

# At the Ready

Local Government's Role in  
Economic Development

Matt Horn, Director of Local Government Services  
MRB Group



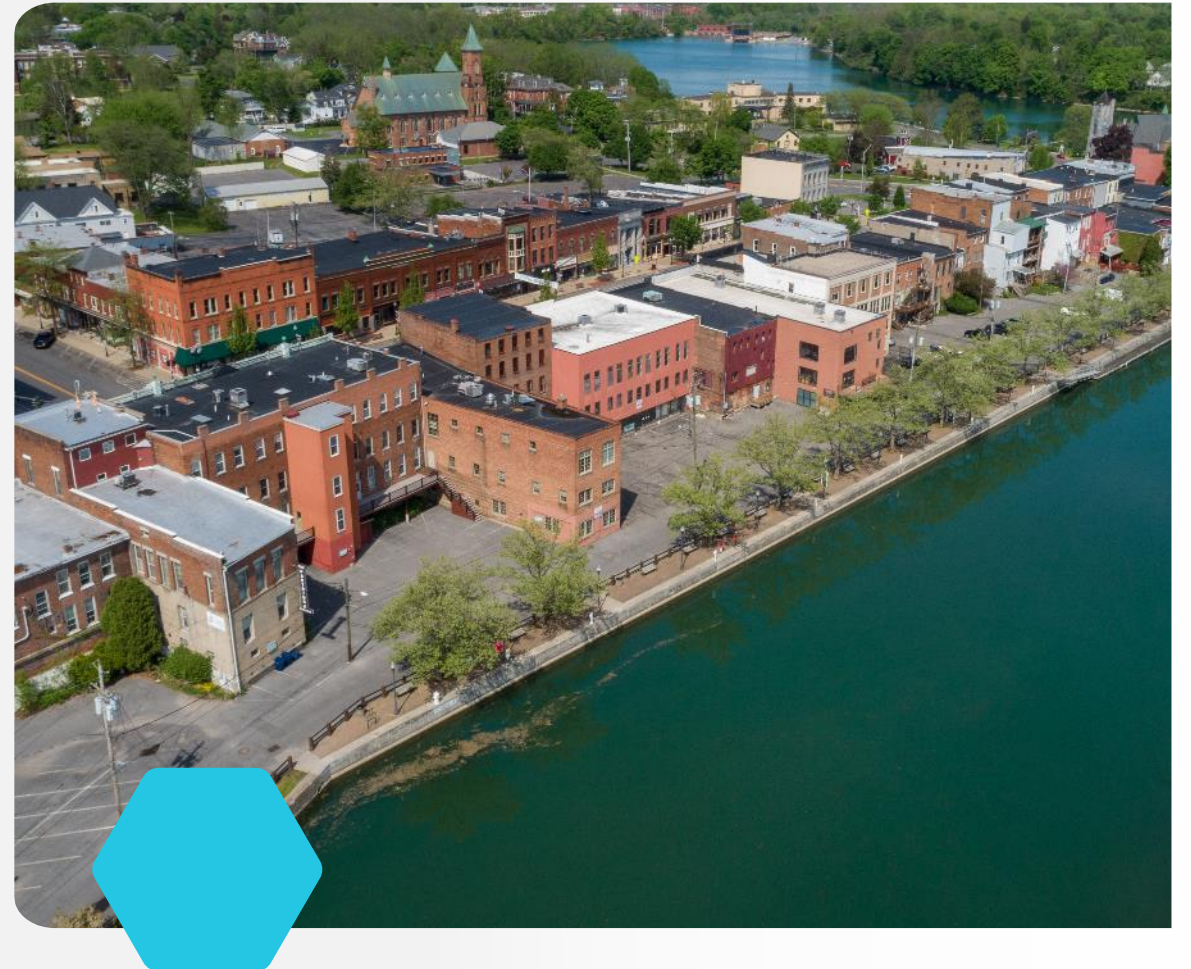
# Control Your Own Destiny

We work primarily in smaller cities, villages, and towns. The overwhelming majority of these communities tend to defer to county, regional, and state leadership when it comes to attracting development.

