

Economic Development without Blowing the Budget

Presented by Deb Brown, SaveYour.Town

Don't blow the budget

Economic developers are not often in a position where they have too much money to do the work they need to do. So, what are some tricks for doing economic development on a shoestring budget – especially when you're trying to get multi-year projects off the ground?

Small ideas

Let's begin by looking at some ways to start tiny businesses that don't require huge investments. You can lower the barrier to entry for entrepreneurs, let them test their ideas out and see if they work and create more excitement around new businesses. You want more tiny new business ideas to get tried, so you can find the most promising ones to grow.

Zuni

Our first few ideas are about expanding the places where your tiniest business startups can make sales and grow.

The Pueblo of Zuni, New Mexico, had lots of local people making traditional crafts and arts, but very few usable commercial buildings. To support their artists in growing their businesses, they created an outdoor market area in an empty lot and started a series of arts and crafts market events. The artists reached more customers together at these temporary events than they would have each on their own.

This is easy to start in any town: Take an empty lot. Pick a weekend and have your local crafters, artists and entrepreneurs sell from pop-up booths.

Pop-up a village of shops.

Use inexpensive garden sheds to create a bunch of tiny business spaces. Tionesta PA pop five hundred did just that with a lot that sat empty for 10 years. Now they have a bunch of businesses there, and it's a kind of business incubator. It would work in a roofless building just as well as an empty lot.

Today

This is what it looks like today! There are eleven different sheds with businesses like a doll dressmaker, the local winery on the edge of town, a baker from a nearby town, a guy that makes flies for fishing, an artist, a BBQ place and more. I've been there and it's such a great idea and looks wonderful too.

Business Resource Night

In another example, several partners in Iowa decided we wanted more entrepreneurs, so we held an informal gathering called Entrebash. Round tables were set up so you could visit with the experts personally. The young Hispanic couple you see in the photo met with the Small Business Development Center to work on their business plan and have since started their own greenhouse business.

Art on the walls

Our next idea is business inside a business. This is simple to start. Walk into an existing retail business and ask if they'll dedicate one wall for another local business to decorate with something for sale. This coffee shop in Minnesota asked a local photographer who worked from their home to display their work on an empty wall

Tool Library

Another idea to get more people making things and support an entrepreneurial mindset is a tool library. People can check out tools for woodworking, metal work, sewing machines, even culinary tools, and kitchen equipment. Why not 3D printers, desktop laser etching, or even compact machine tools? Any kind of tool you can think of, this is a good way to get it into the hands of more creative people in your community.

Old Geezers Club

If you take the garage sized spaces, and outfit them with a tool library of donated equipment people can share, you get a low-budget makerspace.

One maker space like this is in Akron, Iowa, and it got started thanks to a group of retired fellows who drink coffee together each morning. The men had woodworking tools cluttering up their garages. They got together and moved their tools into an unused workspace in an empty building. They call their workspace the Old Geezers Club.

They work with the local shop teacher and help students learn the craft of wood working. It's a great place for potential makers to try out the equipment without investing a ton of money into their project.

Crafters

You can boost creativity while building community with co-crafting events like crafternoons, hacker or maker days. We know when you bring people together, magic happens. Why not use an empty space and host local crafters? Or provide crafting opportunities for your visitors?

From tech enthusiasts to crafters, scientists to garage tinkerers, at these kinds of events, novices and experts of all ages come together to show what they've made and share what they're learning.

SSUP

One terrific youth entrepreneurship program happens in Norfolk County, Ontario. They have a summer project for kids in grades 6 through 12, called the Student Start Up project, or SSUP.

Kids can apply for real money to start a real business. They submit a very simple explanation of what business they want to start, following an elementary level “business plan” template. Over the years Norfolk County has offered anywhere from \$50 to \$200 in start-up grants to the kids, depending on how much funding is available.

Then kids run their businesses all summer. And during the summer, Norfolk County holds a special marketplace event, where the young entrepreneurs can feature their businesses in booths and displays. I’m sure people in the county look forward to this every year.

At the end of the summer, kids can earn a small cash bonus by turning in a final report that looks a lot like a simple profit and loss statement.

Downtown

Your downtown is the area of your community that everyone claims as their own. It’s where you gather for events, eat with friends and everyone wants to visit when they come back home. It is the heart of our towns. Many of our independent businesses are there and they support your community projects, school sports, and keep more of the profits in town.

It makes sense to bring people downtown – both visitors and locals. Let’s look at some affordable ways to do that.

