

## Meeting Notes, Columbia Economic Development Corporation Public Meeting

Friday February 26, 2016

Compiled by Victoria Storrs

*These are not minutes, but a memo of ideas and issues generated during the public discussions.*

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Tony Jones, CEDC Chair, welcomed attendees and said “this is a working session” about creating an action plan for the rest of this year and next year – “what ... will do us the most good.”

Mike Tucker, President and CEO, provided an overview of CEDC’s activities and the plans for developing a strategy with public input. He discussed the role of CEDC in the regional economy, opportunities to work closely with neighboring Greene and Berkshire counties, and Columbia County’s unique Creative Economy dimension.

Mary Ellen O’Loughlin, Independent Management Consultant, reviewed the agenda for the Public Meeting, supported by a Powerpoint presentation.

Victoria Storrs, Independent Economic Development and Public Finance Consultant, presented an overview of the County’s demographics, supported by a Powerpoint presentation.

*Mary Ellen O’Loughlin then facilitated the public engagement discussion, writing ideas generated by attendees on large flip-boards. At the end of the discussion she invited attendees who had not had time to ask questions to write them on index cards provided. Flip boards and index cards are transcribed after the notes on the public discussions, which begin below.*

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### Question Period

*Mary Ellen asked the audience if there were any questions about the information that had been shared.*

- Question: What is meant by organizational development capacity?
- Answer: (Mike Tucker) [it is] what can CEDC do within the County, but also what CEDC needs internally, for example continually looking to implement strategies.
- Question: [can speaker] discuss plans, strategies, tax issues to develop business incentives?
- Answer: (Mike Tucker) Business climate is statewide – NY still has a way to go e.g. on energy, wages. This is more a function of chambers of commerce since CEDC cannot

lobby. CEDC needs partners to advocate and to support it. However education, workforce, infrastructure are integrated into CEDC activities.

- Question: Creative Economy data [that was presented]. Was there data at the County level or just the regional information from the Powerpoint slide?
  - Answer: (Mary Ellen O'Loughlin) thinks she can get it but does not have it today. Mike Tucker added that information can be found at [www.UpstateCreative.org](http://www.UpstateCreative.org).
  - Question: (from Todd Erling, Executive Director, Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation) On the Creative economy side; when the Hudson Valley did a study it included food services, agriculture, a sign it is evolving.
  - Answer: (Mary Ellen O'Loughlin) This list [of Creative Economy activities] is what [the Capital Region study] looked into but others could have been looked at such as culinary arts, printing. This study defined a scope for data purposes. It is evolving and craft brewing and agribusiness is part of it.
  - Question: How [are] industries of focus different from/ similar to ones near it. What is different in [counties] south and east?
  - Answer: (Mike Tucker) Manufacturing and tech in our region are component part manufacturers. Top 20 non-government/education/healthcare industries include agribusinesses, tech, arts & culture, manufacturing. Keep in mind most businesses are small. Here they can be a 4-person manufacturer. Need to provide services [for small businesses] such as loans. Don't wait for the "flying roast duck" such as a Global Foundries. Want to work especially with town supervisors on what are the opportunities. Some communities don't want some projects and [CEDC] has to respect that. But where it is desired, [we need to] think through how to make that easier, through a consensus process not project approval followed by litigation, which can ruin the business climate. Dialogues, discussions help get people who are here to expand and attract new businesses. Provide a forum for projects and initiatives.
  - Question: One slide showed poverty measures. What about rural poverty?
  - Answer: (Victoria Storrs) It's something we want to know more about but data on rural poverty at the county level without the urban areas are hard to find. We do know that in Columbia County about 9% of the population receives SNAP (food support) benefits and 3% cash benefits.
  - Answer from the audience: residents can be too proud to accept public benefits.
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## Public Discussion

*Mary Ellen O'Loughlin introduced the next portion of the discussion, asking the audience to present ideas "What are opportunities and threats?" She wrote responses on the flip boards. In many cases the audience specified whether the comment presented a threat or opportunity and that is noted.*

