
A Strategic Plan for the Sustainable Economic Development of the City of Asheville, North Carolina

Introduction

The purpose of this strategic plan is to set forth the strategic goals and strategic actions for the City of Asheville. This is not intended to be a plan for the entire county or metropolitan area; it is designed to address the specific needs and concerns of the leadership within the City. The intended result from this strategic planning effort is a more inclusive strategy to move the community forward to become a better place in which to live, work, and play. The plan will help facilitate a road map for the City's sustainable economic development effort, telling us where we are, where we want to go, and how to get there.

Situation Audit for Asheville

The starting point for a credible strategic planning process is an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the community as they relate to future opportunities for development. In other words, what problems exist in Asheville that constitute barriers for successfully achieving the vision of its leadership? How well will the community respond to the likely political, social, economic, and environmental changes that the future will bring?

Local Perception of the Problems of Asheville

Part of the answer to the question of what Asheville will become in the future lies in how the local leadership of the community and the citizens perceive the situation today. The allocation of scarce resources to the problems of the community is determined primarily by the priorities of its leadership and their constituents, which means that the level of attention given to problems is a function of the viewpoint of the residents of the City.

Determining the local perception within the community involved three separate activities. A survey was conducted of the leadership to ascertain their perception of the strengths and weaknesses of Asheville. Another survey was conducted of the citizens of the city to obtain their input. Finally, a leadership workshop was held to determine local priorities for local economic development.

The leadership survey was prepared by LGC and was mailed to approximately several hundred identified leaders in the city. Of the total mailed, 90 were completed and returned. The key results are as follows:

Leadership Survey Results

TOP STRENGTHS	% OF TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS
Availability of adequate hospital facilities	91.4
Adequate local clinics and health care professionals for basic health care needs	86.2
Quality of the climate	85.1
Attractiveness of the physical environment	84.0
Impact of the tourism industry on the City	82.8
Availability of adequate hotels and motels	72.3
Adequacy of the marketing program to attract tourists	68.8
Level of cultural activity and facilities	68.1
Availability of a range of quality restaurants in the city and nearby area	60.6

TOP WEAKNESSES	% OF TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS
Availability of housing for low income families	85.1
State and local permitting and regulation process for business	80.0
Availability of fully served and attractive industrial sites	78.7
Cost of housing overall	76.6
Availability of suitable industrial building space	76.6
Cost of water and sewer services	75.3
Availability of quality jobs for the workforce in the City and surrounding area	72.3
Adequacy of local newspaper for promotion of the City/County business activity	67.0
Level of wages and salaries paid locally	65.6
Availability of adequate water and sewer lines to industrial and commercial sites	63.8

From a strategic planning perspective, this survey identifies a number of opportunities (strengths) for the City to build on, and a number of problem areas to address. A level of importance can be assigned based on the “points” calculated for each issue. However, it is important to clarify that leadership perceptions of local strengths and weaknesses do not necessarily translate into priorities for action.

A second survey was published in the Citizen Times for the citizens of Asheville. Approximately 337 responded. The following are the areas of satisfaction (strengths) and dissatisfaction (weaknesses) voiced by the citizens.

Citizen Survey Results

Strengths (Very Pleased or Satisfied)

- ❑ Cultural activities
- ❑ Telephone service
- ❑ Retail shopping
- ❑ Community college
- ❑ Adult continuing education
- ❑ Health care
- ❑ Major highways serving city
- ❑ Law enforcement
- ❑ Recreation programs
- ❑ Downtown Asheville
- ❑ Programs for senior citizens
- ❑ Public access to recreation

Weaknesses (Not Satisfied or Very Unhappy)

- ❑ Cleanliness of the community
- ❑ Local streets
- ❑ Availability of quality jobs
- ❑ City planning
- ❑ Environmental protection
- ❑ Water and sewer service
- ❑ Commercial air service
- ❑ Local traffic movement
- ❑ Housing availability and cost
- ❑ Local taxes

Another key question on the citizen survey asked for an identification of the primary problem facing the City. The results are as follows:

Biggest Problem Facing the City of Asheville

(The following rank ordering is based on the number of times the issue appeared among the top 3 issues)

- ❑ Availability of jobs
- ❑ Cleanliness of the community
- ❑ Level of local taxes
- ❑ Lack of enforcement of zoning and building codes

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- ❑ Quality of local education
 - ❑ Quality of drinking water
 - ❑ Crime and drug activity
 - ❑ Cost of housing

Lockwood Greene Consulting Assessment of Locational Strengths and Weaknesses

The “objective” assessment of the city by LGC was conducted primarily from the perspective of a business investor. An analysis was made of relevant data and interviews were conducted with local employers, local officials, and other key sources of information. This assessment resulted in the following locational strengths and weaknesses, particularly with respect to business investment and job creation. The consulting firm of Lockwood Greene Consulting, based on their research and on local employer interviews, determined that Asheville possessed the following locational advantages / assets for business and industry:

Locational Advantages of Asheville

- ❑ Quality of life
- ❑ Health care
- ❑ Availability of community college/technical training
- ❑ Highway transportation/access
- ❑ Small business development and entrepreneurial spirit

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- ❑ Vibrant downtown
 - ❑ The potential development of the French Broad River
 - ❑ Low labor cost
 - ❑ Education/schools (K-12)
 - ❑ Tourism's economic impact
 - ❑ Telecommunications infrastructure
 - ❑ Higher education resources

Mixed Results

- ❑ Worker productivity
- ❑ Labor availability
- ❑ Air transportation
- ❑ Lack of unified leadership and direction for economic development
- ❑ Electric power cost and reliability
- ❑ Water supply, water and sewer availability and capacity

Locational Disadvantages of Asheville

- ❑ Lack of industrial sites, office space, and cost of real estate
- ❑ Housing availability and general cost of living
- ❑ City relations with business and industry
- ❑ Lack of graduate education and university research in the science and engineering disciplines

This assessment from the perspective of outside business investors/employers is important to the development of a strategic plan that effectively improves the competitive position of the Asheville area. The weaknesses of the area are important impediments to attracting and retaining employers; the strengths point to opportunities.

Some of the weaknesses identified by LGC were also perceived locally. These include:

- Lack of industrial sites, office space, and cost of real estate
- Housing availability and general cost of living

Leadership Workshop to Determine Priorities

As part of the strategic planning process for Asheville, a leadership workshop was held to obtain input from local leaders regarding their perception of the key economic development problems in the community with the intent of determining what they considered to be the development **priorities**. The results of the preceding surveys and the LGC assessment were shared with the participants with the intent of informing them about local perceptions as well as providing them a measure of objective reality.

Prior to the workshop, LGC prepared a list of key economic development issues facing the City of Asheville. These were obtained from the following sources:

- Leadership workshops conducted by the Citizen-Times
- The Arthur Anderson high technology study
- The Wadley-Donovan Group study for the Chamber of Commerce
- The Citizen Survey
- The Leadership Survey
- The LGC Community Assessment

This list of key issues was distributed to the participants of the workshop. It should be pointed out that the following list is not necessarily totally inclusive of all the development problems or issues facing the City of Asheville. The focus of this list is on “economic development” issues; therefore, less emphasis is given to social and quality of life themes. Because no organization or local government can tackle all of the local issues equally well given the limitations of funding, resources, and staffing, it is very important for the community to focus on those particular issues that are most critical to its future.

Checklist from Workshop of Key Economic Development Issues

- a.____ Lack of developable sites for business and industry within the City.
- b.____ Lack of available buildings suited for manufacturing and distribution.
- c.____ Lack of available building space for new business startups.
- d.____ A tight labor supply, with a shortage of skilled workers.
- e.____ Lack of cooperation between the City and the County governments.
- f.____ Problems in the permitting and zoning process.
- g.____ Lack of local agreement on the type of business and industry that should be attracted to the City.
- h.____ Shortage of rental housing.
- i.____ Lack of available buildings for corporate office operations.
- j.____ The adequacy and cost of commercial airline service.
- k.____ The Civic Center does not meet the requirements for those business meetings, trade shows, conventions, and conferences that could be attracted to the City.
- l.____ Lack of a permanent film production studio and/or sound stage to attract more movie filming.
- m.____ Shortage of affordable housing.

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- n._____ A high level of underemployment (workers employed in jobs that do not use their skills or pay wages below what they could receive for their level of education or training).
- o._____ The lack of a coordinated development approach for the downtown area.
- p._____ Revitalization of the urban riverfront.
- q._____ Lack of incentives for small business.
- r._____ Improvement of public transportation from low income areas to employment centers.
- s._____ Revitalization of the commercial area of West Asheville.
- t._____ A lack of prestigious research institutions and technical/professional graduate programs in the community.
- u._____ The lack of an Asheville Connector to I-26 will result in increased traffic congestion.
- v._____ The community does not retain its college graduates.
- w._____ The City needs to annex additional developable land.
- x._____ The City needs to expand its tourist-related activities and amenities.
- y._____ A need for an additional full-service hotel in the downtown to complement the Civic Center.
- z._____ The water supply is inadequate, lacks appropriate infrastructure, and is high cost.

