and resources and the American Rescue Plan Act dollars that have gone into the community.
- Economic Health Office is very open and accessible to businesses, community members, and people interested in doing business in Fort Collins
- New roles and work in the Economic Health Office:
 - Multicultural Business and Entrepreneur Center support and the Business Connectors
 - Capital Projects Business Liaison and the additional business support there
 - The Economic Health Office is skilled up for what is needed – staff can support both small businesses and primary employers
- Arts initiatives like Art in Public Places and the Fort Collins Mural Project
- Connexion, broadband access
- Bilingual business support
- Vibrant Downtown with many amenities, including historic “Old Town” areas
- Zoning for home childcare is in a helpful place
- City’s willingness to engage on multiple topics and including community and organizations in the process
- City’s support of staff to understand their own childcare needs as one of our largest employers
- City feels more inclusive in how they advertise jobs, who they are hiring, and intentions in expanding diversity
- Diversity of economy with many major employers across multiple sectors

Weaknesses:

- Insufficient workforce size to keep up with the demand for qualified workers
- Insufficient housing affordability which impacts housing for employees (especially recent college graduates, young professionals, essential workers). This also contributes to the lack of workers for industry to hire in the region
- Limited site-ready land and space for business growth, including affordability of commercial space and land especially for start-ups and entrepreneurs
- Lack of identifiable site-ready sites that could accommodate a larger employer that would bring immense value-add to the community, including quality job opportunities (one that is desirable and compatible to the community)
- Escalating cost of doing business in Fort Collins which is believed to be brought on by City’s attitudes, policies, and regulations
- Perceived community resistance to change (e.g. population, business growth, infrastructure)
- Predominantly white community with lack of diversity in the population
- City not favorable toward growth, economic development or business
- Lack of available funding for female founders and women in tech startups
- Old published economic data, unsure where new data lives

- Lack of collaborative space for entrepreneurship collisions. Galvanize on Linden was a great space but the business model needs subsidies from the City of Fort Collins to be successful.
- We have no messaging to encourage supporting local business and cannot compete with online retailers
- Development review process is tough for businesses to go through
- Too many regulations to support a business-friendly environment
- Sustainable waste management solutions
- Information sharing for businesses is not consistent and hard to find. The City website is hard to navigate.
- Fort Collins Loveland Airport is not providing the services our region needs
- Other City plans do not incorporate economic health factors, while other City priorities factor into the economic health plan.
- 1041 regulations and water adequacy
- Integration between City departments
- DEI work doesn't feel as encouraged or celebrated within businesses right now. For example, businesses are afraid to showcase Pride Month based on the news and political climate.
- Lack of consistent business survey tells the community the City doesn't care as much about the business perspective
- Cell phone service, especially in SE Fort Collins is a challenge.
- Lack of good and affordable transportation to Denver International Airport
- Council's indecision to approve any taxes or to move forward around childcare support
- Not seeing investments in the improvements of childcare support in our community
- Business owners that have an ITIN vs a social security number are treated differently and can't retain the same business to business contracts.

Opportunities:

- Define Fort Collins' brand, as a community decide what we're striving to be?
- Encourage start-ups and recruit new business for innovation, products, and services while utilizing Fort Collins' young talent
- Build up mentorship program for aspiring entrepreneurs
- Increase engagement with large employers in order to encourage greater presence in the community
- Commit to a philosophy and practice of business recruitment, focusing on high value-added sectors and companies
- Champion more diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across the community and make Fort Collins more welcoming to diverse individuals and families
- Plan for and actualize the development of sites and spaces for business growth
- The arrival of new businesses to Fort Collins, means increasing the job opportunities for community members and increases retention of talent, including graduates from Colorado State University
- Collaborative messaging and communication strategies among partners in the region to help brag about big economic wins, entrepreneurial support, regional assets, etc. This applies to all partners but specifically CSU and City can work together better in this space.
- Clearer pathways between City of Fort Collins Economic Health Office, Larimer Small Business Development Center, and Colorado State University Institute for Entrepreneurship and how each one best supports our community and eco-system.
- Talent readiness, upskilling, micro-credentialing, and partnerships with higher education.

- Change City codes to allow more access to business data in order to help
- Share with the business community and partners what data is available to us
- City staff, leadership, and elected officials can be more sensitive to business constraints and understand how they operate
- Life sciences and climate tech are our best economic opportunity right now. Those businesses should be in Fort Collins.
- Business to business sharing, making connections among business owners to increase social capital
- Business loan programs, access to capital
- Economic incentive/development zone for North and South College to create better access to infrastructure, food.
- Improve public transportation and MAX access from lower cost of living to higher density employment areas
- Incentives and programs for commercial space like good landlord incentives, help small businesses purchase buildings, and commercial rent control.
- Analysis of economic impact of any new policy or ordinance
- Analysis of DEI of any new policy or ordinance. For example, the plastic bag ban on disabled community members.
- Support the relationship with Poudre River Power Authority and Utilities
- Business support for businesses who fall in the middle of Innosphere and Larimer SBDC needs.
- Expand business information into additional languages, not just Spanish.
- Skilled trade schools in Fort Collins
- Chips Act and Chips Zone to help create quality jobs
- City needs to define what it means by equity. Is it equal opportunity or equal outcomes?
- Work in partnership with Economic Health office to share data around childcare and its economic impacts and opportunities
- Employers that offer flexible benefits including four-day work weeks, parental leave, childcare support.
- Funding for homeless/affordable living strategies through a program similar to Art in Public Places
- More support for immigration and entrepreneurship
- Financial literacy education for business owners
- Specific trainings, support, and business paths for owners with an ITIN

Threats:

- Increasing water scarcity in Colorado and the costs associated with securing this resource
- Escalating cost of living and doing business in Fort Collins believed to be in large measure due to City government policies
- The City perceived as not willing to adopt policies, make plans and encourage investment in more attainable housing across the spectrum of income-earners
- Outflow of young, college educated talent in search of more accessible housing and employment opportunities
- Potential anti-growth sentiment growing in community
- Getting in our own way as an entrepreneurial eco-system. Many of the same folks have been around for a long time. This is a strength, but the eco-system partners could be more open-minded to new partners, ideas.

- Rent and housing costs
- Talent shortages
- CSU is trying to increase student enrollment but not working to house these students
- Overall increased regulations on businesses from all levels of government.
- Downtown employment base is not supporting downtown businesses like it used to when folks work from home.
- Our regional airport is underutilized and not working as the asset it could be.
- U+2 regulations
- Commercial lease rates
- Access to childcare
- Members of City Council create friction between businesses and the organization.
- City Council not understanding their role impacts the ability of EHO to do their job.
- Businesses choosing not to open in Fort Collins because of the arduous development review process and cost of fees
- Council comments in meetings such as “evil landlords” can have negative impacts
- Large corporations are driving out small business
- Short-term rentals eat up housing inventory
- Rental registration program
- Cost of doing business and upcoming requirements around sustainable food packaging