Panelists link comprehensive plan, economic competitiveness

The legal reason why communities in the Commonwealth must craft comprehensive plans is pretty well stated in the Kentucky Revised Statutes… to “serve as a guide for public and private actions and decisions to assure the development of public and private property in the most appropriate relationships.” Panelists at a recent Direction 2030 forum added another and perhaps even more compelling reason for them—economic competitiveness.

Adam Caswell, Vice President of Public Affairs at the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and past president of Legacy, a Northern Kentucky organization for young professionals, commented during the proceedings that “the comprehensive plan plays an important role in setting the path for the area’s future. Direction 2030 can go a long way towards helping the region move forward and I’m excited to be part of it.”

In addition to Caswell, panelists for the July 25 forum spoke to various aspects of the local economy and how quality of life issues play a major role in the ongoing competition for jobs and economic security. Those included on the panel were:
- Andrew Aiello, General Manager of the Transit Authority of Northern Kentucky;
- Douglas Hinger, President of Great Traditions Homes;
- Bill Scheyer, President of Vision 2015;
- Jeanne Schroer, Executive Director of the Catalytic Development Funding Corp. of Northern Kentucky;
- Dan Tobergte, President and CEO of Northern Kentucky Tri-ED; and
- Janet Harrah, Senior Director of the Center for Economic Analysis and Development at NKU.

The forum was facilitated by Della Rucker, AICP, Principal at Wise Economy Workshop who has over 20 years’ experience in planning and economic development.

Janet Harrah opened the session with a description of Northern Kentucky’s competition in the marketplace for jobs. To illustrate her point, she described our primary competitive peer regions for people and jobs as Austin, Charlotte, Cleveland, Columbus, Denver, Indianapolis, Louisville, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Raleigh, and St. Louis. She asserted that metropolitan areas are important because “labor markets do not observe state lines or other governmental boundaries.”

Harrah argued that one of the key criteria in the jobs competition is talent. Her assessment suggested that if communities cannot provide needed workers, businesses will move to other metro areas that can. She emphasized that an educated workforce was key to attracting and retaining businesses and that quality of life was highly desirable to these educated workers. Harrah concluded her presentation by saying Northern Kentucky is not growing as fast as its competitors and ranks tenth currently out of the noted 12 markets.

Della Rucker moderated a panel discussion that followed. She began by asking members of the panel for the key factors that impact our ability to compete economically.
Dan Tobergte responded that highway accessibility is a key to attracting new industries and that historically most development has occurred between the Mount Zion and Richwood exits along I-71/75. He continued that those two exits in Boone County affect Kenton County, pointing to the importance of a metro-level approach.

Jeanne Schroer responded by stating a high quality of life in a visually-attractive community with a wealth of housing options is critical for the area to compete. Douglas Hinger suggested that if we are planning for the next 20 years, the desires of consumers 20 years out should be a high priority. He described research that shows approximately 75 percent of the millennial generation desires urban living, a market that is currently underserved in the Cincinnati region.

Harrah added “the thing that’s most notable to me is that each panelist touched on something different. We talked about transportation, housing, education, and the cost of doing business; I think that highlights something important. There’s a reason we call it a comprehensive plan. You can’t focus on just one or two areas and have an effective economy. It truly is a system. When we think about how we’ll be preparing our communities to compete going forward, we have to think about the full spectrum of things that impact our ability to compete for talent and for jobs. It’s not just one or two things.”

Rucker then asked panelists what communities need to offer to get potential businesses to look at them more closely.

Bill Scheyer responded by saying a community has to be able to attract and retain young professionals who traditionally look for areas with a significant number of amenities including active lifestyle options. He pointed to the Licking River Greenway initiative as a good start and indicated more would be needed to help make the area economically competitive.

Adam Caswell agreed and stated young professionals today are choosing where they want to live first and then looking for a job, the direct opposite of the traditional model where jobs are obtained first. He stated these individuals want to live where there is a high quality of life and desire affordable urban housing options. He suggested that million dollar condos downtown are great but we also need affordable options for these young professionals.

Andrew Aiello affirmed the sentiments about young professionals and stated that TANK is also noticing changes in preferences. He pointed to a study conducted by the University of Michigan Transportation Institute that reported 46 percent of 16-year-olds in 1983 had their driver’s licenses. The same study reports that only 31 percent of today’s 16-year-olds have obtained their licenses.

He also added, “We’re looking at the younger generation to try and get a feel for what their preferences are because they’re going to dictate the work that we do down the road. The general preference for younger folks to drive is declining. What does that mean for TANK and the larger group when we talk about development?”

He suggested that this reduction and the trend it illustrates would be a significant need to be addressed through planning efforts like Direction 2030.

Rucker then entertained questions from the audience ranging from how changes in utility rates (electric, water, and sewer) might affect companies decisions to stay or locate here and what potential hurdles arise from fragmented government structures.

The forum concluded with the panelists responding to the audience’s questions and providing recommendations for issues that should be addressed in the new Kenton County comprehensive plan. Those recommendations included addressing changing demographics, examining walkability, and reconsidering where infrastructure investments should be made (i.e. new construction or taking care of what already exists).

“This forum provided one of the best illustrations of how comprehensive plans impact peoples’ lives on an everyday basis,” said Dennis Gordon, FAICP, executive director. “The 70+ audience members
complimented the panelists for showing why comprehensive plans are so important and why citizens should get involved in the process. It's not too late…"

Results from this forum and prior Direction 2030 meetings will be incorporated as the plan moves forward to the crafting of goals and objectives. A capstone meeting will be held in late October. More information is available at the Direction 2030 website.

Video of the entire economic competitiveness forum is available courtesy of the Telecommunications Board of Northern Kentucky. Click here to access video from the public forum.

Direction 2030: Your Voice, Your Choice is a community planning initiative of the Kenton County Planning Commission centered on public input—your ideas and your opinions. Its goal is to help create a new citizen-based 20-year comprehensive plan for Kenton County.