

STRENGTHENING YOUR  
COMMUNITY'S COMPETITIVE  
POTENTIAL **BY IMPROVING  
QUALITY OF LIFE**

BY GOLDEN SHOVEL AGENCY & CONVERGENT NONPROFIT SOLUTIONS



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EDOs, including economic development corporations, commissions, authorities, and chambers of commerce, have recently emphasized the quality of life in their community marketing and messaging. Some may be implementing a talent attraction campaign. Some have added quality of life initiatives to their public policy agenda. And some promote new quality of life initiatives they build or create.

These quality of life initiatives are essential in defining a community's sense of place and attracting and retaining residents. They are also crucial for attracting business investment - a key goal for any economic development organization. In 2022, [Brookings researchers](#) analyzed communities throughout the midwest, evaluating the impact of quality of life improvements on the economy. They reported, "Our research on smaller communities has found that community amenities such as recreation opportunities, cultural activities, and excellent services (e.g., good schools, transportation options) are likely bigger contributors to healthy local economies than traditional "business-friendly" measures. Smaller places with a higher quality of life experience higher employment and population growth than similarly situated communities, including those that rank high by traditional economic competitiveness measures." Brookings's groundbreaking research makes a clear business case for investing in quality of life improvements.

But, how do you, as an economic developer, make the case to your stakeholders? How do you encourage people and businesses to invest in quality of life when those initiatives rarely result in immediate job creation and tax revenue? And if you can get them to buy in, which quality of life initiatives should you start first? Throughout this whitepaper, we will explore these issues and give you the data and tools necessary to improve your community's quality of life - with community support.

Happy reading!

Bethany Quinn, VP Strategy and Content Development • Golden Shovel Agency

# THE CASE FOR IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S QUALITY OF LIFE

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Economic developers are working to achieve specific goals for their communities, including attracting more investment and workers, retaining businesses, and creating new jobs. What if an investment in quality of life could increase your success in the above mentioned areas? According to [Brookings](#), it just might - "Smaller places with a higher quality of life experience higher employment and population growth than similarly situated communities." Quality of life improvements, they found, are a foundational element that draws people, businesses, and investors to your community.

That alone can help to make the business case for focusing on improving the quality of life in your community. But that's not all. There are clear economic benefits to improving the quality of life for residents, especially when those efforts improve a community's overall health. Illness-related absences equaled 1.5 billion days of lost productivity in 2019 (before the COVID pandemic), costing employers \$575 billion, according to the [Integrated Benefits Institute](#). More specific research was conducted on the impact of poor community health on absenteeism and tardiness in U.S. manufacturing plants. The [Community Health and Employee Work Performance in the American Manufacturing Environment](#) study found that employees who lived in counties with poorer health outcomes missed more work days. In one plant alone, the value of those lost wages was \$1.3 million annually. "These findings bolster the case for greater private sector investment in community health" (McHugh, 2019).

The [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) emphasized the impact that poor community health can have on workplace performance when writing, "Even when an employer implements health-promoting strategies at the worksite, if employees then go home to unhealthy neighborhoods, the workplace progress is compromised." The [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(Department of Health\)](#) expanded on this when discussing their Healthy People 2030 initiative. "The neighborhoods people live in have a major impact on their health and well-being... Interventions and policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels can help reduce these health and safety risks and promote health. For example, providing opportunities for people to walk and bike in their communities — like by adding sidewalks and bike lanes — can increase safety and help improve health and quality of life."



# THE CASE FOR IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S QUALITY OF LIFE

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Their [Healthy People 2030](#) campaign aims to make various minor community changes that will improve the population's overall health. For example, there is a goal to increase the number of people who walk or bike to work or other activities. Economic developers can help by working to secure funds for additional bike trails through the Rails to Trails program, private investors, and other grant sources. The different pathways will create opportunities for residents to exercise, spend time with friends and family, and become a quality of life asset that can help to attract outdoor enthusiasts to the community. "Adding bike trails and additional outdoor recreation space is often at the top of the list when we survey community members about what they wish economic developers could do for their community," said Bethany Quinn, VP of Strategy & Content Development, Golden Shovel Agency.

Simply put, residents want quality of life improvements, and existing businesses will benefit from improving their employees' health. In other words - there should be significant local support for these initiatives. In addition, as an economic developer, you will be better situated to achieve your long-term investment and workforce attraction goals. So now the question becomes - how do you sell it to your investors? How do you prove that investing in quality of life can indeed pay off? Keep reading to find out.



# IT'S POSSIBLE TO PROVE THE ROI OF QUALITY OF PLACE IMPROVEMENTS

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Proving ROI for quality of place improvements typically centers around job creation and talent attraction. Economic development organizations understand that if their community does not have a workforce, they will likely not attract new companies to their area or see expansions in their local industries.

