

The Mt. Juliet Way:

Elevating Customer Service as a

Catalyst for Economic Growth

by **Jennifer Hamblen**

City of Mt. Juliet, Director of Development Services and Economic Development

Submitted to Dr. Dave Kolzow

Project Mentor: GC Hixon, CeCD

Fall 2025

Introduction

Economic development success is often measured by the number of site plans approved, ribbon cuttings held, or incentives awarded. However, behind every successful project is something far more difficult to quantify but arguably more critical: service. In Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, customer service is not just a value, it's a strategy. This Capstone Project, titled *The Mt. Juliet Way: Elevating Customer Service as a Catalyst for Economic Growth*, explores how exceptional customer service practices in local government, particularly in planning, permitting, community engagement and business outreach can drive economic development in measurable and immeasurable ways.

The purpose of this report is to analyze the critical role customer service plays in economic and community development using the City of Mt. Juliet as a case study. Drawing on coursework from the Tennessee Certified Economic Development (TCED) program, this project connects theoretical principles with real world application, emphasizing the value of concierge style service, relationship building, and responsiveness to business needs. Drawing on community feedback, firsthand quotes from business owners, stakeholders, and developers as well as insights from peer communities, this report offers both a descriptive and comparative analysis of Mt. Juliet's customer service model.

The significance of this topic is especially relevant in rapidly growing communities like Mt. Juliet, where balancing expansion with service quality can either strengthen or strain economic success.

As commercial developer Mike Murphy noted:

“Growth is always a two-edged sword...I think the city is doing a good job understanding the balance between growth and inactivity by encouraging development at key commercial roads and intersections”

Mandy White, instructor of the *TN Marketing and Attraction* course, stressed that getting to know your client and tailoring your support to their individual needs is what separates high-performing cities from the rest. Her consistent message that “customer service is number one” has shaped this report’s focus and mirrors Mt. Juliet’s real-world approach to business engagement.

While this report emphasizes service over subsidies, it’s important to acknowledge the foundational role that business plays in funding city operations. With one of the lowest property tax rates in the region, the City of Mt. Juliet relies heavily on sale tax revenue to fund vital services like public safety, parks, and infrastructure. This fiscal model reinforces the city’s core belief that “A business’s success is the city’s success”. Every new storefront, restaurant, and commercial project contributes directly to Mt. Juliet’s quality of life, making strong partnerships with the business community not just smart policy, but essential to the city’s sustainability.

By examining customer service through the lens of economic development, this project seeks to highlight what is often the missing link in successful project implementation: not just providing a service but building lasting relationships that support a healthy economic ecosystem.

Background

The City of Mt. Juliet, often referred to as the “City Between the Lakes”, is experiencing one of the most significant growth periods in its history. Nestled just east of Nashville, Mt. Juliet

has become one of the most desirable places to live and do business in the region. With their high quality of life, strong public school system, robust infrastructure, and proximity to the Nashville Metropolitan Area, the city has seen its population, household income, and commercial development surge over the last decade.

In response to this exponential growth and increasing development activity, Mt. Juliet's organizational structure has evolved to streamline services and enhance responsiveness, the City of Mt. Juliet recently reorganized its development services by physically relocating the Director of Development & Economic Development and the Planning Department into a shared space with Building Codes and Public Works & Engineering. This strategic move not only centralized operations but also brought the oversight of both Planning/Zoning and the Building under one unified leadership structure.