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- aa.____ City's role in economic development needs to be clearly defined and articulated, particularly with reference to the economic development program of the Chamber of Commerce.
 - bb.____ Difficulty of recruiting scientists and technicians to Asheville.
 - cc.____ A need to expand the film industry in Asheville.
 - dd.____ A need for a small business incubator to nurture the growth of startups.
 - ee.____ Availability of public parking in the local commercial areas.
 - ff.____ Other_____

Each of the preceding issues is important to the future development of Asheville. However, one of the primary purposes of strategic planning is to assign priorities to problem areas, recognizing that no community can tackle all of its problems simultaneously and with equal vigor. To that end, each participant prioritized these issues and the tabulation of these individual assessments led to what the participants perceived to be the most important of all of the identified issues. The key priority problems facing Asheville (according to the participants) are in rank order as follows:

Community Development Priority Issues

1. Shortage of diverse and affordable housing within the City, including rental units.
2. Lack of developable sites.
3. Tight labor supply with a shortage of skilled workers.
4. Lack of local agreement on the type of business and industry the City should try to attract.
5. The water supply is inadequate and high cost.
6. Lack of prestigious research institutions and technical graduate programs.
7. Problems with the planning, zoning, and permitting processes.
8. Lack of cooperation between city and county government.
9. Need to revitalize the riverfront.
10. High underemployment.
11. Lack of available buildings for manufacturing and distribution.
12. City's economic development role needs to be more clearly defined.

In a discussion following the prioritization of these issues, it was decided by the group that the issue of housing was already being adequately addressed by a housing task force and did not need to be dealt with in this economic development context. The lack of developable sites and the lack of available buildings were combined into a real estate issue. The tight labor supply with a shortage of skilled workers, the high

underemployment, and the lack of prestigious research institutions and technical graduate programs was combined into a workforce/education issue. The issues with planning, zoning, and permitting were covered under the term “development process.” The revitalization of the riverfront also became a planning issue. The issue of lack of cooperation between city and county government is currently being addressed, according to the group, and did not need to be a focus of this effort. Finally, the role of the City in economic development and the specific types of industries to target will be addressed by LGC as part of its consulting input to the City.

Target Industries for Asheville

The Leadership Workshop also identified a number of desired target industries for the City of Asheville. Based on their list and on LGC analysis, the following are the highest recommended industries for the city to pursue. All of these are knowledge-based industries as opposed to manufacturing and distribution, which is appropriate, given that the City has limited manufacturing sites. A detailed report on these industries has been provided.

- ❑ Medical services (medical cluster as well as wellness and alternative medicine)
- ❑ Software development

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- ❑ Environmental technology
 - ❑ Internet related activity
 - ❑ Corporate back offices and call centers (higher wage operations)
 - ❑ Film making

Tourism and arts and crafts were also identified as targets for Asheville. The current economic impact of tourism on the area is enormous. The arts and crafts industry contributes to the tourist base as well as improves the cultural offerings in the area. Handmade in America has laid the foundation for this, and the City should promote the growing artist community.

Certain manufacturing sectors are also appropriate targets for the City. However, the City of Asheville needs to dramatically expand their inventory of sites (“product”) before recruiting large manufacturing operations. Some of the sites available may be adequate for small-scale operations, but overall, the site inventory precludes much activity for now. The following industries were identified as specific manufacturing targets at the Leadership Workshop, and LGC concurs that they have potential for the community:

- ❑ Electronic equipment
- ❑ Industrial machinery and equipment
- ❑ Fabricated metal

In addition, the automotive parts industry appears to have considerable potential for this area, once the site situation is improved.

The Strategic Plan

The input from the previous plans and studies, surveys, LGC assessment, and leadership workshop served as the foundation for the strategizing part of the strategic planning process. A strategic plan is more than a list of problems to be solved, weaknesses to be corrected, or opportunities to be pursued. It is also more than a statement of vision. All of this needs to be translated into more specific goals, and into actions to achieve those goals. These goals and actions are the core of an effective strategic plan.

Our Vision of the Future

What motivates local leadership and the citizenry to get actively involved in programs to improve their community? Generally, it is a sense of pride in the community -- a belief that conditions could and should improve through both individual and joint effort. This motivation comes from a "shared vision" of the potential of the community. Without vision, leadership tends to be ineffective and residents lack any sense of pride in where they live.

A shared vision for a community such as Asheville is an ideal and unique image of the future. It incorporates a view of a future condition that would be better, in some important ways, than what now exists. It is a

dream rooted in reality. The development of a clearly articulated vision provides the concepts necessary to enable people to see the changes that must be made if their dream is to become a reality. Developing a clear vision involves a belief that people can influence their community's destiny by what they do now and into the future.

The leadership of Asheville has developed such a vision. In 1995, 160 citizens from across the community gathered to develop a shared vision of what they want Asheville and Buncombe County to become. Because of this ongoing visioning effort, a separate vision statement for just the City of Asheville was not developed as part of the LGC strategic planning process. The following is the vision statement from Asheville-Buncombe Vision, Inc.:

Asheville and Buncombe County will have a top-notch education system that inspires children and adults to become productive citizens, and to realize their maximum potential. There will be a reduction in the poverty level by one half of the 1990 level, particularly in households with children. We envision a balanced, inclusive community that nurtures our children, respects cultural diversity and protects our natural beauty and resources.