A community's quality of life and quality of place simply helps attract and retain workers. That is absolutely a quantifiable improvement. A [2020 study by the Knight Foundation](#) found that in the communities they serve, quality of life accounts for about a third of the moves to a metro area and a third of the resident's decision to stay. It also found people choosing to live in an area because of quality of life express significantly stronger sentiments of attachment than those living there for a different reason, such as family or jobs.

While quality is defined in many ways, access to it is critical. Whether a person would like a minor league baseball team in their town or prefer the symphony, access to quality-of-life amenities leads to a more significant commitment to the community.

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# IT'S POSSIBLE TO PROVE THE ROI OF QUALITY OF PLACE IMPROVEMENTS

## How Do You Measure the ROI of Quality of Life Projects?

Measuring success for quality-of-life initiatives can be just as challenging as defining what it is. Does a downtown revitalization initiative really mean more jobs? How does the theater expansion impact economic development? And how will a talent attraction campaign help my business grow? Finding the return on investment isn't easy, but it is possible. Let's explore the ROI of three amenities as examples:

### Downtown Revitalization

Active, safe downtowns not only attract investment within their boundaries but can have a positive impact on areas outside of Main Street. However, measuring the ROI impact of downtown revitalization within the downtown boundaries is easier and correlates more clearly to an organization's activities.

In Abilene, Texas, the Abilene Industrial Foundation has defined its measure of success for its downtown initiative as increases in property tax assessment and the number of businesses. NewTown Macon's downtown revitalization plan will focus on entrepreneurship and creating a sense of place, and its measures will increase jobs and residents in downtown Macon, Georgia. These are two communities where capital campaigns have just started.



# IT'S POSSIBLE TO PROVE THE ROI OF QUALITY OF PLACE IMPROVEMENTS

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## Arts and Culture Expansion

**The 2020 Knight Foundation study found that access to arts and culture rated the highest in importance to residents, followed by recreational areas and safe places to work and play.** A theater expansion is an excellent example of measuring arts and culture impacts. First and most apparent, a theater expansion requires construction. While temporary, construction expenditures do impact the economy through job creation.

Additionally, the entity itself impacts the economy. The employees earn wages and spend their money in the local community. Theater expansions usually mean more seats available to sell, an increase in the theater's ability to attract higher-grossing performers, and new technologies that enhance the patrons' experiences. Simultaneously, you can determine tourism impacts by attendance numbers.

*"Proving the ROI of individual quality of life improvements can be done if measurements (and expectations) are planned and managed in advance," said Carlotta Ungaro, Convergent Senior Project Director. "Overall, it can be argued that quality of life amenities bind our communities together and connect us to them. The worth of that is priceless."*



# IT'S POSSIBLE TO PROVE THE ROI OF QUALITY OF PLACE IMPROVEMENTS

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## Talent Attraction Campaigns

More and more economic development organizations are executing talent attraction campaigns to promote their quality of life improvements. These marketing initiatives message potential residents that this community is the right one. Measuring the impact of a talent attraction campaign brings to mind the famous quote from the U.S. retail magnate, John Wanamaker, "Half my advertising spend is wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half." The expected result of a campaign is people moving to the community, and the desired result is that they are filling the vacant jobs the businesses in the community are eager to fill.

The talent attraction campaign could focus on attracting entrepreneurs. Website visits and inquiries about the community can be measured and used to determine the campaign's effectiveness. Moving data from the U.S. Post Office and census data are lagging indicators that can also provide insight. The outcome is easing the worker shortage. These initiatives can be measured with data about the predicted jobs filled. A talent attraction campaign is part of the Greater Topeka Partnership's new five-year visioning plan. The organization has identified its ROI measures in partnership with the businesses in its community.

"Proving the ROI of individual quality of life improvements can be done if measurements (and expectations) are planned and managed in advance," said Carlotta Ungaro, Convergent Senior Project Director. "Overall, it can be argued that quality of life amenities bind our communities together and connect us to them. The worth of that is priceless."



# CONSIDER WHICH TYPE OF PROJECTS ARE WORTH INVESTING IN

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Quality of life projects should be based on the needs and wants of the community, in combination with what will have the most significant impact on the economic growth and vitality of the region. Potential projects can range from education programs to parks, downtown improvements, infrastructure, community centers, DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives, etc. The objective is to invest in initiatives the community will widely support and produce measurable results. Below, we provide examples of what this could look like for education, downtown, infrastructure, and DEI initiatives.

## **The Role of Education in Talent Attraction**

"Education is now the #1 economic priority," according to Don Gilman, CEO of Ignite College and Career Academy in Georgia. In the past, most economic development organizations focused their efforts on creating jobs and capital investment. Today, the pandemic's "Great Resignation," coupled with the high level of Baby Boomers retiring, has businesses struggling to fill jobs.