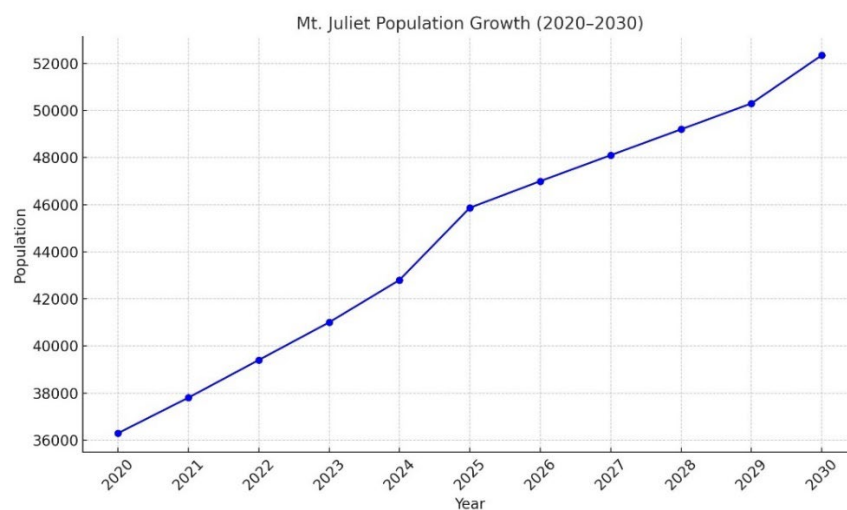
The result is a true “one-stop shop” for development, where permitting, infrastructure coordination, planning, and economic development now operate side by side. This consolidation has significantly improved communication, increased transparency, and enhanced consistency in service delivery. Developers, business owners, engineers, and community members alike now benefit from faster response times, clearer processes, and a more coordinated development experience. Having the Economic Development professional strategically embedded within Mt. Juliet's core development team has proven to be a valuable and a competitive advantage.

In the *TN Managing Economic Development* course, Kendrick Curtis of the Middle Tennessee Industrial Development Association emphasized the “economic development is a team sport”, a principle Mt. Juliet has brought to life by co-locating key departments under one roof. This internal collaboration ensures not only efficiency but also unmatched responsiveness, strengthening the city's ability to serve developers and entrepreneurs alike.

This transformation in service delivery is vital because Mt. Juliet is not just growing, it's thriving. But that growth brings complexity. New infrastructure demands, rising expectations from both national brands and local businesses, and the need for personalized attention in a high-volume environment mean that customer service must be intentional, strategic and perpetual. Providing support for commercial permitting, small business retention, and efficient plan review has become both a challenge and an opportunity.

Mt. Juliet's Population Growth

Figure 1: Mt. Juliet's projected population is expected to increase from 45,868 in 2025 to 52,348 in 2030 growing by approximately 3.5 residents per day.



Since 2020, the City of Mt. Juliet has experienced remarkable population growth. As illustrated in Figure 1, the population has steadily increased from 36,291 in 2020 to an estimated 45,868 in 2025. By 2030 projections place the population over 52,000, representing an increase of more than 15,000 residents in just two decades. This rapid growth reinforces the critical need for high level customer service to meet the demands of incoming residents, businesses and developers. The expansion of development services, particularly the consolidation of key

departments into a one-stop shop strategically positions the city to manage its rapid growth more effectively. This model not only streamlines a business-friendly environment, but it remains a non-negotiable priority for the city.

Why Customer Service Matters in the Face of Growth

Mt. Juliet's development boom is more than a headline; it is a reality that manifests daily in the form of site plans, building permits, zoning requests, inspections, and utility coordination. As rooftops rise and new businesses open their doors, the demand on municipal services has expanded in lockstep.

Each new business or residential development introduces a web of needs: road infrastructure, water and sewer coordination, fire access, ADA compliance, community engagement, and individualized support, just to name a few. In this increasingly complex environment, success isn't only measured by how fast a permit is issued, but how well a city communicates, anticipates and supports those navigating the process.

The key to Mt. Juliet's economic development success? Proactive, personalized customer service. At its best, the public sector mirrors private-sector concierge models, anticipating needs, building trust, and removing roadblocks. But what truly sets Mt. Juliet apart is its belief that economic development is not transactional, it's relational.