When you defer to outside partners for development strategy, at best you have influence over what projects come your way. A leadership role ensures that you attract the type of investment that aligns with your community vision.

## A strong economic development program means:

- Growth in your tax base, spreading the cost of development away from residential taxpayers, and more evenly across the community
- Additional resources for quality of life amenities, including parks, streets and sidewalks, libraries, and services
- Orderly growth and development that ensures that your community reflects your vision for the future



# Incremental Changes Add Up

Every project doesn't need to be a multi-million dollar public park or infill development. Local governments can make small, incremental investments over time. If these investments are made in conjunction with an overarching strategy, the effects will multiply with each new project.

The best path forward is typically to identify the next, smallest improvement that will move you forward; then repeat!

## Cities, Towns, and Villages can spur development through:

- Assessing and improving clarity and effectiveness of your zoning and other regulatory codes
- Updating infrastructure to improve reliability and capacity
- Establishing and promoting a clear, unified vision for growth and development
- Promoting available buildings and sites for priority redevelopment







# A Roadmap for the Future of Your Community

# To Get What You Want, Know What You Want

Yogi Berra was once quoted as saying “if you don’t know where you’re going, you’re bound to get there...” This should be the trademarked slogan for municipal planning.

Not always, but many times that a project is questioned, it is because of a muddy or non-existent vision for the community’s future. A developer wouldn’t know better than to bring a misaligned project.

## A strong local government planning foundation includes:

- An understanding of the community’s wishes for future development, and their take on how to get there
- A clear, unified vision statement that defines the ideal condition of the municipality ten to twenty years from now
- A set of planning principles or core values that will be used to score a project’s alignment with the community’s vision





# Engaging the Public

To ensure that you clearly understand the direction your residents want to move in, don't leave it to chance, or to the comments you heard on the election trail.

Develop a robust, diverse public engagement strategy that gets at the heart of the resident and stakeholder view on the future of your community. Leverage both digital and in person strategies for hearing from your constituents.

## Strategies for ensuring strong public involvement include:

- A communitywide survey can be an inexpensive and effective tool for hearing from the community. Be sure to leverage both digital and print distribution
- Host focus groups, roundtables, or community forums to hear directly from residents about their views on opportunities and challenges
- Test out vision and values concepts on residents via in-person or Zoom public input sessions



# A Clear, Unified Vision

Once you've heard directly from your residents, work to synthesize the shared themes into a statement that clearly indicates your hope for the idea community condition, a decade or two out.

This statement will be the basis for all future planning activity, so “getting it right” is critical to development success.

## Vision statements for a community should be:

- Aspirational but authentic—a stretch goal for your community to work toward, but grounded in who you really are
- Short enough to be memorable, but long enough to accurately describe your ideal community into the future
- Branded onto anything that will stand still for longer than 30 seconds—the front door of Town Hall, all meeting agendas, etc.



