



2013 Transforming Local Government Conference
Case Study Submission

Cast Title: "Innovation Avenue, North Port, FL 34286"

Case Study Category: Economic Vitality

Jurisdiction Name: North Port, Florida

Population: 58,000

City/County Manager Name: City Manager Jonathan Lewis

Would you like the application to be considered for an Innovation Award? Yes

Would you like the application to be considered for our Rapid Fire Session? Yes

Project Leader (Primary Contact for case study notification)

Name: Jonathan Lewis
Title: City Manager
Department: City Manager's Office
Phone: (941) 429-7077
E-mail: jlewis@cityofnorthport.com
Address: 4970 City Hall Boulevard, North Port, FL 34286

Presentation Team Members:

Name: Allan Lane
Title: Economic Development Manager
Department: City Manager's Office
Phone: (941) 429-7001
E-mail: dschult@cityofnorthport.com

Name: Ruth Buchanan
Title: Economic Development Coordinator
Department: City Manager's Office
Phone: (941) 429-7029
E-mail: rbuchanan@cityofnorthport.com

Name: Erin Bryce
Title: Community Outreach Manager
Department: City Manager's Office
Phone: (941) 429-7165
E-mail: ebryce@cityofnorthport.com



SYNOPSIS:

He sauntered in with a black leather brief case. The smell of the clean leather, mixed in with a sweet but subtle cologne, filled the small office space. A handshake. A smile. He pulls the chair back and he eases comfortably into the woven cushion – as though he’s been there before. The confidence rolls off him like waves crashing on a sandy shore. It’s time to make a deal. Click, click. The business case opens.

Open for Business: A State of Mind

“The City of North Port is open for business.” The words are strewn across a flyer that hangs in the elevator doors of North Port City Hall touting slashed impact fees and business incentives designed to help drive new construction and kick-start a local economy that has stalled. A colorful graphic features photographs of manufacturers, open green space, smiling customer service representatives, and the essence of youth brimming with opportunity.

The City of North Port, at 104-square-miles and more than 57,000 residents, is the largest city in Sarasota County and is now the lead city in the North Port-Bradenton-Sarasota Metropolitan Statistical Area. A median age of 40 and nearly 10,000 school children, North Port is only 20 percent built out. This translates into plenty of room to develop.

Some residents have described this up-and-coming community as a blank canvas, ready for a Picasso or a Michelangelo to paint the picture of a glorious lifestyle. But most think of Norman Rockwell, due to North Port’s young families and that special “small town feeling” that one gets when attending the local winter holiday parade or visiting the community library.

It’s that “small town feel” and that overarching youthfulness that keeps the City of North Port’s leaders wide-eyed and hopeful. It’s as though stakeholders understand the importance behind chasing a dream – a dream of home ownership, a dream of entrepreneurship, a dream of success. This is a community that supports economic development efforts like no other city does.

And when you are in that state of mind, there’s a feeling like you can conquer. There is a sense of confidence that allows you to take a leap into the unknown and try new things. To innovate. To create. To dare.

...Confidence rolls off him like waves crashing on a sandy shore. It’s time to make a deal. And, click, click. The business case opens.

What’s Inside?

In 2007, no one had ever heard of North Port. People in Jacksonville, Miami, Tampa, and Fort Myers had no idea that there was a large city in southern Sarasota County.

So, the City of North Port got bold.

It hired a new Economic Development Manager and approved an aggressive Economic Development Strategic Plan. It also developed a 25 member Business and Economic Development Advisory Board that would answer to the City Commission and make recommendations on how to encourage economic development. Over the next five years, this community developed a city brand, launched an aggressive marketing plan, and built what is known as the Small Business Assistance Program. The flurry of activity came from the voices of the community. It was what they wanted, and City leaders listened.

What’s inside that briefcase? The Small Business Assistance Program.

The program consists of three parts: the Entrepreneurial Academy, the Lunch and Learn program, and the Revolving Loan Guarantee Fund. The programs were designed by community leaders and local business owners, not just City staff. The programs were organized so that they would run in cooperation, not in competition, with partner programs as well as provide support to entrepreneurs in consecutive phases.

The Entrepreneurial Academy: *Have an idea for a business? Want to branch out on your own? The Entrepreneurial Academy is an eight-week intensive course aimed to equip an aspiring entrepreneur with the basic skills on starting up a*



business. By the end of the course, enrollees have written a business plan that is realistic, implementable, and ready to take to the bank.