- Threat – demographics. More than half the population above age 40 and 50. Also look at the young – where are they going? How can we keep them?
- Opportunity -- One slide showed the County just behind Taos and Brooklyn in terms of the Creative Economy. Interesting that a large number of Brooklynites are relocating here. CEDC can find out why?
- Demographics – a reason it is difficult to attract/retain young people is they need entry level jobs and affordable housing. During the 2001-2014 national downturn in housing prices, Hudson's actually rose.
- On an earlier slide – workforce readiness challenges. [Speaker] talked to three business people recently. All 3 complained about the inability to get quality employees.
- "Has me wondering about the importance of communication" if we have underemployed workers and businesses looking for good workers, is it a communication problem?
- A dichotomy exists between people who want to move a business here but can't get by the local board, and so move away. [Boards] have to have education! [Speaker] attended a training session at Pace and was sadly disappointed. Was not told enough.
- There is a lot of overreach [by boards.] They are volunteers, untrained, and their reviews are uneven, not strategic or regulated. [Speaker] is on her town's board and a truck stop approval took 2 years. The company was able to get approval for 5 others elsewhere during the same time period.
- Everyone cites the same problem. Taxes, fees, regulations. Taxes come in a variety of ways, hit you blindsides. For example cell phone fees, employee taxes.
- Broadband (*spontaneous audience applause*). [Speaker] runs 2 businesses in spite of the lack. It's an opportunity for CEDC since the big players don't want to come to the County.
- (Michael from CEDC) There is antipathy to the notion of countywide planning.
- Regulations. [Speaker] works at Hudson Opera House. There are 5 funding contracts, mind boggling to get through.
- Competition from outside for example Amazon.com. Wants to see more support for local businesses.
- Education and Communication from CEDC, overcoming stigma, conflict of interest. There is also stigma on the concept of economic development. There is an opportunity to educate.
- Outdated infrastructure such as water/sewer means businesses have been turned down for building/expanding.

- Support local businesses and make the experience comfortable. Need hotels. [Mike Tucker points out there are no “flag” hotels in the County and do residents want one?]
- Broadband is very important to younger people.
- Existing hotels have very few handicapped rooms.
- Opportunity – it’s obvious but it’s a beautiful area. Recreation and nature.
- Creative Economy – build a Creative Industries Council for stop, learn, partner? [Mary Ellen O’Loughlin said] some counties do this.
- Hudson captures (priority?) of what goes on but the County has opportunities in areas not being developed.
- Countywide planning. [Speaker had] recent conversations about the County’s looking at comprehensive plans and zoning for all municipalities, to get a sense of what is wanted, discouraged.
- Lack of zoning, comprehensive planning is discouraging. [Speaker] moved up recently as part of the Creative Economy. These things will help preserve the character. Also, hotels that require 2 nights per visit is hard.
- On hotel and tourism industry – it’s very easy to fill the weekends. Need to attract visitors during the week.
- Tourism – weak spot [that] connects to everything.
- Expand dialogue about smaller communities having comprehensive plans. More expedient might be to look at those who have developed 5-10 year plans, like Philmont. Who is addressing things long term?
- *Mary Ellen O’Loughlin suggested that when the County has a plan then communities can plug in, see how to connect.*
- *Mike Tucker said CEDC is reading through the comprehensive plans.*
- Columbia County lacks a brand, identity. It represents a lot of different things. Challenge to create.
- Pipeline for education to workforce. We lack training opportunities. [Speaker is] running an “Earn to Learn” program. Trying to get kids into college but what can she say about why they should come back? And for students not college-bound she wants to be able to tell them about opportunities here.

*Mary Ellen O’Loughlin introduced the next session topic, Idea Generation. Conversation starters included college grads, young people, second homeowners, tourism to explore more of the County, connections for agribusiness. Participants were invited to share any and all ideas.*

- Young people want rural escape with cultural amenities for the creative mindset
- Young people want/expect broadband.
- Young people want transportation, less likely to own cars.
- All people coming by train need other transportation around the County.
- Tourists could explore more. The northern end of the County, at the main entry points there are no tourist kiosks or offices.