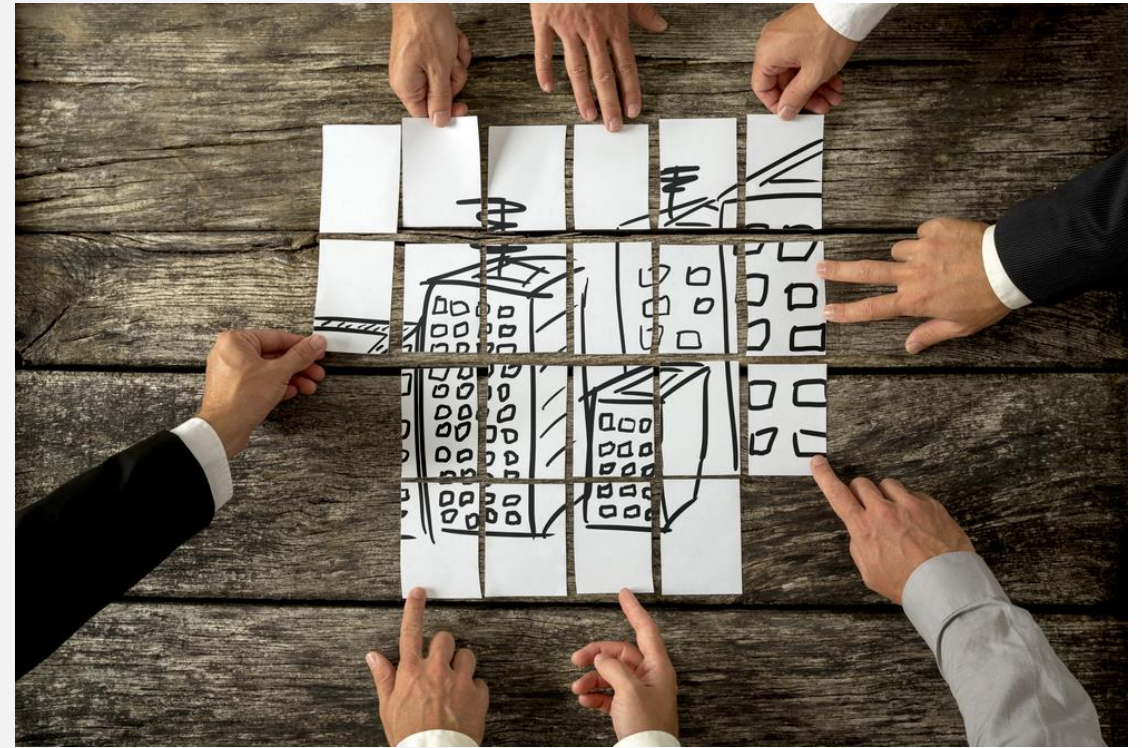
# Measuring Project Alignment

Once you have a unified community vision, it's good policy to create a set of principles or values that define “how” you are going to get there.

A set of core values or planning principles can serve as a filter for future projects. Rather than trying to guess at every kind of project that may come your way, establish boundaries for what you will and will not consider.

## Core values or planning principles should define:

- Traits or qualities of future projects and initiatives that may be presented to your community (i.e. “We value projects and initiatives that preserve our rural character”)
- The elements of your community that must be changed or retained with future projects (i.e. “Our compact Village form will be retained or enhanced”)







# Understanding Your Assets and Challenges

# Establishing Your Readiness Baseline

Now you know the types of projects that you are hoping to attract, and the community character you are seeking to develop or preserve. How well-suited is your community for those targets today?

It's critical to understand your baseline, if only to communicate opportunities and gaps. Investors will be thankful to have data, even if the assets are challenged.

## Assess all of your assets and gaps, including:

- Do your current zoning and development ordinances align with your vision and values?
- With respect to your ideas for growth and revitalization, what buildings and sites can support your vision?
- Is the quality and capacity of water, sewer, roads, broadband, etc. sufficient to serve intended targets?
- Are there environmental assets or challenges that should be protected/addressed?





# Assessing Your Policy Readiness

The area of development most within a municipality's control is the regulatory framework used to guide development. This is an area often overlooked by local government, as regulations have been in place for an extended period of time.

Development ordinances and regulatory frameworks should be considered living documents—updated regularly to reflect your changing community.

## Development regulations should be assessed to determine:

- Alignment of regulatory framework with your community vision. If this has been updated, be sure to audit your regulation to determine congruence
- Clarity of intent and process. The right developer has little concern for what the rules are, just that they are clear and consistent
- Calibration and regular updates of fee schedules to ensure costs are on the right side of the ledger



# Where Can You Direct Development?

Understanding your product inventory is critical when contemplating the future of development in your community. When you've identified priority sites for development/redevelopment, collect data and information that will support development activity.

This can be as complex and detailed as a GIS database, or as simple as a legal pad with lists of buildings and sites. Just having the information is a critical first step.

When evaluating buildings and sites, work to understand:

- Descriptive data about the property—acreage, square footage, topography, condition, etc.
- Access to, and condition of infrastructure—proximity to water, sewer, broadband, etc. Capacity questions, etc.
- Owner's expectation relative to price and future use considerations. Whenever possible, lock in price for future development (option, development agreement, etc.)