The team lives this out daily. Not just processing permits but walking alongside business owners every step of the way. From pairing new prospects with developers and property owners to coordinating with architects and engineers, they ensure that every detail is addressed. The city will regularly accompany business owners to onsite inspections with the Fire Marshal, Building Officials, and the Health Department, work with our internal departments to fast-track permitting

when possible, and proudly host ribbon cuttings, grand openings, and groundbreakings to celebrate milestones along the way.

But the city doesn't leave after the ribbon is cut. In many ways, that's when the real relationship begins. The team will check in on the business, their families, support their milestones, and celebrate their wins as if they are family, because over time, that's exactly what many of them become. That relationship building is what makes Mt. Juliet not only business-friendly but truly business-connected.

Another powerful example of how the city leverages relationships is its intentional effort to connect local high schools with local restaurants for pre-game meals. These partnerships not only provide meaningful exposure for small businesses but also foster community pride and goodwill that extend far beyond game night. As Mt. Juliet High School Athletic Director, Michael Berardi recently provided feedback to a restaurant participant *"....thank you...the chicken was a huge hit. Don't be surprised to get a few visits from some Bears in the near future!"*.

These real-world connections illustrate how Mt. Juliet's relationship-driven approach isn't just a philosophy, it's a practice that's felt across all corners of the community, from schools to storefronts.

"As a small business in Mt. Juliet, we've experienced firsthand how the city's dedication to customer service makes a difference" shared Carmelita Stafford, co-owner of Sister's WhimZy. *"We've always felt supported-from guidance on permits to handling challenging issues like COVID protocols to road closures. That kind of care show how important ongoing relationships are to economic development"*

This spirit of support isn't limited to small businesses, it extends to developers and investors alike, creating a culture of confidence that benefits the entire economic ecosystem.

“As someone who works closely with a wide range of businesses, I’ve seen firsthand how the City of Mt. Juliet takes care of people”, said Mark McDonald, local developer and co-owner of Oldacre McDonald. *“It’s not just about getting through permitting; it’s about building confidence in the process. That means a lot to investors, tenants, and clients. The city staff are responsive, solutions-focused, and always looking for a way to yes. That culture is a real asset to Mt. Juliet’s future”.*

When developers feel supported, businesses feel heard, and residents see intentionality in every interaction, they respond in kind, with investment, advocacy and loyalty. Mt. Juliet has built an economic success framework centered around white-glove, red carpet service.

Comparative Evaluation: How Mt. Juliet Stands Apart

To better understand the value of Mt. Juliet’s service-driven model, it’s helpful to examine how peer cities across Tennessee and beyond approach economic development. Many municipalities still operate in a siloed structure, where permitting, planning, and inspections are separated by departments, locations, and communication gaps. While these cities may offer incentives or structured business programs, they often lack the personalized, real-time responsiveness that Mt. Juliet provides. During the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) coursework, instructors such as Mo Collins, Mandy White, Kendrick Curtis, and Laith Wardi emphasized the importance of relationship building, entrepreneurship, and proactive retention as a foundation to long-term success.

Notably:

- Mandy White emphasized knowing your client and tailoring service to their unique needs is what sets great cities apart, this echoed Mt. Juliet's approach perfectly.
- Laith Ward described customer service as the "lifeboat" of business retention, a sentiment visible in Mt. Juliet's constant follow-ups, onsite visits and day-or-night availability for developers.
- Kendrick Curtis called economic development a "team sport" and Mt. Juliet exemplifies this by uniting Planning, Codes, Public Works, and ECD under one roof, a true team approach.
- Mo Collins' teachings on entrepreneurship stressed support mechanisms, many of which Mt. Juliet has embodied through incubation support, marketing exposure, and community partnerships.

Compared to cities that rely on incentives or formal programming, Mt. Juliet offers something harder to replicate: a reputation for exceptional service and long-standing trust among the development and business community.