Chambers and EDOs are prioritizing talent attraction initiatives to help fill the [11.4 million](#) job openings in the country. Education enhancements directly connect to talent attraction. Efforts such as upskilling, trade-focused high school academies, and promise programs can be differentiators when people choose a community where to live and work.

*"Workforce development has many moving pieces, but the most obvious is training and preparing our residents to enter and move about effectively in industry. The greater our ability to do so, the greater our ability is in attracting the attention of potential industry and keeping our current businesses staffed and growing."*

# CONSIDER WHICH TYPE OF PROJECTS ARE WORTH INVESTING IN

## Upskilling Opportunities Aid in Workforce Attraction

In many cases, job applicants or current employees may not possess the skill sets employers need. One way for a company to solve this issue – and be competitive in the talent attraction space – is to provide short-term, skill-specific training options. Skills training is one of the top perks younger workers look for in a new job, according to a [2021 Gallup survey](#) conducted on behalf of Amazon. In that survey, 66 percent of workers ages 18-24 ranked learning new skills as the third-most important perk when evaluating new job opportunities, behind only health insurance and disability benefits.



Source: The American Upskilling Study: Empowering Workers for the Jobs of Tomorrow, Gallup, 2021.



# CONSIDER WHICH TYPE OF PROJECTS ARE WORTH INVESTING IN

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## College and Career Academies Are Important for Business Attraction

First established more than 30 years ago, College and Career Academies (CCAs) enhance high schools to keep students engaged and launch them into individually relevant and strategically sound choices for college and career(s). Students in a CCA enroll in an interdisciplinary program of study that involves career/technical courses (typically one or two each year) and academic courses (typically three or four each year).



Convergent Nonprofit Solutions worked with Ignite CCA in Sumter, Georgia, managing the quiet phase of their \$1.75 million campaign to support student skill development through dual-enrollment and work-based learning programs focused on strategically identified skills pathways. This effort was exciting as it was initially the brainchild of One Sumter Economic Development Foundation as, in the organization's words, "perhaps the most ambitious undertaking of One Sumter's efforts around workforce development and education."

One Sumter partnered with the county school district, local community college, and state university to develop the program. They told the [local paper](#), "Workforce development has many moving pieces, but the most obvious is training and preparing our residents to enter and move about effectively in industry. The greater our ability to do so, the greater our ability is in attracting the attention of potential industry and keeping our current businesses staffed and growing."

*The CCA has enrolled over 900 students in less than a year.  
They also enjoy relationships with 102 business partners.*

# CONSIDER WHICH TYPE OF PROJECTS ARE WORTH INVESTING IN

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## Education for All: Promise Programs Increase Education & Income Levels



Promise programs are both an educational initiative and economic driver proven to attract families to communities. With the high cost of college, many cannot afford the education needed to qualify for jobs in the community. A [Promise program](#) removes cost as an obstacle and allows all high school graduates to attend college tuition-free.

Convergent Nonprofit Solutions recently completed its second capital campaign for The Greenwood Promise in Greenwood, South Carolina, an initiative driven by the Greenwood Partnership Alliance. The organization raised nearly \$4.6 million in 2015 via an initial capital campaign that relied primarily on private sector funding to help cover in-state tuition and fees.

On average, 750 graduating students per year are eligible for The Greenwood Promise, and the organization anticipates that 30-35 percent of those students will qualify for the Promise program initiative. That equates to approximately 225-262 students in Greenwood County receiving post-secondary education, significantly increasing the community's skilled workforce.

**Studies have shown that Promise communities have lower high school dropout and juvenile crime rates, increased tax revenue, and average income levels.** There are more than 200 Promise programs in the country today. Many also include formulas to prorate the Promise's financial support based on the length of time a family has lived in the community.

With a labor shortage in our country like we've never seen before, communities providing new and different education opportunities offer an immediate and long-term solution to workforce development and talent attraction. Strive towards filling jobs today by attracting residents while ensuring that tomorrow's workforce is educated, trained, and ready to work.

# INVESTING IN YOUR DOWNTOWN CAN GENERATE REVENUE AND LEAD TO LONG-TERM GROWTH

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Turning your downtown into a destination is a strategy that can help retain current residents and attract new ones - making this a quality of life initiative with immediate and long-term benefits. "We see rural communities struggle to retain their youth after graduation. Creating a thriving downtown area is one way to encourage them to stay. It creates a sense of place and community gathering spot they will want to be part of," said Bethany Quinn, VP of Strategy for Golden Shovel Agency. The same holds for entrepreneurs, remote workers, young families, and retirees. Everyone wants to feel connected to their community, and the downtown area is an excellent place to start.