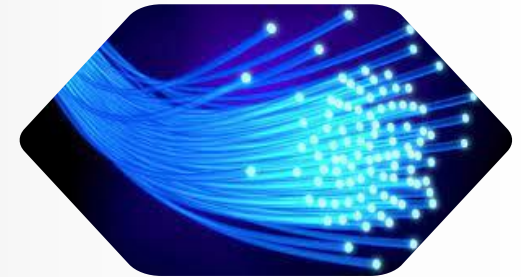
# Understanding Infrastructure Capacity

Infrastructure is critical to every facet of community development. Housing, mixed-use, adaptive re-use, greenfield development, or industrial prospects all have infrastructure requirement to advance projects.

Understanding your infrastructure condition and capacity will assist in developing capital improvement plans, grant applications, and other resource development efforts.

## Evaluate key infrastructure for:

- Alignment with your development goals. Different sectors and project types will have differing infrastructure needs
- Understand condition of all areas of the infrastructure operation—generation/treatment, collection/distribution, etc.
- Understand current capacity and the likely capacity needed to support your development goals
- Develop relationships with non-municipal providers to understand and influence their investment plans



# Environmental Concerns

Whether its remediation of known environmental concerns, or preservation of key environmental assets, you'll want to understand the landscape of areas you are seeking to develop.

In New York State, the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) has a specific standard for all types of redevelopment. Work to align your assessment with this standard.

## Understand environmental impacts, including:

- Where redevelopment activity is targeted, understand any potential legacy issues (spills, brownfield issues, etc.)
- For greenfield development, identify assets that need to be preserved (forests, wetlands, watershed, etc.)
- Document environmental conditions, and be up front with potential investors about the issues at hand







# Developing a Plan to Leverage Assets and Close Gaps

# Invest Where Impact is Greatest

Local governments have limited resources. When gaps exist between your vision and your current condition, identify those projects that can jumpstart momentum. Look for the smallest investment that can create the largest impact.

Momentum creates interest from other funders, including federal and state grant dollars and private sector investment.

## Funding strategies for development readiness include:

- The New York State Consolidated Funding Application (CFA) filters dozens of programs that can facilitate economic development
- PILOT-Increment Financing, Benefit Assessment Districts, and other innovative financing tools can leverage potential new development to enhance infrastructure
- Incentive zoning and other regulatory tools can provide regulatory flexibility in exchange for investment in public amenities (parks, trails, water/sewer, etc.)





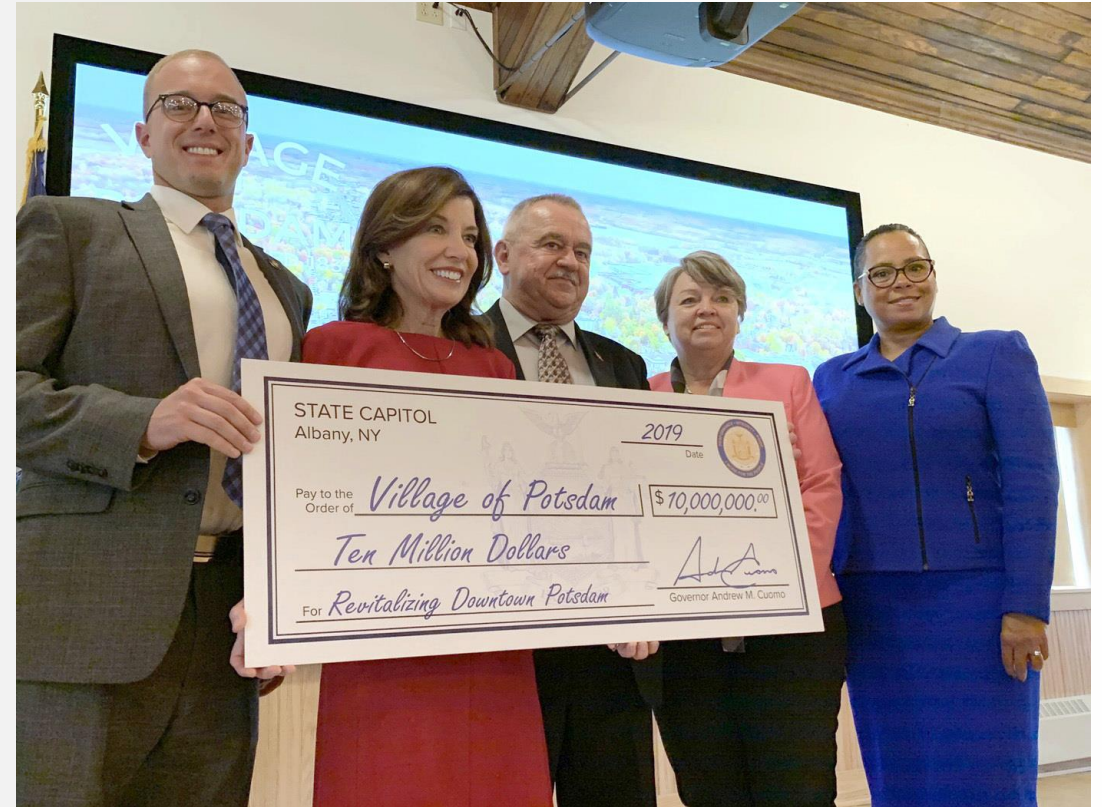
# Attracting State and Federal Investment

