

A New Tool for Educating Elected Officials on Economic Development and the Role of the Economic Developer

Michael Pealow, B.Com, Ec.D(F), PAED

A common complaint of economic development professionals is that their employers – elected officials (municipal councillors, First Nations councillors, and federal/provincial/territorial legislators, in particular) – do not understand the role of the economic development professional, may struggle to understand the value of the work that economic development professionals do, and consequently, may not support the work of the economic development professional. In response to this, a video was created to be used by economic development professionals to educate new councils or to help councils, boards, or committees who are about to engage in strategic economic development planning to have a shared understanding of economic development and their role in the planning and implementation process.

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A Need for Education

A common complaint of economic development professionals is that their employers – elected officials (municipal councillors, First Nations councillors, and federal/provincial/territorial legislators, in particular) – do not understand the role of the economic development professional, may struggle to understand the value of the work that economic development professionals do, and consequently, may not support the work of the economic development professional.

This is further complicated by the wide range of work that economic development professionals may engage in, from investment attraction, to business retention and expansion, to entrepreneurship support and financing, cluster development, revitalization initiatives, labour force development, and more. Most concerning, however, is that elected officials often don't understand the crucial role that elected officials themselves play in creating an environment for successful or unsuccessful economic development.

Economic development is, first and foremost a political responsibility, but many elected officials have a limited understanding of what economic development is. How can elected officials be expected to support economic development professionals if they do not understand economic development or their own role in creating an environment for economic success?

Selecting a Pedagogical Application

In response to these concerns, a need was identified to educate elected officials about economic development, the role that they play in economic development, and the value that economic development professionals can provide. If designed appropriately, the right tool can be used by economic development professionals to educate new councils or to help councils, boards, or committees who are about to engage in strategic economic development planning to have a

shared understanding of economic development and their role in the planning and implementation process.

Approximately 20 elected officials and economic development professionals were asked what was needed in a pedagogical application in order to most effectively reach the target audience. Respondents indicated that the educational tool must be:

1. Accessible (easy to use and easy to access)
2. Engaging
3. Relevant, and
4. Respectful of the limited time and finances that elected officials have.

After considering a number of options, including: articles (academic and otherwise), a book, guidebooks/workbooks, and workshops (in-person, app-based, and online), a decision was made to produce an animated video fewer than ten minutes in length. The animated format had been previously suggested by the EDAC Year 3 cohort in 2013. Provided online, the video can be accessed by any economic development professional or elected official to educate interested elected officials, boards, or committees with an interest in economic development.

After identifying the animated video format as the preferred pedagogical application, animation options were researched over several years. The cost of conventional animation was prohibitive without considerable financial support and the project was delayed until the LDAY Centre for Learning contributed the use of its license for the online animation system, GoAnimate. A script was developed and refined, narrated by singer/songwriter Fawn Fritzen, and animated by the author intermittently over a five-month period. The video was then tested on approximately 25 economic developers and non-economic developers for their overall perception of the video, engagement with the content, and understanding of the material presented. The Economic Developers Association of Canada and the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers graciously allowed their contact information to be included at the end of the video for viewers interested in learning more about economic development and certification in economic development.

Video Content: Teaching Economic Development as an Organic System

As a profession, economic development has evolved considerably since its early days focusing on industrial attraction and development. The scope of economic development has expanded to include business development, infrastructure development, labour force development, and more. Because economic development has a wide and complex scope, economic developers may engage in the profession in a nearly unlimited number of ways depending on the needs of the government or organization being served. As such, it can be difficult to teach how those many aspects of economic development interact and contribute to each other. This is because economic development is much more than a range of functions; it is because economic development is range of functions within an ever-changing economic system and should be taught as such.

To illustrate this in an accessible way, the video uses a tree analogy to demonstrate how key components of an economic system interact and support each other. The model was initially developed out the author's personal need to understand how the many aspects of economic development interact with each other, a need to understand the role of an economic developer in communities where conventional approaches to economic development do not apply (ex. investment attraction in remote, northern communities), a need to prioritize and focus on which economic development initiatives to pursue, and a need to clarify which roles the many interested parties play in creating a successful environment for economic development.

Since its development, the tree model has been used and refined for over a decade to teach economic developers and elected officials alike about economic development and the roles that different parties have within the economic development ecosystem. The model has enough flexibility that it can be applied in the smallest of communities or at a national level, in western-style economies, or in indigenous communities and nations. Most importantly, the model allows the users to ask important questions about economic development objectives and the underlying reasons for those objectives.

Using the Video

While the author retains all rights, the video is available at no charge to all economic developers and organizations wishing to educate others about economic development and the role that elected officials and economic developers play in creating an environment for economic development success. The video can be accessed at:

<https://youtu.be/7JliZZliZpU>.

Author biography

Michael Pealow was exposed to the north, from Alaska to Nunavut, at an early age and fell in love with the north and its people. Pursuing that love, he relocated to Fort Liard in the Northwest Territories in January 2002, employed as the Economic Development Officer for Fort Liard, Trout Lake, and Nahanni Butte. In that position, he worked closely with communities and entrepreneurs, and thoroughly enjoyed helping them become self-sufficient.

Relocating to Whitehorse in August 2005, he spent a short time as the Acting Senior Business Development Advisor – Renewable Resources for the Government of Yukon before previous clients asked him to contract his services to them. Pealow left Government of Yukon in June 2006 to establish a business and economic development consulting company. Since then, the company has grown, taking on a wider variety of economic and business development-related projects ranging from community economic development strategies to impact and benefit agreement negotiations for self-governing First Nations. In 2016, he expanded his practice and now works primarily as a social innovation consultant and facilitator.