

Mar/11 **Insights From a Site Selector**

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In continuing our series of posts on economic development, we felt that it would be valuable to explore the approach that site selection professionals use in helping their clients find the best places to locate new facilities. With that in mind, I approached Dr. C. R. "Buzz" Canup, founder and president of the site selection and community consulting firm *Canup & Associates*, and asked for some insights into how the process of choosing a community for a new enterprise really works. While much of the process is just as you might suspect, the sequence of the evaluation, the role of incentives, and the places where communities fall short might surprise you.

"One of the key things communities need to understand is that every site location study really is a custom study for a specific client based on the specific project requirements," Dr. Canup began. "The process we go through is to help our client define the criteria of the project, and then that criteria drives where we search, how we search, what we look at, how we evaluate it, and how communities stack up against each other."



Meeting these criteria is the first hurdle for a community to clear in order to be in the running, and while communities can prepare for some, others are more innate and are based on the geographic location.

"Typically, the driving factors relative to the project requirements start off with labor, meaning labor availability, quality, trainability, and productivity. There are a whole lot of different elements of labor that we look at there," Canup continued. "If it's a transportation-sensitive project, logistics typically will drive the project, and that may relate to proximity to interstates, ports, or airports. In some cases, the project criteria is specifically related to customer proximity. We go through a whole series of processes like that – screening, analyzing, and evaluating – and eventually we qualify specific geographical areas that meet those criteria and eliminate all those areas that don't."

Once this first hurdle is cleared, the communities identified will enter the RFP stage where the prospect sends out requests for proposals specific to the project. Arrival of an RFP means that the community has been pre-qualified for the project, yet many communities fail to put their best foot forward at this point.

"The most important thing that communities can do at that point is to be prepared to respond to the RFP with strong information and data relative to the community, region, and assets such as raw land, existing buildings, or whatever the particular project is looking at. That's where most communities fall short – they're just not prepared for the opportunity that knocks on the door.

"Preparedness also relates to your allies, support teams, and having your support systems tuned up to respond to those opportunities, because the next step after you've passed over this second hurdle is that you're likely to get a community visit. A lot of times the community visit is the "go / no-go" type of deal where the community is either ready with the information and has all of the people lined up

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that the prospect needs to meet with, or they drop the ball. It's unfortunate, but that happens in some cases where they've done everything really well up to that point and then all of a sudden they can't get the right people to the table at the right point in time, so they get eliminated."

And what about incentives? Despite what you might think, incentives aren't what gets a community into the running for a project, but are actually saved as a factor for the final decision once the search is near it's conclusion.

"Candidly, I've had a few clients, but very few, who started off with part of the project criteria targeting specific incentives," Canup said. "The best prospects are those who identify regions and communities that will work in the absence of incentives, and then the incentives become discriminators between the locations that you know are going to work. We always start off asking about incentives that are available and how they are applied, but it's generally not until we get down to a short list of maybe three or four communities that we really drill down into the incentive side of the business. Every one of those communities could work and the client can't make a bad decision relative to where they will place the operation, so at that point in time incentives really can be the deal maker or deal breaker. If a community gets to the shortlist stage, which is really the third hurdle, that's when they need to put their best effort on the table."

Along with site selection consulting work for major global corporations, Canup & Associates also does reverse consulting and presentations to help communities prepare themselves for new opportunities. In our next post, we'll share Dr. Canup's comments on incentives, investment, and site planning as it relates to being prepared.

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