## **Downtown Strategies**

Golden Shovel Agency has worked with communities throughout the country that have invested in their downtown and used creative ideas to build a strong sense of place that residents want to be a part of and tourists want to visit.





# INVESTING IN YOUR DOWNTOWN CAN GENERATE REVENUE AND LEAD TO LONG-TERM GROWTH

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## **#1 Seguin Main Street Became a Regional Destination Through Investment & Collaboration**

Since 1996, \$45 million has been reinvested in Downtown Seguin through the city's involvement in the Texas Main Street Program. These investments have made it possible to restore and improve the historic buildings that give the city its charm. In addition, Seguin has several incentives to make it easier for businesses to invest in Downtown Seguin. Incentives include [fix-it facade grants](#) and the coordination of a Low-Interest Loan Program, Federal Tax Credits, and a Five-year Local Tax Abatement to encourage further investment. Kyle Kramm, Seguin Main Street & CVB Director/HPO, said, "The facade grant... is flexible, allowing the applicant to easily find a project that will improve their building and improve downtown."

In addition to providing funding support, they host events throughout the year, some primarily for locals, like summer concerts in the park, while others, like the Food Truck Festival, draw tourists from throughout the region. The city has undertaken the process of creating a new Downtown Master Plan to promote future growth. "We really hope the public gets involved with the survey and the map because downtown belongs to the whole community," said Kramm, "And the only way for us to ensure the whole community feels welcome in downtown is to hear from everyone about their vision for what downtown will look like in 20 years."



# INVESTING IN YOUR DOWNTOWN CAN GENERATE REVENUE AND LEAD TO LONG-TERM GROWTH

## #2 Entrepreneurs Champion Change In McAlester, Oklahoma

Residents and businesses lead some downtown transformations. In McAlester, Oklahoma, entrepreneurs like Kristen Lloyd wanted to be part of the community's growth and invested their time in civic projects and building their businesses. The owner of [Common Roots explains](#), "We have an amazing Historic Downtown that makes shopping an experience. You don't get that everywhere. We have beautiful historic buildings that house fun, unique stores and restaurants." She continued, "We spearheaded the new streetscape downtown and helped get the area rezoned Commercial/Residential so building owners could rent out or live in their buildings." Her motivations are McAlester-driven. "I love to see positive changes in our community. I think everyone has that something that drives them; for us, we love restoring things and helping others," said Lloyd.

Economic developers and community leaders can make it easier for entrepreneurs to get involved in civic projects and to have a say in what happens to the downtown area. Bring them into conversations surrounding zoning, improvements, events, and future plans. As business owners actively involved in the downtown, their insights and recommendations will be incredibly valuable for creating a vibrant place residents want to visit.





# INVESTING IN YOUR DOWNTOWN CAN GENERATE REVENUE AND LEAD TO LONG-TERM GROWTH

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## #3 Madelia Turned Disaster Into Opportunity

Madelia, Minnesota, suffered a horrific fire that wiped out much of their downtown. The natural disaster could have resulted in long-term economic loss for a small rural community, with residents leaving to shop and dine in nearby, larger communities like Mankato. Instead, the community came together, secured funding, and rebuilt their downtown. "Madelia is a strong and resilient community. We rebuilt, and new businesses have opened since," said Brent Christensen of Madelia Area Redevelopment Corp. Newer businesses include a brewery, wine bar, and retail shops. A classic theater has also been renovated and is now attracting regional visitors. "Madelia has become a destination for people who want an authentic downtown experience or to be uniquely entertained," said Christensen. Reinvesting in the community has paid off through job preservation, keeping retail and dining dollars within the community, and making it possible to attract residents. With the downtown rebuilt, young entrepreneurs have also opened their businesses in town rather than leaving for nearby communities - another win for Madelia.





