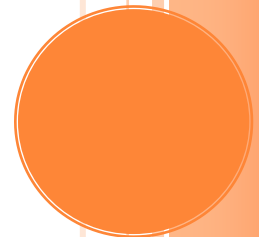


# STRATEGIC PLANNING IN BENTON COUNTY, TENNESSEE

*Tennessee Certified Economic Developer Capstone*

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# Strategic Planning in Benton County, TN

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## **Introduction**

Benton County is a community that has an abundance of tourism opportunities as well as the potential for industrial growth. The original economic development strategic plan for Benton County is over 7 years old, and there is a need to have an updated and functional strategic plan to help Benton County achieve a higher standard of living for the community. According to the Business Dictionary, strategic planning is defined as “a systematic process of envisioning a desired future, and translating this vision into broadly defined goals or objectives and a sequence of steps to achieve them.” (Business Dictionary, 2017) With an active economic development strategic plan, Benton County can develop a vision for the future.

According to Dr. Dave Kolzow’s lecture on Strategic Planning, “communities are changing whether they like it or not.” It is important that community leaders understand that successful change happens with planning and effort. (Kolzow, 2016) The strategic plan that will be developed for Benton County will be targeted and focused specifically on economic development.

One concern of Benton County in regards to strategic planning will be breaking down communication barriers between organizations, county government, and the community. As learned through the strategic planning course, community involvement equals engaged leadership. Inter-agency, local government, and community communication will be the utmost priority during the strategic planning process.

Benton County’s unemployment rate is at 9.8% which is higher than the Tennessee rate of 7.8%. The current poverty rate as of 2015 is 22.8%. Benton County has a labor force of 6,775 as of 2015. Our top industry clusters are chemicals, plastics and

rubber, business services, healthcare, transportation, distribution and logistics, and advanced manufacturing. Some of the major employers in the community are the Benton County School System, Carhartt, and Jones Plastic. Benton County has numerous small family-owned businesses as well.

Benton County has an abundance of natural resources and tourists attractions that bring visitors from near and far into our community. Some of these attractions include

- Natchez Trace State Park
- Nathan Bedford Forrest State Park
- Quilt Block Trail
- Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge
- Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Museum, Farm, and Tour
- Duck River Scenic Overlook
- Lakeshore United Methodist Assembly
- 30 Mile Yard sale
- Annual Duck blind drawing
- Holladay Fiddler's Jamboree
- Patsy Cline Memorial

### **Why is communication important?**

It is the responsibility of economic developers to educate the community on why there is need for a strategic plan and to show the stakeholders all of the benefits that a solid economic development strategic plan can bring to the community.

To build local support of the strategic plan, communication barriers such as lack of program knowledge between organizations, disconnected local government officials, and uninformed citizens in the community needs to be addressed by the steering committee. The community and its leaders have to have buy-in in order for the plan to be successfully implemented once created.

There are agencies and government entities in our community that have impacted our local economy through grant funded activities.

Benton County Health Council

Benton County/Camden Chamber

Benton County School System

City of Camden

City of Big Sandy

Benton County Government

Benton County Three Star

Benton County Joint Economic Development Board

Tennessee River Resort Development Board

Northwest Tennessee Economic Development Agency

UT-TSU Extension Partnership in Benton County

United Way of Benton County

By improving communication within and between these agencies and organizations, the efforts would be coordinated and targeted towards specific goals established by the strategic plan.

## **Partners in the Strategic Planning Process**

In order to successfully open dialogue on the strategic planning process, local representatives formed a partnership between several organizations. The UT-TSU Extension Office, the Benton County/Camden Chamber of Commerce, Tennessee Valley Authority, Benton County School System, City, and County government are all partners in the process, and there is representation from each organization on the steering committee.

The trustees from each organization will be responsible for communicating with their respective groups. Communication will be a two-way process where the group representative brings ideas and opinions from their group as well as reporting back on the process of the steering committee. These representatives need to be on board with the planning process so that they can be the best enthusiasts for implementing the strategic plan.

## **The Process**

TVA has been asked to facilitate as a partner in the planning process. TVA's role will be to help communicate to the community the importance of the economic development strategic plan and help keep on track during the planning process. Also, TVA will follow up with the steering committee to ensure that the plan is being utilized. The initial meeting with TVA proved to create some great ideas for addressing communication barriers, identifying stakeholders, and ways to educate the community on

the importance of the plan. TVA will come in to help us facilitate forums throughout our community.