Our community will have a sustainable and diversified economy that creates prosperity and opportunity for everyone in our county. Average job earnings will increase at a greater rate than the North Carolina average, and job opportunities will be provided to allow young people to stay in, or come

to, Buncombe County to live and work. The community will have the necessary infrastructure to support economic and residential development.

The responsive private sector leadership of the community will empower our citizens and encourage the leadership potential of our young people. Our government will encourage participation, listen to the individual, identify the common good, and then act effectively.

This vision statement, like any vision statement, is not written in stone. Ongoing input from the citizens and leaders of Asheville is likely to bring about some alteration of the statement over time. And, as the area changes and as circumstances change, this statement needs to be reviewed and modified to reflect more current views.

This vision is reflected in the goals and priorities of action of the strategic plan. The vision supplies the general sense of direction for the Asheville area; the goals and strategic actions provide the specifics on how to get there, particularly with respect to sustainable economic development.

The Mission of the Strategic Plan

The **Vision** sets the direction for the community and its organizations. The **Mission Statement** clarifies the purpose of the strategic planning process for the City. It demonstrates the key values inherent in the people of the community and their leaders.

Mission Statement for the City of Asheville’s Sustainable Economic Development Strategic Plan:

The City of Asheville strategic plan will provide a basis for actions designed to stimulate a sustainable, diversified, and vibrant economy while preserving the values inherent in the community.

Core values to be reflected include a commitment to quality, broad-based citizen involvement, and a preservation of the character of the city. This ongoing process should focus on economic development issues and opportunities prioritized by the community.

The result will be an improved local business climate that fosters private business investment leading to an increased tax base and a sustained improvement in the standard of living and quality of life for all residents.

The Action Planning Process

Ideally, the development goals for a community like Asheville should reflect its vision statement. The vision statement, however, is much more encompassing than the set of goals. A goal is a more specific statement of what the area would like to be or achieve. Goals should be focused on the priority issues impacting the development of the community.

As part of the strategic planning process, a citizen-led Task Force was appointed by the City Council to move the planning from vision and development priorities into achievable goals. This Task Force set up Strategic Action Teams from its membership to develop these goals and the strategic actions to achieve them. Local leaders with interest and/or expertise in the key economic development issues became participants in these Teams.

During the initial course of setting up the Strategic Action Teams, it was decided that the following teams would be established:

- Development Process Team
- Real Estate Team
- Workforce/Education Team
- Riverfront Team

All of the issues from the leadership workshop were brought into one or another of these teams, with the exception of the issue of water supply. The Task Force was of the opinion that this issue did not need to be addressed at this time, since significant improvements to the system had been recently made or are planned, such as the activation of the Mills River Treatment Plant.

Over the course of four months in the latter half of 1999, the Strategic Action Teams met to devise appropriate goals and strategies to achieve them. This process used a problem-solving approach to clarify the identified problems, determine their causes, and devise strategies to remove or remedy these causes. The output of these Teams was reviewed by LGC, who was engaged to serve as overall facilitator of the strategic planning process. Each Team developed a set of strategies that were related to the priority issues on which they were focused. LGC reviewed and modified as appropriate the work of the Teams, as well as adding some additional strategies. LGC rewrote the identified problems into goal statements, transforming them from negative statements to positive statements. The goals and strategic actions that follow constitute the heart of the strategic plan.

Development Process Team

Goal 1: Asheville's *urban planning, zoning, and permitting processes*, as created and administered by the City, facilitates sustained and positive development.

Strategic Action 1: The City's Planning & Building Safety Departments will streamline the process by eliminating and combining steps.

Strategic Action 2: The City's Planning Department will advocate changes in the UDO, such as reformatting content and presentation of the publication and adding flexibility to the ordinance. A mission statement, guiding principles, and goals will be adopted.

Strategic Action 3: The planning staff and planning commissions will adopt a "common sense" culture.

Strategic Action 4: The City's Planning & Building Safety Departments will restructure some processes to provide for enhanced communication among parties earlier in the process.

Strategic Action 5: The City’s Planning Department will eliminate conflicts between ordinances, standards, and codes.

Strategic Action 6: The City’s Planning & Building Safety Departments will improve permit coordination with “outside agencies,” such as the County and State.

Strategic Action 7: The City’s Planning & Building Safety Departments will create more effective education/informational tools (checklists, guides, etc.).

Strategic Action 8: The City’s Planning & Building Safety Departments will strengthen communication between the City and the private sector through such means as Development Forums.

Strategic Action 9: The City’s Planning & Building Safety Departments will use the latest and most appropriate computer technology, where practical, to improve the development process for both local government and business.