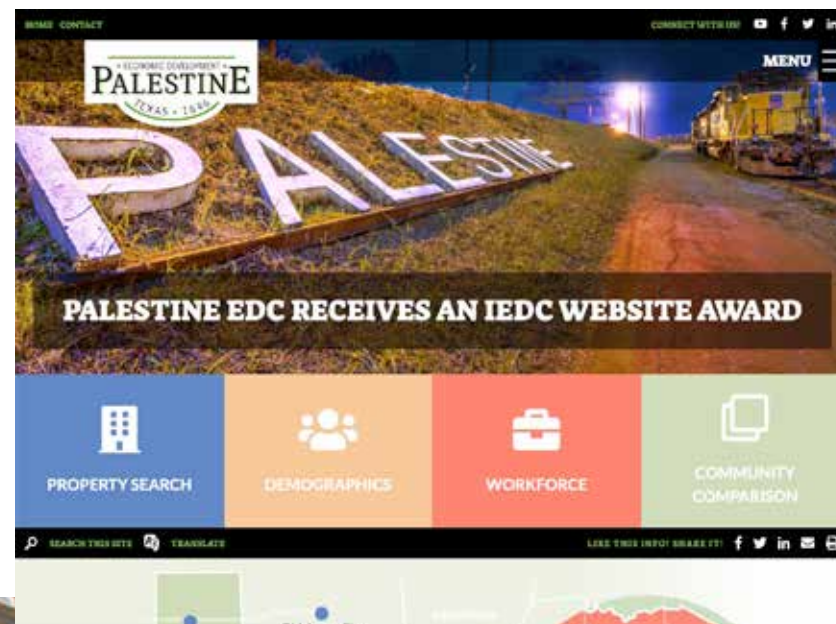
# INVESTING IN YOUR DOWNTOWN CAN GENERATE REVENUE AND LEAD TO LONG-TERM GROWTH

## #4 Palestine Promotes their Historic Downtown

If you have a historic downtown, promote downtown buildings as an investment opportunity. While Main Street businesses and events attract tourists and improve quality of life, an entire tourism market focuses on history. From historic trains and gardens to sites and programs dedicated to important figures (think George Washington's Mount Vernon), an investment in history can also be an investment in the future.

Palestine, Texas, uses an annual historic downtown property tour as one way to spur investment in their historic buildings - many of which have found new uses while maintaining their character and charm. Their annual tour is done in partnership with the Texas Historical Commission. The "[Imagine the Possibilities](#)" tour is part of their initiative to connect potential investors, entrepreneurs, developers, and residents with properties eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. "Our previous tours have been wildly successful," said Mary Ann Admire, Palestine Main Street Coordinator. "In 2021, we had seven properties listed. Six were purchased right away."

Palestine has also developed a [website portal](#) that allows people to find information on historic places and activities downtown, along with suggestions for girls' weekends and fun trips.



# INVESTING IN YOUR DOWNTOWN CAN GENERATE REVENUE AND LEAD TO LONG-TERM GROWTH

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## **Ways to Invest in Your Downtown**

Below are just a few more ways to invest in your downtown and turn it into a destination for residents and tourists.

### **#1 Build outdoor gathering spaces**

An outdoor town square can be a gathering place that brings the entire community together. A combination of grass to play on, benches to sit on, and play space for children allows for multiple generations to come together daily while also being a space for community events.

### **#2 Improve building exteriors for a cohesive and updated look**

Facade grants are being offered by EDOs and Main Street organizations. These facade grants can improve the exterior of buildings through painting, awnings, lighting, etc. Small business owners may be unable to improve their property independently but are willing to invest with community support.

### **#3 Beautify the downtown**

Working with a local architect to beautify the downtown will make it a more inviting place to visit. Falls City, Nebraska, built a median downtown and used it to place benches and flowers along their Main Street. Installing vintage light posts and hanging flower baskets can be another simple way to beautify the downtown and build a sense of character. Likewise, community signs at the entrance to the downtown can be inviting.

### **#4 Built-in parking spaces**

Residents may forgo the downtown in favor of a nearby strip mall if there isn't enough parking near stores and restaurants. If your community lacks parking spaces, consider purchasing lots or vacant buildings to create a surface-level lot or parking garage. Communities like Annapolis offer free trolleys from parking garages to downtown areas to make it easier to get around once parked.

# INVESTING IN YOUR DOWNTOWN CAN GENERATE REVENUE AND LEAD TO LONG-TERM GROWTH

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## **#5 Design with multiple generations in mind**

Consider how people, young and old, are likely to interact with each other and downtown spaces. For example, are there certain stores or restaurants that are destinations for seniors? If so, make at least one parking space in front of that location handicap-only and ensure a ramp for wheelchair access to the sidewalk. If teenagers visit an ice cream shop after school or games, place bike racks in front of that location so they can get there quickly. If young families come downtown for events, ensure a safe space for children to play. If you don't have access to green space, build a low fence around an empty lot and place benches and play equipment inside of it. More people will find it convenient to visit your downtown by creating spaces for varying ages and abilities.

## **#6 Solve any accessibility issues**

Review your downtown from the issue of accessibility to make sure that unnecessary barriers are removed. For example, there should be ramps up to sidewalks to allow wheelchair access. Smooth sidewalks so people with balance issues are less likely to fall. Lighting should be sufficient to enable people to walk around at night easily. Having someone specializing in accessibility walk your downtown and make recommendations is a best practice for ensuring that everyone in the community has equal access.