The first goal of the plan was to develop a strategy for community assessment through facilitated forums, surveys, and meetings with individual civic and community organizations. The steering committee thought it was necessary to ask questions so that they can gather relevant information to conduct a SWOT Analysis to better determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The chamber director has already started the community discussions by attending county commission meetings, local organization meetings, city alderman meetings, and the Benton County School System Board of Education meeting to discuss the visions for the process.

The Benton County Strategic Planning Committee along with the help of TVA will then host a forum. The committee wants to invite one or two representatives from each group that were involved with the needs assessment to identify the needs of the community. The idea behind attending the initial community meetings was to inform people in the county of the efforts to get people thinking about possible needs of the community beforehand so that they would come to the community forums with ideas and feedback.

After the forum is concluded, the committee is going to prioritize the needs of the community as gathered from the assessment so that they can develop a vision for the future. In following suggestions from the USDA Rural Development Strategic Planning process, the committee is going to rank the needs on two factors: the severity (seriousness of the problems) and magnitude (number of people affected). The steering committee will

then assign a value to each problem, ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high) and rank accordingly taking into consideration leadership concerns, business concerns, community concerns, and local government concerns.

For each item listed as a priority, there needs to be an action plan developed and implemented. The steering committee needs to identify why the problems exist and what is causing that problem. Once the committee identifies the problems and the factors that are causing problems they can begin to establish goals and measurable outcomes that will align with the vision set forth by the steering committee.

Using the criteria for S.M.A.R.T goals, the committee will consider outcomes that are: specific, measurable, aggressive, but attainable, result-oriented, and time-bound. It is important to understand that there have to have measurable outcomes so that progress can be determined.

As the strategic planning documents come into place, the next step in the process will be to write the economic development strategic plan, distribute it to the contributing agencies and promote it through local media sources in Benton County.

## **Implementation and Evaluation**

“For strategic plans to be effectively implemented, they rely upon the input and commitment of a wide range of individuals who need to be involved and informed in the process from its earliest stages to the generation of results.” (Richards, n.d.) In order to be successfully implemented, the strategic plan needs to be incorporated into each organization and local government’s overall planning framework to assure the accomplishment of strategic goals and objectives is achieved. Each department head,



government official, and other stakeholders in Benton County will be asked to allocate resources that reflect the goals of the strategic plan. The steering committee identified several resources needed to successfully begin implementing the plan.

- Financial resources through grants, annual budgets, or stakeholder investment
- Time through meetings, forums, and promotion
- Facilities, as needed
- Use of local media outlets (news and radio) to promote the strategic planning efforts.

Once the plan is implemented, it will be important to evaluate the actions and adjust if necessary. In Dr. Kolzow's lecture on strategic planning he emphasized the importance of effective strategic planning. The evaluation process is an ongoing and changing process that will be the only way that the steering committee will know if their goals were achieved. If there are parts of the strategic plan that fail an evaluation of those plans will be needed so that the steering committee can decide on a different approach.

To evaluate the strategic planning efforts appropriately, there needs to be a focus on outcomes that can provide measurable results. The outcomes are going to directly reflect what changed because of what the steering committee did.

## **Conclusion**

An initial meeting was held with TVA, City, and County Mayors, UT-TSU Extension, Benton County Three Star Committee, and the Benton County/Chamber of

Commerce to discuss the process with TVA involvement. The goals of the initial strategic planning steering committee are as follows:

- Identify needs through community forums, surveys, and meetings
- Develop a list of priorities based on the forums, surveys, and meetings
- Develop a vision that is clearly articulated, strongly committed to, widely shared, challenging but attainable, highly desirable, and concise and memorable as discussed in TCED Strategic Planning course.
- Formulate strategic actions to implement the priorities
- Set goals with measurable outcomes that follow the vision set forth by the steering committee (SMART)
- Evaluate and adjust our process as needed to ensure the strategic plan is implemented and active

The steering committee is ready to host a community forum. With effective planning and open communication, Benton County has the opportunity to create a strategic plan with an economic development focus that will improve the quality of life in Benton County. If the strategic planning steering committee is successful, residents, local officials, businesses, and other organizations will help implement the plan and communication barriers between these groups will be reduced.

By following lessons learned from the Strategic Planning Course and with help from Tennessee Valley Authority, the Benton County strategic planning steering committee will be able to develop an economic focused strategic plan that can be used by

local organizations and local governments. Benton County will benefit from the mutual efforts of each group by merging ideas and thought processes into a viable economic development strategic plan.

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