- Bring young people back. [Speaker is] working on environmental/waterfront issues and gets huge interest among young people. Internships are great while they are in school (implied need opportunity after school.)
- Primary – High School to build on. Create a system that is superior because families and younger people will be attracted.
- Need consolidated marketing plan. Talking about how to approach from constant contacts, print media. Create a consistent identity.
- Tourism – potential for more robust system of trails, as elsewhere such as Hudson Valley. Needs money and commitment.
- Young people and college grads have a connection with agriculture. [Speaker] guesses hundreds have come here to support career farming.
- Agribusiness – what does it mean? There is a regulatory hurdle for livestock, dairy. To link with culinary arts requires slaughtering, raw milk processing, which have huge regulatory burdens. It would be helpful to have help in this area.
- Engage young people consistently with social media. Get message out to other colleges, not just in County. [Speaker] is a 2<sup>nd</sup> homeowner and says most 2<sup>nd</sup> homeowners don't want to be involved. It is difficult to engage them.
- Young people – look at services. Everybody thinks about schools but what about library services, which don't have significant support from the municipalities. Even this audience is an aged population. The County is not approaching services in a unified manner.
- Trail system & agribusinesses, craft beverages. Expand that trail for tourists, not just the nature trails.
- School system – would love to see more options such as charter or private schools.
- Underutilizing Hudson River. No way to get there. Need more tourism options. [Speaker] is a bed & breakfast owner; visitors are good for a couple of days then “it gets a little thin.”
- [Speaker is a library board member] library board now meets Saturday mornings, uses Skype, to reach out to 2<sup>nd</sup> homeowners who have deep backgrounds. [Need to] change the way nonprofits govern themselves. There is a reason 2<sup>nd</sup> homeowners moved here and not the Hamptons. Give them more of whatever it is that made them come here.
- Bike trails. Small groups have been working on this for 20 years and they need muscle from big groups, government. Need help getting past National Grid, Amtrak.
- Tourists should explore more. Hudson businesses act as ambassadors. They need information on what's available in the rest of the County. We lean on them rather than having kiosks, etc.
- Housing. [Speaker's] organization develops workforce housing. She sees a lot of wonderful buildings that could be repurposed. Young people might like this vs. a big house with a long driveway.

- Veteran reintegration through working the land is recognized as therapeutic. Organizations are working on this.
- Keep young people. Some are coming. Why and how to retain them? Study “Soul of the Community” by the Knight Foundation <http://knightfoundation.org/sotc/>. Quality of life could be redefined as “Character of life.” In urban areas people are driven by Character of Life. When they get here they need to have jobs, then housing in line with the employment.
- Veterans – advantage to hiring. Trained, skilled, leadership abilities.
- College grads – figure out before they leave. Integrate to send them off knowing what is here to bring them back.
- Transportation.
- [Speaker identifies as a young person just here from NYC] (wants) affordable housing with character. Somewhere to get dinner after 8pm. Seeing people on the street on a Saturday.
- What about a bus, like the Megabus?
- Car rental business near train station? Zipcar is a model.
- [Sarah from CEDC Board] Don’t forget the population already here. She has been here for 15 years. People are priced out of housing – everyone needs the same thing.
- Transportation – if you come here for a late dinner you can’t get a train back to NYC.
- What is meant by connecting to agribusinesses? [Mike Tucker explains it is deliberately broad and can include tours of farms, manufacturers, education, employment, markets.]
- A commercial kitchen would be an enormous benefit.
- Like to encourage people from Nantucket because of the history of Hudson. People from the Netherlands because of the Dutch heritage especially in Claverack which is flat and wet and has attracted farmers from the Netherlands. Holland, MI has a fantastic connection with Netherlands businesses, specialties in Dutch goods and landscaping. Sister community connections.
- [Speaker is] 50 year full-time resident. Ironic to her that wonderful factory buildings are now galleries or performance spaces but small, clean, light industry should use these buildings also. Need culture but also need those jobs.
- Marketing – need better signage and some level of coherence in messaging.
- Young people – need housing/hostels, a cheap way for the interns who come especially for agricultural work.
- Companies who need to outsource part of their business here, like Etsy. Sell County as a place to hold a conference that doesn’t require a big hotel.
- Message here is we can have economic development but that’s not what you hear at town boards. Need people on those boards (who support economic development.)
- Concurrence with marketing coherence.

*Mike Tucker introduced Assemblywoman Didi Barrett.*

Assemblywoman Barrett: You're the activists – run for something! [I] run a subcommittee on [cultural] tourism so the subject is near and dear. We're all on the same page. Please don't hesitate to call. Ensure we have a sustainable community economically and environmentally.

*Mike Tucker then thanked Jim Campion of Columbia-Greene Community College, the CEDC Board, and the Columbia County Board of Supervisors.*

*Mary Ellen O'Loughlin began her wrap-up comments.* The next steps are the distribution of a survey [possibly] within the next week, presenting a report to the public April 19<sup>th</sup>, and a new CEDC President June 1<sup>st</sup>.

Tony Jones delivered more thanks to attendees. He said this was immensely helpful for specifics and process and he looks forward to more engagement.

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### **Comments/Questions from Index Cards**

- External threats: NIMBYs and BANANAs (Not in my backyard, Build absolutely nothing anywhere near anybody); lack of knowledge about what economic development is; lack of public support for economic development.
- Look at Berkshires Visitors' Bureau [www.IBerkshires.com](http://www.IBerkshires.com) as a model for PR for the County.
- Threat: Education problems obstruct business growth:
  - Lack of well-educated potential employees
  - Unattractive local education opportunities for children of new residents (business owners and managers)
  - Lack of appropriate training for non-college bound kids.
- Transportation: from Columbia County to anywhere other than Hudson-Albany is limited to taxi. Need comprehensive transportation plan to study travel patterns and design systems to support those needs.
- Marketing Mission and Activities to desired audience. How do you reach out and motivate the workforce, businesses owners and leaders to look to the CEDC as a resource?
- Broadband is the glue that will bring all the County together. Creative artists can't work without broadband. Young people will stay. More businesses will open. Unless broadband comes to ALL the County we will remain a sleepy place.
- Lack of broadband.