Fix it

Fix something broken on an empty building, like a loose board or dangling wire. You can even wash the windows. one city council member in Pullman Washington actually adopted these sad flower boxes with new happy looking plants, and she carried water to the plants all summer long.

Lights

Hang string lights or put out solar lights. There’s not a space in the world that can’t be made better with some string lights. Put them in pocket parks, on trees, on fences, and over outdoor patios.

Involve many people

In our next round of ideas, we’re opening up to even more people participating. Everyone has gifts to share and ways they can play a role in your community. Not everyone can participate in the same way. We have to make the size of what we ask

them to do match what they are capable of and motivated to do. These next ideas are about breaking down the size of what you ask people to do.

Officials

In any organization you are part of, give smaller grant amounts. Give ten \$100 grants for every 1-thousand-dollar grant. Your budget is extra tight anyway, so this is the perfect time to support promising tiny ideas. And if you can't grant money, print certificates, and give public recognition.

Group donations

We know you are resourceful people who take action, because you're here. But you'll talk to some people who say they just don't have time for all this! Great, they can donate money!

Dickinson, North Dakota, has a group of three hundred people who donate \$100 a quarter to be used to better the community. Then the majority in attendance decide who to donate to.

Spearfish, South Dakota, have one hundred women who donate \$100 for similar crowdfunding projects.

Luling, Texas, Chamber of Commerce invited people to bring just \$20, then they all shopped together at a local business. That's called a cash mob, and it's a great way to support a local business.

Katy Kassian told us she has a group of friends in rural North Dakota who each give \$5 then they use the group money to support local businesses. They helped a craft shop purchase an initial round of yarns and helped Stag Valley Homestead purchase some greenhouse items.

Donate stuff

Some folks can't donate money. Great, they can donate stuff!

Encourage people to donate an extra tool they no longer need, as long as it's still usable. You can add it to the tool library.

Ask them to check their shed and garage for paint, lumber, and other materials that could be used in projects around town.

Tell them to look around the garden. Any plants you could dig and divide for flower baskets downtown?

Donate time

If people can't donate stuff or money, you can help them can donate just a little time. You'll find people **don't** have time to serve on a multiyear committee, but they do have a couple of hours to help on a project for one day. So, make sure you ask people for time spent doing, not meeting.

Add Color

People want to live in a place that is beautiful and happy. So next, we're sharing ideas for making your community more accessible, beautiful, involving, and pleasant for all the local people. Long term, it's attractive to visitors and outsiders, too.

Fences

Lots of towns have chain link fence either downtown or along the major traffic routes. It's a natural place to hang some art. Indianola, Iowa, was renovating their courthouse square and there was a big hole in the middle of town.

The county made the best of a messy situation by decorating the construction fencing with colorful banners that promote their County. They opened it up to the community for people to submit or sponsor their own banners. Since it's a multi-year project, they will continue to add more banners over time. They're calling it "Warren County Strong" to reflect the strength that their communities are showing during this tough time!

And it's much more attractive than blank chain link and a busy construction site.

Crack Art

Create some crack art. The arts group in Colfax, Washington, took a look at a crack in the sidewalk, and turned it into a piece of art. They painted the crack to look like the trail left by a clown on a unicycle. They've done several little creative bits like that around town. Tiny fun!

Selfies

Paint or set up something people will want to take their picture with. You can paint or chalk on blank walls.

For something more durable than chalk but less permanent than paint on walls, you can paint selfie backdrops on fabric, cardboard, wood, or anything you can find. Then bring them out for special occasions.

Hashtags

Want people to use your hashtags? Post them! You'll be getting more people to help promote your community.

When I visited Paulding, Ohio, there was a big sign painted on the wall of an empty building. It was advertising a business that was no longer there. Before I left, we covered it by painting their favorite hashtag promoting the town. And no, we did not ask for permission! Lots of people honked and cheered when they drove by, including the county sheriff. This was a good way to make more locals aware of the My Paulding hashtag

Livability

A lot of these ideas are about livability. If you don't have excitement, beauty, and a joyful atmosphere any work you do to create economic development will be fruitless and wasted time. Start small, get people excited and involved and make your town the place people talk about.

The strength of interested people talking to each other becomes even more powerful when people do projects together. They take ownership of the project and look forward to doing more. Community is being created. No matter how small of a step you take, you feel ownership for the project you work on.

The Idea Friendly way makes room for everyone to participate by taking small steps. Trying and testing ideas, enjoying the participation and ownership of many people, and creating your community is economic development.

Placemaking handout

Thank you!