Strategic Action 10: The City’s Planning Department will encourage higher densities and mixed uses within the City via performance-based standards and ordinances.

Note: Strategic actions 1 through 10, as initially developed by the Development Process Team, would be presented to the City Council as part of this strategic plan to be acted on as policies for the City's Planning & Building Safety Departments.

Strategic Action 11: The Action Team will meet at regular intervals (3 months and 6 months) for updates as well as for input regarding specific proposals for changes, improvements, etc., to processes, standards, ordinances, etc..

Strategic Action 12: The City's various Commissions involved in planning, zoning, and development should be restructured to more closely resemble a "Technical Review Committee" structure.

Real Estate Team

Industrial Development

Goal 2: The *availability of suitable sites* within the City will meet its business needs into the future.

Strategic Action 1: Current zoning ordinances should be strengthened to preserve and maintain selected existing areas of the City that currently allow for manufacturing uses.

Strategic Action 2: The City's Economic Development Division and Planning Department should select key sites within the City that are suitable for development or redevelopment as manufacturing sites. These sites should be zoned exclusively for that purpose.

Strategic Action 3: The City should work cooperatively with Buncombe County and adjoining communities and counties to initiate a regional approach to the development of major industrial parks that would benefit all the government entities and their residents.

Strategic Action 4: The City should explore the feasibility of annexing adjoining or nearby land that has the potential for manufacturing sites.

Strategic Action 5: City zoning should be changed to permit appropriate light assembly and high tech manufacturing uses in some office areas and commercial areas.

Strategic Action 6: The City should assist in the development of a business incubator to further encourage small business development and entrepreneurship.

Strategic Action 7: The Economic Development Division of the City will target and develop the local environment (“product development”) for stimulating specialized industries that meet the unique locational characteristics of Asheville.

Sustainable Development

Goal 3: The City’s future development will *balance economic objectives, social goals, and its natural resources* to the benefit of present and future generations.

Strategic Action 1: The City should reserve industrial land for manufacturing use (see Goal 2: Strategic Action 1).

Strategic Action 2: The City’s Planning Department should plan for a sustainable land use pattern. This approach would preserve quality neighborhoods, reserve areas for businesses and industries, create a viable downtown, develop connecting transportation corridors, build greenways, and protect environmentally sensitive areas.

Strategic Action 3: The City should explore the “urban villages” concept that incorporates the principles of higher densities and mixed use as a way of redeveloping the community for sustained development.

Strategic Action 4: A public education process should be instituted that would create a higher awareness of the need for and value of sustainable development in the City's land use pattern.

Strategic Action 5: The appropriate city departments and/or other agencies in the community should identify and prioritize the infrastructure needs and costs to support projects under Goals 2 and 3.

Workforce-Education Team

Goal 4: The institutions of *higher education and training* in the Asheville area will meet the skill needs of the businesses and industries in the community.

Strategic Action 1: Improve private sector awareness about programs available at local institutions by linking these institutions to various Web pages in the area; and, through the collaboration of these institutions, to centralize information and materials in an accessible physical location. These materials should describe academic and training programs, special interests, research opportunities, grant writing opportunities, student/faculty skills inventory, etc.

Strategic Action 2: Conduct a skills inventory of the institution's students and graduates.

Strategic Action 3: Establish a clear contact person at each appropriate local educational institution to coordinate the need for information and to handle inquiries as related to workforce and work place development.

Strategic Action 4: Conduct a workforce skills assessment of local businesses and industries to determine their needs for expanded education and training.

Strategic Action 5: Set up focus groups between business/industry and education to explore ways of improving the delivery system.

Strategic Action 6: The appropriate local education institutions will expand their enrollment of appropriate programs to meet workplace needs. These programs may include information technology, engineering, education, nursing and health sciences, software development, environmental technology, cultural arts, filmmaking, tourism, and professional services, all of which have been identified as target industries for Asheville.

Strategic Action 7: The Workforce-Education Team will investigate master plans at area institutions to determine how future workplace needs are being addressed.

Strategic Action 8: The local higher education institutions will collaborate so that their collective resources can be reorganized and re-packaged to respond, in a timely manner, to the training needs of the workplace.

Strategic Action 9: A “think tank” of active and retired CEOs should be developed to explore ways to improve education and training to meet workplace needs.

Strategic Action 10: State and local elected officials should be informed and lobbied so that the issues and needs of WNC higher education institutions will be addressed by the General Assembly in a timely and fair appropriations process.

Strategic Action 11: Aggressively advocate for the institutions to speed up the process (“fast track”) for new degrees that respond to workplace needs.

Strategic Action 12: Establish a formal collaborative partnership or consortium of all area institutions to address the problems identified above, to serve as a clearinghouse and point of contact for information and activities, and to implement the proposed strategic plan. The Consortium would be organized around a physical space and staff for coordination of activity development and implementation.