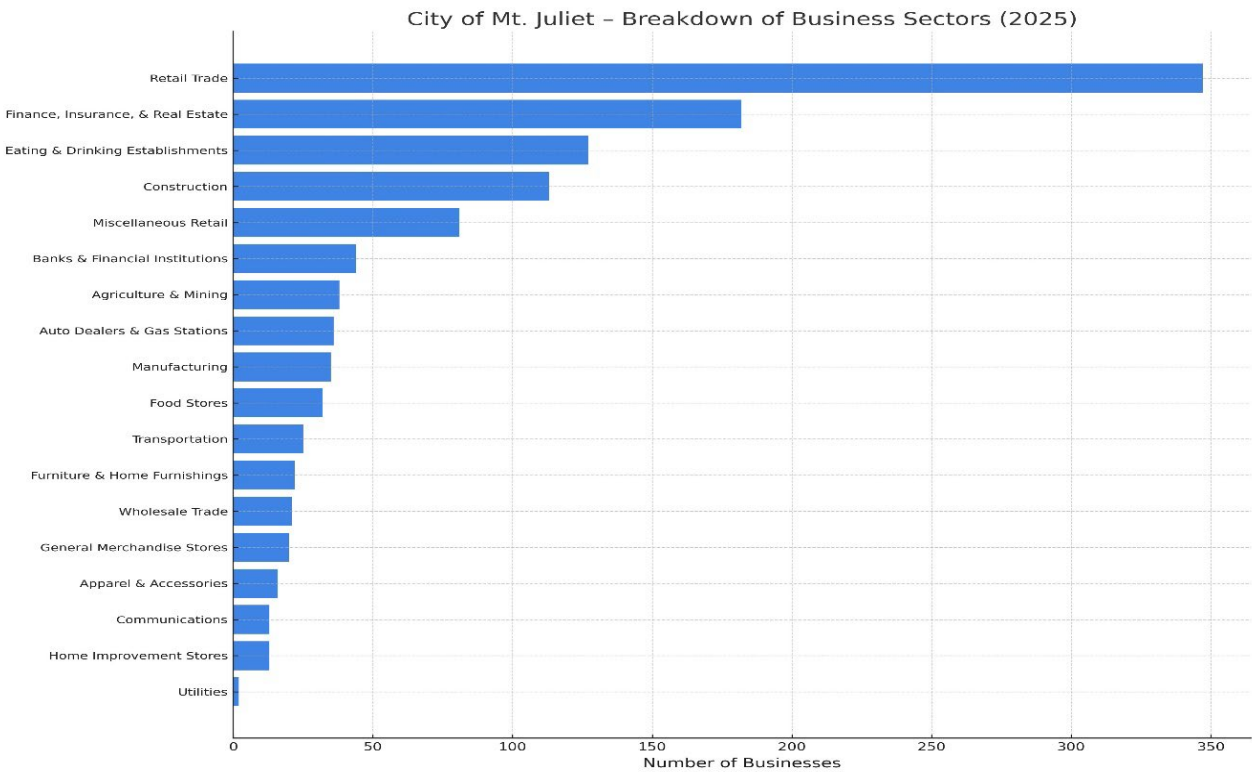
Breakdown of Business Sectors: Interpretation and Strategic Implications

A thriving economic ecosystem requires not just growth in population but a diverse and resilient mix of businesses. As of 2025, the City of Mt. Juliet is home to approximately 1,416 businesses, ranging from small family-owned operations to national franchises and professional service providers. This diversity strengthens the local economy, supports job creation, and enhances the quality of life for residents.

Mt. Juliet’s commitment to fostering a pro-business environment has created a fertile ground for this economic diversity to flourish. Through intentional planning, streamlined development services, and a customer-first mindset, the city positioned itself as a magnet for a wide array of industries. This diversity not only reflects Mt. Juliet’s attractiveness as a destination for investment but also reinforces its resilience in the face of economic shifts.

Below is a summary of Mt. Juliet’s Business landscape by sector, illustrating the distribution of businesses that make up the city’s commercial environment.