## **Raise Money for Your Downtown Project**

State historical organizations, Main Street programs, and federal grants can all be used to improve the downtown. Still, many of their grant programs are limited in scope and will only allow certain activities to be completed. You should consider a multi-year fundraising campaign involving all your stakeholders to achieve your goals.



# DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES CAN HELP TO RAISE INCOME LEVELS FOR THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY

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"As diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts take more of a front seat in economic development strategy and growth, we're seeing communities benefit from these efforts, and funders start to expect them when reviewing future plans," said Andy Coe, Principal, Convergent. Convergent Nonprofit Solutions has managed capital campaigns for EDOs and Chambers of different sizes and scopes. Many have taken different approaches to ensure that their area encompasses DEI in its initiatives to improve business retention, talent attraction, workforce development, and overall quality of life in the community.

In 2020, [Numbeo](#) ranked Raleigh, North Carolina, second in the WORLD on its quality of life index by city. This was no surprise, as the Raleigh Chamber had just completed a [\\$7.25 million campaign](#) to fund a strategic plan with quality of place/quality of life as a significant pillar of fostering economic prosperity. Interestingly, the first bullet they listed under this initiative was strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. They hired a Director of Equitable Economic Development for Wake County Economic Development (WCED) and charged this role with adding reflective equity-based layers to Raleigh's evolution, including corporate inclusivity and workforce diversity. They also included a Vice-Chair of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity on their Executive Committee. Their goal was to ensure Raleigh's growth was fair by focusing on three areas: inclusive economic mobility, small business support, and talent/workforce development. This program resonated with community leaders; their initiatives were fully funded with overwhelming support.



# DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES CAN HELP TO RAISE INCOME LEVELS FOR THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY

Convergent recently partnered with the Greater Topeka Partnership in Kansas to raise funds to implement their five-year strategic plan, which includes equity as its epicenter, as shown here. This was not a new position for the Partnership to take. They have included DEI as a core value for many years.

"Diversity and equity have been part of our holistic economic development strategy for a long time," said Greater Topeka Partnership CEO Matt Pivarnik. "We wanted to be sure it was not something that was said once and then put in a corner. It's a part of every decision we make. Having it at the center of our plan for the future has strengthened our muscles in remembering this. Whether we're talking about youth sports, downtown revitalization, or attracting a new business, we ensure we're talking about being inclusive of everyone in our community."

One recent example of equity as a centerpiece is their recent Sports Commission launch through the convention and visitor's bureau. The very first discussions about this new initiative included how to ensure all kids would be able to benefit. The conversation then turned to the Commission's board. Would their community be accurately represented by those they were asking to join the board? "Every initiative we undertake is automatically put through an equity lens before it moves forward," said Pivarnik.

The success of communities in the future will rely on investment today in infrastructure and resources that promote equitable opportunity for all people. Whether talking about quality of place, education improvements, talent attraction, or workforce development, diversity, equity, and inclusion should be part of the conversation.





# DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES CAN HELP TO RAISE INCOME LEVELS FOR THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY

Funding DEI efforts as part of quality of life initiatives will ensure that no one is left out of your community, whether a current resident or a family you are trying to attract. For example, if a family considering moving for a job has a disabled child, they will be looking for education services, ADA-friendly parks, and other amenities. Not having them could cause them to look elsewhere. Simultaneously, suppose someone feels there is no diversity in your community and no programs or safe spaces where diversity is encouraged. In that case, they may think it is too homogenous for their comfort.





# USING COMMUNITY PLANNING & INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS TO BECOME MORE COMPETITIVE

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Infrastructure, especially broadband, has become an essential aspect of quality of life instead of just being necessary for site development and business attraction. Workers require fast internet speeds, especially if they want to work from home. People want to live in places with good traffic flow, so they don't spend their life in traffic jams. Many are attracted to communities with bike paths for an alternative form of commuting. And electric vehicle charging stations are essential for those who are environmentally conscious. Planning for the infrastructure necessary to meet these needs is integral to economic development and community planning.

## **Strategic planning and infrastructure investments make your community more competitive**

In today's economy, it's not enough to ensure your community is business-friendly. You also have to make it people-friendly. When choosing between two comparable communities, quality of life is the tiebreaker. In today's labor market, attracting a skilled workforce is no longer a "chicken and egg" question. People can afford to be selective, so businesses need to grow where people want to live.

The primary needs such as air and water quality, housing costs, school districts, safety, and access to healthcare are a given. Once they're met, the more nuanced quality of life issues need to be assessed and addressed.

## **When it comes to using community planning and infrastructure investments to become more competitive, every EDO should periodically ask itself these two questions:**

- Is our community attractive by today's standards?
- Is our community playing to its strengths?