Goal 5: The *local workforce* will have the basic education, life skills, and technical skills to meet the demands of Asheville's workplace in the future.

Strategic Action 1: A collaboration of local support agencies will be developed to further identify and address workforce problems, recognizing that many of these problems stem from societal dysfunctions.

Strategic Action 2: Community projects will be developed that will enhance the educational process, particularly as it relates to the workplace (e.g., Schools 2000, Communities in Schools).

Strategic Action 3: Develop a career pathway approach to accomplish a smooth transition from public schools to post-secondary education.

Strategic Action 4: The manufacturing certification program should be implemented.

Strategic Action 5: Workers should be recruited to enroll in appropriate education and training programs being developed locally.

Strategic Action 6: Under the leadership of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, the City's Economic Development Division should provide appropriate marketing assistance to attract those higher paying businesses and industries to the community that will make use of the skilled workers.

Riverfront Team

Goal 6: Asheville’s “total” *riverfront* (inclusive of the French Broad and Swannanoa rivers) will be redeveloped to maximize both its full potential as a quality of life amenity as well as for commercial opportunities.

Strategic Action 1: Upgrade existing roadways to parkway or boulevard status with one name throughout the entire riverfront corridor.

Strategic Action 2: Place attractive and unified signage throughout the corridor that will improve movement into and within the corridor.

Strategic Action 3: Improve drainage within the riverfront corridor.

Strategic Action 4: Design and construct greenways and recreation areas as appropriate within the riverfront area.

Strategic Action 5: The City should designate a Greenway Coordinator for obtaining rights-of-way, easements, etc. and developing solutions for property owners as related to the Greenways.

Strategic Action 6: Design and construct parking and public access as appropriate within the riverfront area.

Strategic Action 7: Zone appropriate portions of the riverfront to permit higher density and mixed use.

Strategic Action 8: Coordinate the planning of the riverfront with that of adjoining small area plans.

Strategic Action 9: Work toward the successful engagement of the Corps of Engineers for a study of the dredging needs of the rivers and for the implementing of that study.

Strategic Action 10: Plan each “section” of the riverfront for appropriate uses as identified by the Riverfront Team, coordinating these plans with the master plan now beginning for the I-240 to Amboy Road portion of the riverfront.

(Note: these six sections are:

Section A – North of I-240 to Broadway

Section B – South of I-240 to Amboy Rd. bridge

Section C – Amboy Rd. bridge to I-240 W.

Section D – Amboy Rd. bridge to Biltmore Village

Section E – Biltmore Village to I-240 E.

Section F – I-240 to Lake Craig)

Strategic Action 11: Work closely with projects involving other agencies, such as NCDOT, Norfolk Southern, and the Corps of Engineers, so that the implementation of the riverfront can be undertaken in an efficient manner. Such projects include: upgrading the existing road structure, replacing a railroad trestle, and flood mitigation activities.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The strategic planning process for Asheville is not complete. It has only begun. Strategic planning is like “a race with no finish line.” As the various departments of the City and other organizations begin to flesh out the strategic actions and attempt to implement them, it will become clear that modifications and adjustments will be necessary. And, because strategic planning is a long-term process, some of the strategic actions will take a number of years to complete.

The ultimate success of this planning process will depend on how well the appropriate organizations manage the implementation of the various strategic actions. The plan by itself is worthless. Its value lies in the directions it provides to local agencies and organizations, and the reminders it gives as to the priorities for accomplishing and sustaining future economic health in Asheville.

It is critical, therefore, that the existing steering committee set up a process whereby the plan can be and will be systematically and periodically reviewed and evaluated. If the implementation of the strategic actions is not resulting in the desired changes in the community, why not? What needs to be done differently? What is a more effective approach?

It is recommended by LGC that the following steps be taken to facilitate the implementation of this strategic plan:

- Establish an Implementation Task Force focused on the four strategic issues of Development Process, Riverfront Development, Real Estate, and Workforce/Education. This Task Force should be comprised of appropriate city officials, city staff, and volunteers. They will have the task of monitoring, coordinating, revisiting, and modifying as necessary the Strategic Actions in the Strategic Plan. This Task Force should meet no less than quarterly to review the reports on activity submitted to them by the City Manager's office and determine the progress that has been made.
- The Economic Development Director, the Planning Director, the City Manager, and the Task Force will be charged with the responsibility to annually evaluate the progress of the implementation of the plan and make a report to the City Council on their findings.
- The City's Planning & Building Safety Department will have the responsibility for implementing the strategic actions of the Development Process Team, Strategic Actions 1, 2, 4, and 5 of Goal 2 and Strategic Actions 1 through 5 of Goal 3 from the Real Estate Team, and the strategic actions of the Riverfront Team. The Economic Development Director will assist in this process.
- The Economic Development Director of the City will be responsible for implementing Strategic Action 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 of the Real Estate Team,

working with the Planning Department as appropriate. In addition, the Economic Development Director should serve as the City's liaison with the reconfigured Workforce-Education Task Force to assist in the implementation of the strategic actions recommended by the Workforce-Education Team. This new Task Force should consist primarily of key representatives of the education institutions of the Asheville area.