2025 Business Count by Sector in Mt. Juliet, TN



Interpretation

Despite Mt. Juliet's explosive growth and appeal as a commercial destination, the City has remained intentional in limiting the use of financial incentives, choosing instead to offer a high-touch concierge-style service model that prioritizes relationships, responsiveness, and a long-term partnership. Since its incorporation in 1972, Mt. Juliet has extended just one formal incentive package to Costco Wholesale Corporation, a major retail anchor whose presence has significantly boosted regional traffic and sales tax revenue.

This exceptional restraint emphasizes the strength and success of Mt. Juliet's concierge-style economic development model, where relationships, responsiveness, and a customer-first attitude serve as true differentiators. Rather than relying on tax abatements or land deals, Mt. Juliet has cultivated a reputation for service, an approach that has resonated with both small business owners and large-scale developers alike.

“Working with the City of Mt. Juliet has been a completely different experience than with other municipalities. This is all thanks to the work provided by the ECD team, they bring a true concierge approach to economic development. They go above and beyond just processing permits or checking boxes. They actively look for ways to make the process smoother, help solve problems behind the scenes and remains engaged well after the ribbon cutting to ensure businesses feel supported long term. That level of customer service and relationship building is rare in our industry and has made working in Mt. Juliet an exceptional experience compared to anywhere else I’ve ever worked. --Cole Aycock, Commercial Broker and Developer, Aycock Realty.

This strategy aligns with sentiments echoed by state level instructors in the TCED coursework, such as Madison Haynes in the Basic Finance Course, who notes that some of the most impactful “incentives” are actually free, and that concierge-level service can be immeasurably valuable.

Strategic Implications

The City’s track record proves that outstanding customer service can be just as powerful as traditional incentive packages, if not more so. As communities across Tennessee compete for retail, restaurant and commercial investment, Mt. Juliet stands out by offering clarity, consistency and personalized support throughout the development process.

The fact that Costco Wholesale Corporation remains the only incentivized project in the city’s 50 plus year history reveals a deeply intentional and disciplined approach to economic development. Rather than relying on financial giveaways, the city attracts and retains investment through strong infrastructure, robust demographics and superior service. This positions Mt. Juliet as a model for sustainable growth and responsible development.

While Mt. Juliet does not actively lead with financial incentives, the Economic and Community Development team stands ready to assist businesses and developers in navigating the agencies that do. Whether it’s the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the Joint Economic and Community Development Board (JECDB) of Wilson County, or various State-level programs, Mt. Juliet’s ECD team plays a critical role as a coordinating agency, helping connect projects to the right partners, streamlining communications, and supporting applications for regional or state assistance when appropriate. And of course, the city stands ready to provide detailed statistics and supporting data to help strengthen applications and secure funding.

By building trusted relationships and serving as a liaison, Mt. Juliet shows that true economic success can also come from meaningful connections.

Social Media Usage & Community Engagement

In today's digital-first world, economic development is no longer confined to boardrooms, permits or groundbreakings. For the City of Mt. Juliet, social media has become a powerful tool to engage the community, promote transparency, build relationships, and support local business in ways that are both meaningful and measurable.

Over the past year, Mt. Juliet's Communications Director, working closely with the city's Economic and Community Development team, has created an expansive social media presence that has garnered over one million views on ECD-related video content. From showcasing beloved local eateries in the "What's for Lunch Wednesday" series to providing real time construction updates in the "We're Movin' Dirt MJ" series, this digital storytelling approach builds both trust and excitement within the community.

ECD video content consistently features:

- New business announcements and construction milestones
- Ribbon cuttings and grand openings
- Spotlights on local restaurants, shops and services
- Behind-the-scenes infrastructure updates
- Local partnerships with schools, nonprofits and public safety