Some regions have the advantage of natural amenities like lakes, woodlands, mountains, or a coastline. Some climates are a bigger draw than others. Yet many communities without outdoor recreation meccas or perpetual spring-like days have become magnets for the top talent by finding resourceful ways to compensate and creative ways to portray and publicize their region.

# USING COMMUNITY PLANNING & INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS TO BECOME MORE COMPETITIVE

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## **Workers Are in the Driver's Seat (and they know it)**

Today's talented workers know they're in demand. They pay more attention to work-life balance and are not interested in moving to Generic. How can you play up your community's uniqueness while making it feel like home?

The recipe for success today is about finding the right mix. When it comes to creature comforts and convenience, people are more discerning than ever, and a community's supply must meet their demands. They want an excellent grocery store and a local farmer's market. They want an exciting variety of restaurants, a good gym, and a choice of self-care amenities like day spas and salons. When it comes to shopping, they want unique locally-owned businesses balanced by some major retail establishments. They also wish for quality entertainment, recreation, and cultural activities.

Today's aversion to inconvenience is reflected in people's unwillingness to tolerate traffic congestion and circuitous routes to airports and nearby metropolitan areas. This means that easy access to the interstate is now essential. However, cars aren't the only consideration. Just as people now want an array of choices in goods and services, they also wish for options in transportation. Safe, well-designed walking trails, bike paths, and green spaces are essential investments in community planning and infrastructure.

The pandemic years have forever redefined the way we work and live. Broadband made great strides in becoming available and affordable, and the new infrastructure bill will further that progress. Continuing to invest in broadband is vital to thriving communities because, in addition to attracting a skilled workforce, it adds micro-businesses and remote workers who can choose to live anywhere to the mix. In addition, broadband enhances every community by improving access to healthcare and education.

# USING COMMUNITY PLANNING & INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS TO BECOME MORE COMPETITIVE

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## Infrastructure Investments Have a Long-term Payoff

The rewards of investing in community planning and infrastructure can come full circle and snowball. The more attractive a community is, the more prosperous it becomes. The more successful it becomes, the more opportunities it offers, and so on - not to mention that jobs create more jobs.

Though you may have a solid sense of your community's needs, conduct a thorough needs assessment to determine the economic impact of your proposed infrastructure investments, identify ways to fund your plan, and make a compelling ask for the funding.





# RAISE MONEY FOR YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE INITIATIVES

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The data is clear - quality of life initiatives create an economic boost, make your community more competitive, and are essential for attracting talent and business investment. While reading through this whitepaper, you likely had a list of potential quality of life projects running through your head. The question then becomes, "How do we fund them?" That's where Convergent's multi-year campaigns come in. "Before we were working with Convergent, there was a moment where we asked, "Can we do this. Are we going to be able to raise the money?" said Christle Ross, CEO, Foothills Area YMCA. Through a multi-year campaign, they could secure the investment necessary to build a YMCA facility and fund programming for the entire community, making this a transformative quality of life project.

"Convergent was formed on the foundation of asking rights. We work with organizations to ensure that they have the credibility, fundraising skills, and outcomes necessary to raise investment for their quality of life projects," said Convergent General Manager Brian Abernathy. "Our job is to determine if our clients have asking rights. If they don't, our job is to prepare them so that they can go forward."

That includes completing a feasibility study and putting a package together that shows potential investors (business owners and other stakeholders) how the particular project, or sets of projects, will directly benefit them, in addition to helping the community. This comes back to the ROI concept discussed earlier. If, for example, a project were to bring in a large number of visitors to the community, how would those visitors spend their money? How would local hotels, restaurants, and retailers benefit? What revenue could they expect to see? Likewise, if community leaders implemented a workforce training program, how would this positively impact local manufacturing companies, etc.? How would it make it easier to hire skilled workers? It becomes easier to ask for their commitment to achieving transformative goals by demonstrating the connection between the project and their business.

# MARKET YOUR QUALITY OF PLACE, LOCAL EVENTS, AND COMMUNITY BRAND

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Once you have assessed your community's quality of life needs, determined which projects to tackle, raised money, and everything is up and running, it is time to market your community and the improvements you have made heavily.

Marketing your quality of place, local events, and community brand are crucial to an economic development strategy because it can help with workforce and business recruitment. [Forbes](#) reported in 2017 that "Millennials want a better everything." Years later, that remains true, and other generations are joining them. People demand better working conditions, better living environments, and communities that meet their lifestyle needs. In response, businesses are also searching for locations that meet their needs and the needs of their employees, making it more critical than ever to market your community's quality of place.

## **Ways To Market Your Quality of Place, Local Events, and Community Brand**

Once your community has an established brand and apparent quality of place, it is time to create engaging messaging and start promoting your marketing message. Here are some of the ways you can do so.