From making cupcakes to mowing lawns and from creating pet accessories to manufacturing swimming pool supplies, the men and women who are looking to build their business in this recession understood that it was never going to be easy. Yet they were willing to be educated and prepared. Since its launch in April 2009, the Academy has graduated 56 businesses. About half of these businesses are now in operation.

To create this course, the City of North Port brought in key collaborators who were experienced in training up-and-coming business owners. They partnered with organizations like SCORE and the State College of Florida, a local community college. Graduates receive a six month membership into the North Port Area Chamber of Commerce, which provides a network of existing business owners who want to see the new start-ups flourish.

News of the Academy's success spread throughout the Southwest Florida region. Entrepreneurial Academies have started in surrounding communities based on North Port's blueprint. The City of Punta Gorda and the Chamber of Commerce in Englewood now are graduating their own set of future business leaders.

Lunch and Learn Series: *Already in business and feeling stuck? Want to know more about human resources, marketing, and other aspects but don't have the funds to take business classes at the local college? Consider attending a Lunch and Learn program. During a typical lunch break, local business owners can sharpen your business skills for free.*

The City of North Port, each year, partners with the local Chamber of Commerce to question local business leaders what is troubling them. The brainstorm session takes place over coffee and muffins – Mammoth Muffins, that is – at a local Perkins Restaurant. A long list of possible topics is compiled, and then presented to the City's partner, the State College of Florida. From there, a course list is prepared. Once a month, from 11:30 p.m. to 1 p.m., Room 244 in City Hall is transformed into a classroom. Course topics range from, "Are You Legal?"; "Marketing Your Business on a Shoestring"; "How to Make Social Networking Work 4 UR Biz"; "Payroll and Other Boring Stuff"; and "Does Your 'Net' Work?"

Lunch is provided for free courtesy of local businesses sponsorships. The program is fully supported, not just by the local Chamber of Commerce, but by local educational faculties as well as small business support groups.

The numbers speak for themselves. So far in 2012, the five workshops that have been offered so far had standing room only. In 2011, the attendance rate for all eight workshops offered was 130. In 2010, about 107 businesses participated. The program was first offered in 2009, when 137 businesses attended.

Revolving Loan Guarantee Fund: *Bad credit? No credit? No problem. In North Port, nothing can get in the way of a business owner chasing a dream. The City of North Port works with local banks to provide a guarantee revolving loan fund to help small businesses grow.*

With the recession came a small business financing crunch. To minimize exposure to risk, the banks have tightened up their underwriting guidelines, resulting in a tight credit market. The City of North Port, just like the U.S. economy, is made up primarily of small businesses. It was important to the City that growing business owners be given an alternate means of financing if unable to get the loan from their bank. The City's Revolving Loan Guarantee Fund was created, through the support and expertise of the local financial community, to provide gap financing or alternative financing.

The program is simple. If an applicant is declined by traditional sources of financing, the applicant may qualify through the bank for the City guarantee, get the capital needed for them to grow, and repay the loan in three years, or refinance with a traditional financial institution after the period of three years. By which time, whatever credit or operational issue that prevented them from getting approved from a traditional loan will have been addressed.

This is a City that prides itself on being a place where residents can "Achieve Anything." Supporting small businesses is so important to the City of North Port that it placed \$100,000 aside to act as collateral for banks – the guarantee. Sarasota County government donated an additional \$100,000 to add to the pot.

Interest is growing with this program. Talk is beginning about creating a regional revolving loan guarantee fund, and the City's blueprint is being looked at as a model.



...Confidence rolls off him like waves crashing on a sandy shore. It's time to make a deal. And, click, click. The business case opens.

But the tools don't end there.

Achieve Anything

The City of North Port stresses an integrated approach to place marketing that is in tandem with a Citywide effort to make the campaign data-driven, cohesive, and true to its character. Traditionally a function of tourism, marketing the City is placed primarily with Economic Development with strong support from elected officials using ad valorem taxes instead of bed taxes (marketing consists of 25 to 30 percent of the Economic Development Budget). Bold. Daring.

The City of North Port is also firmly in control of its own destiny - marketing destiny, that is. While many agencies rely heavily on an outside marketing firm to control the message, this is not true for North Port. The City's top level marketing decisions are made in-house.