- Although not directly related to the Strategic Plan implementation, it is recommended that the City Business and Development Commission be dissolved. Since the Implementation Task Force will provide the City Council with appropriate feedback on local economic development and business activity, the Commission does not have a significant purpose.

It is very easy to slip back into “business as usual,” as the urgencies of daily concerns divert attention away from the longer term issues that will determine the destiny of the city. The evaluation of the progress of the strategic plan should be focused on accomplishing or initiating the strategic actions over the course of the first 12 months. In years two through five, performance measures should be developed by the Task Forces to determine if these actions are bringing about the results desired by the citizenry and leadership of the community.

In addition to the four areas identified as key problems to be addressed, the leadership workshop indicated the need of the City to target certain industries to be attracted to or expanded within Asheville. By and large,

these were what could be called “knowledge-based” industries. The lack of industrial sites inside the City as documented by a separate Lockwood Greene Consulting study precludes the attraction of major manufacturing operations.

The following recommendations were made by LGC to the Economic Development Division regarding the targeted industries:

Health Services Industry

The general health industry in Asheville will continue to grow as a regional medical center, but this growth is most likely to be closely linked with the overall population growth of the region. The City should explore ways of facilitating this industry, using forums and meetings with the medical community. It is possible that services for the medical industry and medical products manufacturers with a potential to relocate in or expand in Asheville could be identified through this networking process.

The growth of the alternative medicine sector could possibly be further stimulated by establishing a “Center” that would enable practitioners to have a clinic-level facility in which they could practice and share information and research findings. Networking with existing practitioners could lead to the identification of other practitioners that could be recruited to the community.

Back Office Operations

Asheville should be able to attract those back offices that employ a higher percentage of skilled and higher paid workers, such as accounting, data processing, and claims processing. However, it is important that vacant office space be identified, since this industry is most likely to locate in readily available space. Since back office operations are difficult to identify, it is important to work with existing firms in the area to determine which companies might be considering the location of a back office in the South or Mid-Atlantic region.

Call Centers

The City of Asheville should focus on those call centers that pay higher wages and seek more educated workers. This is true of customer service and technology support operations. Other call centers tend to seek large labor pools of part-time and lower wage workers, such as telemarketing, catalog fulfillment, and reservations. The relatively low unemployment levels in the Asheville labor market area and the goal of raising the level of income in the community would argue against the active recruiting of other than the higher wage call centers.

Call centers, similar to back offices, tend to look for available office space. Appropriate space should be identified in the City before mounting a

marketing effort. The City's Economic Development Division staff should attend Call Center trade shows along with the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, Advantage West, and the State. Trade shows provide an opportunity for networking with prospects as well as for learning more about what is happening in this industry. The City should work with Bell South to identify in detail the telecommunication advantages of the community, and include those in a promotional brochure tailored to call centers and back offices.

Motion Picture Production and Services

The Asheville area has been the location of the filming of a number of movies over the past years. This track record has given the community the necessary recognition within the industry that could help stimulate additional opportunities. It would appear that one effective strategy for attracting this industry would be to foster the development of multimedia technical skills in the Asheville area by creating or strengthening appropriate curriculums at UNCA and A/B Tech.

Another strategy for building this industry would be the identification of workers currently in the Asheville area that possess the necessary skills for movie and video production. These workers should be classified by the specific skills that they can provide to an on-location filming or to a video

studio. This database should be kept current and should be easily categorized and accessed.

The media workers in southern California are joined together in many different crisscrossing networks of association. These networks allow workers to collectivize their individual experiences, knowledge, information, contacts, and so on, thus generating organizational frameworks that supplement general processes of worker socialization and job mobility. It would be possible, once the potential media workers in the Asheville area have been identified, to develop a formal networking structure to encourage their interaction.

Although Advantage West houses a representative of the film commission for the State of North Carolina, it is further recommended that Asheville join with Buncombe County to create an office of Film Liaison with a full time professional staffing it. This individual should be well connected with the film industry and should have an adequate budget to make personal contacts with representatives of the film and video studios. This is an industry that places great stock in personal contacts.

A detailed inventory should be maintained by the local Film Liaison of appropriate sites for on-location shootings for movies, advertising, and video productions. A picture catalogue should be kept up-to-date, and

should anticipate as best as possible the particular needs for up-coming films, ads, and videos.

The Film Liaison should also be able to work closely with the City and County to arrange for on-site shootings of films and videos. This would include blocking off streets, arranging for extras, providing key services, etc.