New York State has a robust set of grant dollars geared toward community development and infrastructure investment. The federal government has released unprecedented levels of funding for similar priorities.

Don't wait for grant applications to come out before setting your priorities. Leverage your visioning and community assessments to have the data and information needed for successful funding endeavors.

## Prepare for grant applications by:

- Leveraging your vision to effectively scope projects—be clear about what you want and the process you used to develop your priorities
- Scope projects and get good information on costs. Understand the funding formulas for the applications you anticipate preparing, and secure matching funds
- Conduct any public engagement, environmental review, and legislative approvals necessary to be ready when the applications drop



# Growth-Oriented Funding

New development can create funding opportunities to offset development and operational costs. These vehicles require coordination with your partners in neighboring or overlapping jurisdictions, so your role here is to analyze and advocate.

When a new project stands to significantly increase future revenues, growth-oriented funding can leverage new public sector investment

## Tools to consider:

- Tax-Increment/PILOT increment financing allows you to pledge future revenues against borrowing for critical infrastructure. This requires collaboration with the county and school district, but can prove valuable
- Benefit Assessment Districts provide the ability for jurisdictions to levy specific property owners for improvements that directly affect property values
- Local governments should begin conversations with jurisdictional partners and private investors early in the process to determine if these tools are a good fit





# Regulatory Relief

Local governments have significant latitude, when exercised appropriately, to provide for regulatory relief in exchange for publicly available benefits.

Your zoning code can be oriented to maintain community character while providing for relief in exchange for a wide range of public facilities and public benefits. Incentive zoning is a widely used tool that accelerates a community's vision.

## Incentive Zoning can provide benefits including:

- Enhanced density in exchange for providing workforce or affordable housing units among market rate homes and apartments
- Relief from design and other guidelines in exchange for installation (and potentially operations and maintenance) of public facilities including parks, trails, water and sewer infrastructure, etc.







# Telling Your Story

# Letting the World Know You are Ready for Growth

As you build out your economic development program, be sure to communicate to your community (and beyond) about your progress toward your vision and the programs, services, and other opportunities that are built to attract investment.

A diverse communications strategy will rely on old-world and modern tools to tell your story.

## Economic Development communications strategies include:

- Regular communications with traditional media, including announcements regarding new openings, initiatives, etc.
- A dedicated section on your website highlighting development opportunities and announcements
- Social media engagement
- Events celebrating development milestones





# Traditional Media Engagement

Love 'em or not, the traditional media remains a force in communicating with your constituents as well as potential investors. A great relationship with local reporters means access and prompt distribution of positive steps in your economic development program.

It's a two-way street, so always be available to your local reporters as well, and be prepared to answer questions about the good, bad, and ugly.

## Regular communication with the media can include:

- Establish a column in your local paper to showcase the work you're doing. Local outlets are hungry for original content
- Work with local radio stations to get a monthly spot on their morning show to discuss happenings in the community
- Host regular "media hours" where you are available to provide info on anything (especially your wins!)