In 2010, the City created a Strategic Marketing Plan that would complement the City's new brand and guide the City's marketing efforts. Very few cities go to the length that North Port has when it comes to branding and marketing. For example, the City does not use stock art images in any of its advertising campaigns, everything is journalistically true.

Marketing helps with recruitment.

From a strategic combination of the print ads, video airings, and airport ads, the City's Economic Development Division has received well-qualified leads which normally would require the equivalent of many hours of staff time working trade shows and other events geared toward lead generation. For example, a logistics and transportation company in Ohio looking to move to Florida called for an information packet; a defense manufacturing company in Maine asked about business assistance and incentives; a distribution and light manufacturing company in South Florida inquired about relocation assistance; several regional businesses reached out for information about incentives; and other positive feedback came as a result of the marketing efforts from mid-2010 to the present.

Early on, the North Port City Commission defined five target industries. Four of the five are: hospitality, medical, education, and light manufacturing. Contrary to the norm, the City's fifth target industry is retail. The City likes retail; the City incentivizes it, and the City welcomes retail jobs. With a young community such as North Port, retail is a great way for young workers to start their transition into the workforce.

Its recruitment efforts are complemented by a healthy incentive package, which includes an impact fee moratorium, property tax exemptions, local preference ordinance in regards to City contracts, expedited plan review and permitting, economic development grants, and more. The City has a healthy selection of tools in the briefcase.

Borrowing best practices from the private sector, and thereby being good stewards of taxpayer dollars, the City uses a fiscal and economic development model to determine the costs and benefits of a project, as well as the payback period and return on investment.

On top of all of this, the color of the community's blood, pumping through its veins, is green. Recently, the City was named a Florida Green Local Government at the gold level, the highest level that has been achieved through the Florida Green Building Coalition. Economic development efforts have reflected the City's commitment to going green. As part of Sarasota County, which in one of only two communities in Florida to have an Energy Economic Zone (EEZ), the City is cultivating green economic development by encouraging renewable electric energy generation and promoting the manufacturing of products that contribute to energy conservation and green jobs.

...Confidence rolls off him like waves crashing on a sandy shore. It's time to make a deal. And, click, click. The business case opens.

Final handshake.

After a short discussion, two hands meet in the middle. Fingers wrap around fingers in a firm grasp. The up-and-down motion is brief, but effective. A deal has been made. And as the business man closes his brief case, states one final farewell, and exits the small office, there is a deep sense of understanding left in his wake. Confidence comes from knowing your programs are based on listening, daring, taking risks, and understanding community goals.



PRESENTATION OUTLINE:

Project Title: “Innovation Avenue, North Port, FL 34286”

Description: Using a *Saturday Night Live*-like skit with plenty of business suits, business cases, and laughter, the City of North Port promises an interactive learning experience that leaves people thinking seriously about producing similar results inside their own communities.

The skit will begin with a serious overtone, a re-enactment of a business deal taking place through mime with a narration. The spotlight dims and lights again on three business experts in North Port. These three, through bouts of satire, describe the tools in North Port’s business case. They focus on three areas: Retention, Marketing, and Recruitment.

Throughout the script, it is clear the key points are:

- Listen to your community and the different voices. They will tell you what they want.
- Be daring. Try new things. Take risks.
- Recognize and give tribute to those who help.
- Track. Measured results are hard to argue with.
- Tell your story. Don’t stay silent.

The presentation is interactive and engaging. Each audience member is given three compacted paper balls with the words “innovative” written on them in marker (because it takes balls to be innovative). If the project is considered innovative, the audience can throw balls (much like the tomatoes that were always thrown at Fozzy Bear) at the three speakers.

What the audience does not know is that there will be two planted hecklers in the audience that will be making snide comments and throwing one-liners that also help keep the laughter light, but drive the points home.

A slide show will also help aid with visuals and to drive the parts and pieces. Each attendee will receive a hand-out that describes the five points with room to fill in their own briefcase tools.

Takeaways: Once the fun, laughter, and giddiness dies down as the curtain closes and the spotlights dim, participants to the **Innovation Avenue, North Port, FL 34286** presentation will:

- Learn how a creative and market-driven business retention program will forge better collaborations and better results for their community.
- Understand how branding and strategic marketing techniques may be used as part of an effective economic development effort.
- Gain an insight on how to develop economic development incentives that will attract target companies and will have measurable results.