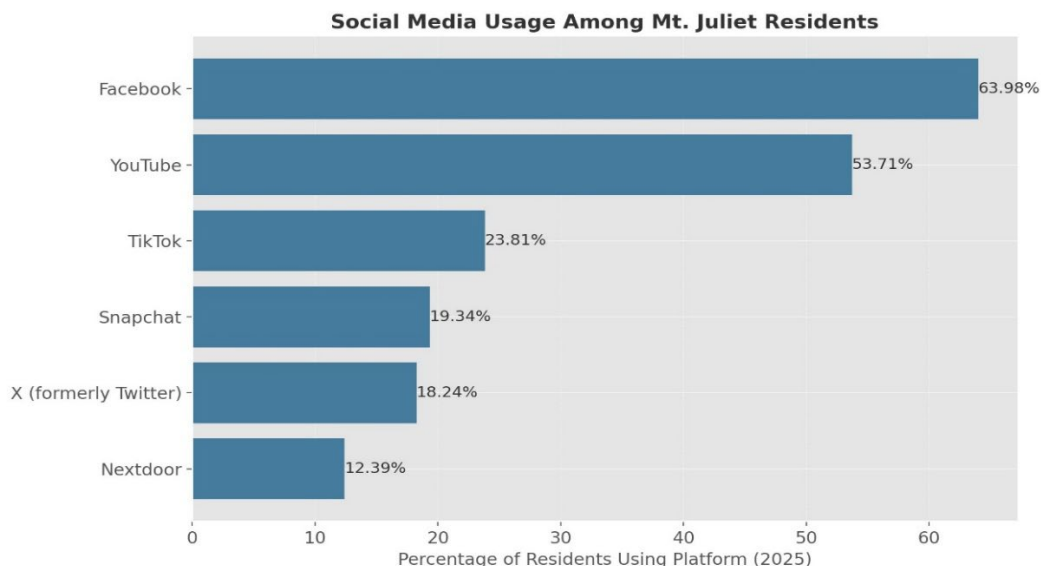
This visibility offers a critical boost to featured businesses, particularly small, local establishments, many of whom can pinpoint direct sales increases ties to their "air day". Equally important, the exposure creates deeper relationships between city staff and business owners, as

these filming sessions provide an opportunity to sit down with the business operators, their staff and sometimes even the construction crews themselves. These human connections build a sense of loyalty and mutual investment in Mt. Juliet's success.

Residents also play an active role in this effort. The community frequently reaches out to the city suggesting businesses they believe could use extra support, whether it's a new storefront, a beloved mom-and-pop, or a family run restaurant trying to get back on its feet.

This kind of community-driven outreach is rare , and it's become one of Mt. Juliet's most powerful tools for both business retention and recruitment. Prospective businesses don't just see supportive city government; they see an engaged, loyal customer base eager to champion them from day one.

Mt. Juliet's Social Media Usage by Platform: Emphasizes Social Media Impacts



This level of personalized engagement is not just rare, it's extraordinary. Few cities, if any, have embedded customer service so deeply into the fabric of economic development. From celebrating the ribbon cutting of a new business to spotlighting a long-standing local favorite,

Mt. Juliet's use of social media is far more than just marketing; its relationship building in action. These thoughtful touches are not just about checking boxes, they're about reinforcing our Shop Local identity, creating meaningful connections, and showing our businesses that they matter. It's a model rooted in community, and one that continues to set Mt. Juliet apart.

Results and Lessons Learned

Mt. Juliet's Concierge-style economic and community development model has proven that exceptional customer service isn't just a strategy, it's a sincere commitment. At the heart of every ribbon cutting, permit review, or business visit is a team that genuinely cares about the people behind the project. This personalized, relationship-oriented approach has produced results that extend far beyond ribbon cutting. It has built a reputation, one that attracts businesses not because of lavish incentives, but because of the way people are treated.

This strategy is effective because it's intentional. Businesses that work with Mt. Juliet receive real-time responsiveness, clear guidance, and ongoing support throughout the life of not only the project, but the longevity of the business. Whether it's a national brand navigating site development or a local boutique expanding for the first time, every interaction is viewed as an opportunity to build trust and set the tone for long-term collaboration.