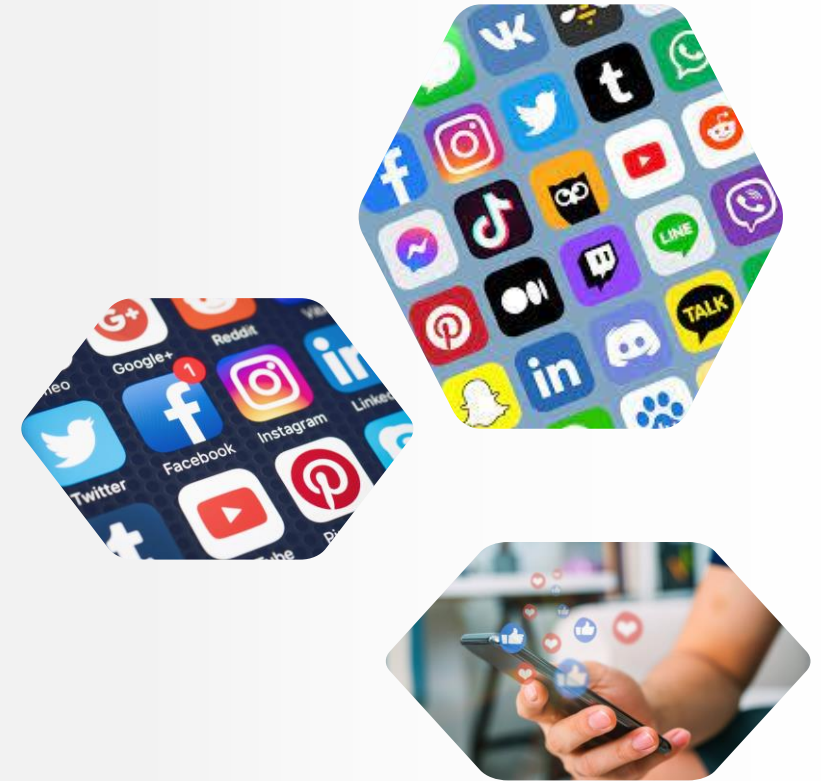
# Digital Media

Digital media, including social media and your community's website are fast, inexpensive, and easy ways to promote opportunities in the community. When done well, you can instantly reach thousands of people with your message.

That said, it's easy to get caught up in the noise, so be sure that your information is current, relevant, and can grab the attention of potential investors.

## Web and Social Media Strategies:

- Ensure that your website has a consolidated section for investors. Link to your available buildings and sites, any incentive programs, development regulations, and announcements
- To get started on social media, select one or two channels that you are comfortable using, and that you are sure you can update at least weekly
- Promote everything you can think of—regulatory changes, new projects, new programs, etc.



# Celebratory and Other Events

Make sure that you take time to celebrate your wins! This not only has the effect of welcoming new businesses and investors to the area, and positively reinforcing the efforts of your team, but it also communicates momentum to the outside world.

Events can be simple or extravagant (watch that budget and municipal gifting provision!). The key is simply to mark the occasion, and show off what you've done.

## Consider hosting events to:

- Celebrate ground breakings and grand openings, no matter what the size of the project—set the cues for momentum
- Celebrate milestones of key local employers—10 years, 50 years, new owners, new leadership, etc.
- Familiarization tours of the community and key projects for decision makers at the local, regional, and state level—showcase available buildings, land, and other community assets





# In Summary

Local governments, particularly smaller cities, villages, and towns, often feel as though they must defer to county, regional, and state leaders to advance development.

While networking resources and leveraging partnerships is key, local government leaders have an opportunity and a duty to ensure that their community is ready for future development.





## Things you can do right now to get started:

- Establish a clear vision for the future. Does it include growth or focus on preservation? What is the balance, and what are we after?
- Assess your assets and gaps with respect to your future priorities. Where must investments be made to accelerate your vision? What funding is available?
- As your readiness grows, ensure that partners at the county, region, state, and private sector understand your vision and your ability to attract projects.





# Thank You

 Matt Horn, Director, Local Government  
 (585) 381-9250  
 [Matt.Horn@mrbgroup.com](mailto:Matt.Horn@mrbgroup.com)  
 [www.mrbgroup.com](http://www.mrbgroup.com)