Finally, a sound stage should be developed in Asheville. This could serve the needs not only of out-of-state film companies, but also encourage independent filmmakers and video studios. This could be developed in an older building with high ceilings that is renovated for this purpose, which would keep the costs down. This facility would also need state-of-the-art equipment to supplement the needs of the industry.

The Economic Development director for the City of Asheville should work with the existing Film Board of the City to accomplish the preceding actions.

Internet Related Activities: Electronic Commerce, Internet Service Providers, and Web Page Designers

The activities by the community to stimulate this industry are similar to those of the movie and video industries. Programs need to be created and enhanced in the local higher education institutions to provide the type of technical workforce and professionals needed in this industry. The

emphasis is on computer software, computer science, telecommunications systems, and other electronically-related knowledge and proficiency. This should be addressed in the strategic planning effort of the education task force that has been investigating this topic.

A new or renovated physical facility for start-up companies in this industry may also stimulate entrepreneurial activity. A “knowledge center” could be developed that incorporates inexpensive space, shared services, state-of-the-art computer systems and telecommunications systems, access to professional and technical expertise, and start-up financing. This knowledge center could also house a liaison person with the local colleges and universities, on-line education resources, and a resource librarian/researcher.

Every effort should also be made to create a network of professionals in this industry within the Asheville area with the intent of encouraging sharing of information, developing alliances, doing joint proposals, attending relevant trade shows, and reducing operating costs through cooperative purchasing.

Conclusions

Although economic development activity is often closely associated with aggressive marketing for “prospect development,” in today’s and tomorrow’s New Economy the emphasis needs to be on “product development.” Clearly, economic development is about more than just trying to attract jobs into the community.

As was stated previously, the lack of industrial sites inside the City precludes the attraction of major manufacturing operations. However, the quality of life of Asheville, the presence of the Biltmore Park Corporate Technology Center, the presence of two and four year colleges/universities, and the excellent telecommunications infrastructure (with the possible exception of cellular service in certain areas) provide the City with the opportunity to pursue knowledge-based businesses. These tend to require smaller spaces, college-educated personnel, and pay relatively high wages, all of which makes them a good fit with the community.

The successful attraction of jobs in these industries is less about marketing and more about creating the proper environment within which these industries can flourish. Therefore, the role of the economic development efforts has to be focused on facilitating the development of a community that is attractive to “high tech” and information-based industries. This requires working closely with other agencies such as the City’s Planning &

Building Safety Department, local educational institutions, the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, Advantage West, and the business community to create the programs and activities as well as the infrastructure to stimulate job development in knowledge-based industries.

As examples, communities such as Austin TX (stimulated by Sematech), Raleigh-Durham NC (stimulated by the Research Triangle Park), Fairfax County VA, Boulder CO, Pittsburgh PA, Rochester MN, Rochester NY, and Tucson AZ (stimulated by the University of Arizona) have become important high-tech and information-based economic centers. However, the success of these communities required major infusions of funds from and the cooperation of federal, state, and local government, as well as considerable investment by higher education institutions and the business community.

To that end, it is *critical* to the community's economic future to focus efforts on such major projects as the creation of a "Knowledge Center" that can foster the development of technology-oriented firms, a multimedia center/sound stage that can stimulate film and video activity, and regional industrial/business parks. These major projects, together with the numerous strategic actions developed by each Team, should serve as foundations to bring about a sustained and healthy local economy that reflects the goals of the leadership for the City of Asheville.

The communities that are moving successfully into the knowledge-based economy are without exception also known for their high quality of life and their commitment to improving and sustaining that environment. That is why it is very important that Asheville moves vigorously to improve its living environment. This includes transforming its riverfront area into a greater recreational and commercial asset, planning for a housing environment that meets current and future needs, and creating a more efficient and environmentally sound physical infrastructure.

Ultimately, the Planning & Building Safety Departments have the primary responsibility of facilitating the sound development of the physical city; the education community has the responsibility of preparing the workforce of the future and meeting the training needs of the workplace; and the Economic Development Division has the responsibility of facilitating the numerous activities that will lead to business investment and job creation. However, given the importance of Asheville's urban planning and the enhancement of local education to the economic development process, the City's Economic Development Division should play a facilitative and catalytic role in all of these efforts.

Clearly, the creation of new facilities and infrastructure in order to attract knowledge-based industries will not be accomplished without an infusion of significant additional funds. The City will need to take the lead in allocating new funds for such new facilities as a Knowledge Center and a multi-

media/sound stage. The transformation of the riverfronts to recreational as well as commercial uses will require major funding for planning, construction, and redevelopment, as well as possible property acquisition where appropriate. These funds must be recurring and sustainable, as these efforts will require a multi-year timeframe.

The City of Asheville's leadership has taken the first steps toward proactively responding to the changes confronting the community. The next steps have been defined, and so the journey begins.