Local civic partners and stakeholders have taken notice. Michelle Shoemake, Business Development Coordinator, at the Mt. Juliet Chamber of Commerce, shared:

“Every interaction I’ve had with the City’s Economic and Community Development team has been overwhelmingly positive. I’ve also heard from countless business owners that working with this team is what gets things moving in Mt. Juliet. They’re thorough, responsive, and they follow up to ensure everything is not only completed but completed well. Their

commitment and attention to detail have truly made a lasting impact on economic development in our city”

Wilson County Mayor, Randall Hutto affirmed this relationship-driven approach:

“The Mt. Juliet ECD team cares about the company long after the ribbon cutting, and they are always prepared to address the customer upfront and assist with any need or question they may have. Everyone is always eager to land that big project and to give birth so to speak, but I believe what separates Mt. Juliet is their ability to nurture and grow the business towards where it has a greater impact than maybe was perceived in the front end. It truly becomes a win-win”

These reflections reinforce that Mt. Juliet’s white-glove service isn’t about simply “being friendly”, it’s about crafting an environment where businesses feel seen, heard and valued. That kind of service builds loyalty. It builds momentum. And in a competitive marketplace, it builds community that businesses want to be a part of.

As emphasized in the *Tennessee Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development* Course, instructor Mo Collins reinforced the idea that true entrepreneurship flourished when cities create an environment that nurtures risk-taking and supports small business journey at every turn. Mt. Juliet’s community-focused model aligns perfectly with this, enabling both large and small businesses to grow in an atmosphere of encouragement and hands-on assistance.

Key takeaways include:

- *Relationships drive results.* Business owners consistently credit strong relationships with city staff as a deciding factor in choosing Mt. Juliet.

- *Transparency creates trust.* Open communication, public updates, and cross departmental coordination have set a standard for professionalism.
- *Consistence matters.* The same level of care is extended to every project, regardless of size or scope, ensuring every business feels supported.
- *Customer Service fills the incentive gap.* With minimal reliance on abatements or incentives, Mt. Juliet's success is a testament to the power of meaningful engagement.

Ultimately, Mt. Juliet has proven that small town heart and big city professionalism can co-exist, and that a strategic focus on customer service is more than just a retention tool, it's an economic driver.

Conclusion

This project set out to explore how customer service, specifically a concierge-style model, can serve as a catalyst for economic growth in a fast-growing city. The goal was to assess how Mt. Juliet's intentional emphasis on relationships, responsiveness, and real-time communication could attract, retain and uplift businesses in a way that strengthens both the economy and the community.

The research, data and firsthand accounts presented in this report affirm that Mt. Juliet's customer-first model is not only effective, but exceptional. Over the past several years, the city has seen:

- A substantial increase in building permits, site plan approvals and tax revenue
- Continued diversification of retail and commercial sectors
- Increased investor confidence despite minimal use of incentive packages
- Strong partnerships with developers, brokers, and business owners

- A widely embraced “one-stop shop” approach to planning, permitting, and infrastructure coordination
- A strategic use of social media to promote transparency, civic pride, and excitement for economic activity

As Bill Robinson, a long-time local developer and owner of Robinson Properties, shared:

“I think economic development is one of the vital signs of a city’s growth. I remember when there were no economic development departments and cities seemed to grow by happenstance. Today in Mt. Juliet, Jennifer Hamblen has been instrumental in shaping the Economic Development Department, along with City Manager, Kenny Martin, they have fostered and promoted smart economic growth. We now have an economic base that thrives on sales tax, which is rare in Tennessee. Jennifer’s deep knowledge of codes, development, and city regulation has made it easier for developers to navigate the process, and her reputation for responsiveness makes others want to invest here. I wish every city was as helpful and cooperative as Mt. Juliet”.

To continue building on this momentum, the following recommendations are offered:

- *Invest in ongoing staff development*, focusing on communication, cross-departmental collaboration, and customer service best practices
- *Track key performance metrics*, such as permitting timelines, satisfaction feedback, and retention rates to evaluate and adjust service delivery
- *Expand community facing programs*, like “What’s for Lunch Wednesday” and “We’re Movin’ Dirt MJ” to spotlight local business and infrastructure progress
- *Establish a formal internal customer service protocol* to preserve this culture standard as leadership and staff evolve over time.