### **Build a Social Media Presence**

Social media is no longer a luxury for economic development organizations – it's a necessity. Not only does it help you show up in more organic search results, but it also helps you reach more people, form meaningful connections, and build community. More and more often, people are relying on the Internet. Millennials and Gen Z are primarily looking for social presences online, and if they don't find you, you're essentially non-existent to them.

When creating your social media profiles, you must fill out every field - we can't stress this enough. Vital areas include your profile and cover photos, 'About' information (use keywords you want to rank for here), website URL, physical address, phone number, and links to your other social profiles.

# MARKET YOUR QUALITY OF PLACE, LOCAL EVENTS, AND COMMUNITY BRAND

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Come up with a consistent posting schedule. Daily posts are ideal, but if you only have time to post once a week, commit to that and stay consistent with your weekly posting. Do not go longer than one week without posting. Create various posts using pictures, videos, links, and text-only to get more engagement. Asking questions, telling people to tag others in the comments, and posting content your followers want to share on their pages will lead to more engagement.

Posting your community's unique features will get the most attention and engagement. Consider these questions to get started:

- Do you have recreational parks people like to visit?
- Are there any large festivals held each year?
- Do you have affordable housing compared to other cities in your region?
- What kind of secure jobs do you have?
- Are there any remote worker incentives?
- Do you have fast-speed broadband access?

In addition, most social platforms will allow you to create events. Not only will you get more eyeballs on your upcoming events, but if someone clicks your event and marks themselves as either "Interested" or "Going," they will receive notifications leading up to the event and the day of the event. Social media users can also invite their network friends to your events – see the positive spiral effect here?



# MARKET YOUR QUALITY OF PLACE, LOCAL EVENTS, AND COMMUNITY BRAND

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## **Run Digital Ads**

Digital ads are a great way to reach people on a large scale. For economic developers, we recommend using Google Ads, Facebook Ads, and LinkedIn Ads, depending on the audience you want to reach. If you're targeting site selectors, focus on LinkedIn because that's the platform where professionals are looking to advance themselves and their companies. If you want to promote your upcoming community event, use Facebook because that audience focuses more on entertainment and activities in their local region.

Targeting is one of the most critical parts of your digital ads. You can choose specific locations, ages, and even interests to a certain extent. If you're promoting an event to locals, select your region as the target audience. If you'd like to attract people outside of your region to move to or visit your community, target those out-of-state or choose the states/regions you'd like to target most.

Keywords are also an essential part of digital ads. We recommend choosing 5-10 keywords per campaign to stay on topic without getting too broad. When considering keywords, think about the words users are typing into their search engines and which searches you'd like to appear on.

## **Create a Series of VR Videos**

Virtual reality videos are becoming more and more popular in the dawn of the metaverse. If your economic development, tourism, or chamber organization is not in the metaverse, you will fall behind.

The possibilities are endless regarding the types of VR videos you want to create. The most popular are Familiarization Tours for business attraction, workforce attraction, and tourism. Imagine someone putting on their VR headset, "stepping into your community," and being transported to whitewater rapids, an outdoor concert, a manufacturing floor, or a Friday night football game. With VR, people can experience what your community has to offer in a truly memorable way.

# GET SUPPORT FROM FIRMS THAT UNDERSTAND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Golden Shovel Agency works exclusively with economic developers and understands the complex goals and challenges of the industry. Its solutions are proven effective and will equip you with the tools you need to market your community and thrive. Learn more about Golden Shovel Agency's [unique services](#), or [contact them for a quote](#).



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# GET SUPPORT FROM FIRMS THAT UNDERSTAND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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If funding is an issue, work with Convergent Nonprofit Solutions. Convergent is a national fundraising consulting firm specializing in managing feasibility studies and capital campaigns for chambers, economic development organizations, community colleges, and other nonprofits. Convergent provides organizations with valuable insights and customized solutions on how a capital campaign can help fund key initiatives in community development and drive overall growth. [Contact Convergent Nonprofit Solutions](mailto:contact@convergentnonprofit.com) today at [convergentnonprofit.com](http://convergentnonprofit.com) to discuss your funding needs and goals.



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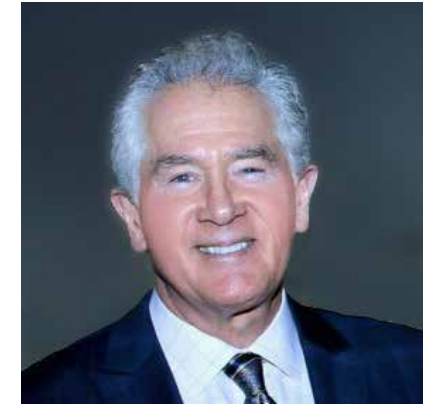


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