- Lack of transportation.
- Engage 2<sup>nd</sup> homeowners
  - Improve/increase opportunities for them to fulfill the reason they move here instead of to Hamptons – rural, culture, low-key social affairs, gardening???
  - Open opportunities for them to participate in local cultural organizations. Have board meetings on weekends and use videoconferencing.
- Agribusiness
  - Commercial kitchen.
  - Agribusiness organization – a group to share experiences, knowledge, network.
- The present governmental structures and boundaries in the County limits our economic development. Too decentralized. No county executive.
- CEDC needs to assist local economic development initiatives.

## Notes from Flip Books – Captured by Mary Ellen O’Loughlin

### Book 1

- Demographic - % of those above 40 and 50 years important to consider. Where are young people going and how to keep them?
- Opportunity – Brooklynites moving to area. Why and how?
- Threat – Availability of affordable housing for younger demographic.
- Broadband – lack of is a threat, creating it an opportunity.
- Countywide planning – antithesis.
- Regulatory process for approval.
- Outside large businesses. (Outside County)
- Education/Communication – overcome stigma of conflict of interest, ethics [about CEDC efforts]
- Reaction to “big bad EDC” opportunity to educate on economic development.
- Infrastructure – businesses turned down because not appropriate – energy, water, etc.
- Lack of hotel beds, especially with handicap access.
- Broadband is an opportunity to attract/keep young people here.
- Opportunity – beautiful natural area.
- Weekday stays for hospitality.
- Bring back internships, what other ways to get opportunity to show around.
- Young/college: educational system – need to have quality education.
- Consolidated marketing plan for County = one voice for promotions outside of County.
- Tourism – trail, biking, hiking, etc. Should have more.
- Young/college – draw is agribusiness and agriculture.
- Agribusinesses –regulation of livestock, dairy (threat). Culinary arts is present link with farming.

- Marketing – social media, consistent message.
- Young people come back – what services do they look for? Education, libraries.
- Young people – cheaper transportation from NYC to here.
- Zipcar at train station?
- People here? Came 15 years ago. Affordable housing (for everyone.)
- Late dinner – no opportunity b/c no late train to NYC.
- Tourism – reach Nantucket, Dutch, focus on history, promote effectively, sister connection.
- Better County signage, better cohesive messaging.
- Hotel – businesses can outsource and hold conferences.

## Book 2

- Workforce readiness – don't have sufficient skilled and ready.
- Communication – is lack a threat or cause or opportunity?
- Local boards – threat.
  - Overreach
  - Business complexity
  - Reviews uneven and local, not strategic
  - Education of local board members (needed)
- Threat – taxes, fees, etc. are a lot.
- Opportunity – Creative Economy, build and create a council.
- Hudson – cost of housing, other properties and communities.
- Strategic countywide perspective (inhibited) by lack of comprehensive planning.
- Tourism opportunities, smaller communities what's going on in them?
- Lack of a brand/identity.
- Pipeline, education to workforce.
- Opportunity for internships.
- Creative economy and Brooklyn/Columbia County. How to exploit? Welcoming rural.
- Train – (tourists) locked into Hudson without transportation.
- Tourists explore more – info centers, kiosks?
- Craft beverage trail, food trail, connect the dots for people.
- More school options – private school, charter school.
- Hudson river underutilized. Can't even get a canoe or kayak.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> homeowners – examine schedule (of community participation) and nonprofits.
  - Meetings on Saturday mornings
  - Skype
- Trail (bike) volunteers but no muscle to make this a priority.
- Tourists – Hudson businesses act as ambassadors for rest of County. Get information and materials to them.

- Housing – repurposing (older buildings, interesting buildings) opportunity for the young.
- Working the land.
- Bring/retain the young. How? “Soul of Community” quality of life issue, “Character of Life.” Need to have jobs, a role for the Creative Economy?
- Young people – hire veterans (skills)
- Public transportation.
- Affordable housing with character, street life, food after 8pm.
- Factory buildings – small, clean industry, manufacturing.
- Local boards – consistent message and priorities.

*End of notes on discussion, and notecard and flip book transcription.*