Looking forward, Mt. Juliet is poised to remain a statewide leader in customer focused economic development to ensure continued success:

- *Formalize the concierge model* through documentation and staff onboarding materials.
- *Share this model with peer cities and TCED partners* to promote best practices across the state.
- *Continue prioritizing post-recruitment support*, reinforcing Mt. Juliet's reputation as a partner, not just a permit issuer.

This capstone's inspiration can be tracked back to a simple but powerful message delivered by Mandy White during the Marketing and Attraction course: "*Know your client. Serve your client. Exceed your clients' expectations*". Her words echoed throughout every TCED course and helped shape the foundation of this project. Her consistent emphasis on going above and beyond for businesses, being present, and doing the "little things" that make people feel valued resonated deeply. Mandy's words helped validate what Mt. Juliet was already doing and inspired this Capstone to document and elevate those practices.

As the community continues to evolve, this unwavering focus on people and relationships will remain its most powerful driver of success. Mt. Juliet is proving that intentional service culture can be the heartbeat of economic growth, without sacrificing identity, accessibility, or trust. Customer service isn't a task, it's a commitment. In Mt. Juliet, that commitment is woven into every plan review, ribbon cutting, site walk, and small business visit. It's what sets the city apart. It's the Mt. Juliet Way.

Resources

- US Census Bureau- https://www.census.gov/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- ESRI ArcGIS Enrichment Data- https://www.esri.com/en-us/arcgis/products/arcgis-business-analyst?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- City of Mt. Juliet Archives- **Sheila Luckett**, *City Recorder*, www.mtjuliet-tn.gov
- Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) Coursework: TCED Program
Homepage – UT Center for Industrial Services, https://www.cis.tennessee.edu/economic-development/tennessee-certified-economic-developer-tced?utm_source=chatgpt.com
 - *Tennessee Marketing & Attraction Course*,
Instructor **Mandy White**
 - *Tennessee Business Retention & Attraction Course*,
Instructor **Laith Wardi**
 - *Tennessee Entrepreneurship & Small Business Development Course*,
Instructor **Mo Collins**
 - *Tennessee Managing Economic Development Organizations Course*,
Instructor **Kendrick Curtis**
- City of Mt. Juliet Contributors
 - **Kenny Martin**: *City Manager, City of Mt. Juliet*- As the force behind the expansion of the city's Economic and Community Development program, Mr. Martin's institutional knowledge and unwavering support created the environment for customer service-based growth strategies to flourish.
 - **Rob Ealy**: *GIS Administrator, City of Mt. Juliet*, Mr. Ealy's GIS and data mapping expertise provide critical insights for economic development strategy, including

site analysis, demographic heat maps, and infrastructure overlays that assist both internal teams and external investors.

- **Justin Beasley:** *Director of Communications, City of Mt. Juliet-* A key contributor to Mt. Juliet's community engagement and outreach, Mr. Beasley's oversight of digital communications and social media strategy has been instrumental in increasing visibility for new business development and Shop Local initiatives. His department consistently generates thousands of weekly impressions through strategic storytelling.

Mentorship

- **GC Hixon**
 - *former Executive Director, JECDB of Wilson County, TN, former Executive Director of Marketing, Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development.*

Business & Community Stakeholders Quoted in Report

- **Bill Robinson:** *Robinson Properties*
 - **Michelle Shoemake:** *Mt. Juliet Chamber of Commerce*
 - **Carmelita Stafford:** *Sister's WhimZy*
 - **Mark McDonald:** *Oldacre McDonald*
 - **Michael Berardi:** *Mt. Juliet High School Assistant Principal and Athletic Director*
 - **Mike Murphy:** *Cumberland Advisors*
 - **Cole Aycock,** *Aycock Realty Group*
-