

Economic Development Plan links diverse interests

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
Friday, 28 October 2022 03:31



There are a lot of business building blocks in Gallup, but the area's economic future will depend on coordinating them so they work together. That's one of the findings of an updated city Economic Development Plan.

"The focus of the Economic Development Plan is to establish the goals around capital investment and incentivizing new business to come to Gallup but also supporting businesses that exist currently to maintain and enhance the quality of life within the region," Denise Aten, senior vice president at consulting firm Bohannon Huston, which produced the report, said.

Aten worked with data updated from prior versions of the plan from 2009 and 2015, and consulted with business leaders in the community. Periodic updates are needed to keep efforts on track and to improve opportunities for grant funding.

The plan includes action items for each of the six economic sectors targeted in the report and how they can be "complementary and consistent" toward overall growth. Although the New Mexico Finance Authority set the broad outlines for the plan, the analysis was also tailored to the local community.

"Art and culture are critical to the culture, history and the future of Gallup, so we wanted to make sure we had some action items and suggestions around that," Aten said. The report advises developing more artisan workspace in the arts and culture district; promoting the local film

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industry; increasing arts programming through GallupARTS; and supporting Gallup Mainstreet projects.

For retail, suggestions include creating more walkable spaces; developing the cannabis industry; implementing the action items from the Gallup Metropolitan Redevelopment Area plan; and targeting the industries in the Gallup Market Study to attract them to town.

In health care, suggestions included that the city should support the Navajo Nation's efforts to build and upgrade local Indian health facilities; recruit more specialized health practices; expand substance abuse treatment facilities; and support regional efforts to expand healthcare options.

Tourism is a multi-pronged effort that should include local tribal agencies as well as the state tourism department, the report said. The city could benefit from developing group travel promotion, internal travel options like bicycling and ride-sharing; improve wayfinding like tourism kiosks and signs that help tourists find what interests them; and exploiting local grant opportunities.

Many of the housing recommendations are easier said than done: rehabilitate dilapidated homes for sale; build on vacant lots; coordinating with other regional agencies; expand home ownership education programs; and increase the housing supply.

"All of these other things will function better and operate better if we can encourage and build and stabilize the housing market within the city," Aten said.

The community also needs to invest in workers with more training programs and bringing industries that will train workers; and following suggestions from the Job Market Analysis recently commissioned by the Gallup Housing Authority.

"We are not at all suggesting that you should do all of these programs. We are saying that this collection of tools could be possible, could be helpful [and] could be beneficial to the city of Gallup," Aten said. "These are tools that we can vet going forward."

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The City Council adopted the Economic Development Plan Oct. 11. It will be incorporated into the City of Gallup Growth Management Master Plan, updating the economic element.

To ensure followup, Councilor Sarah Piano, Dist. 3, suggested the city identify a point person for each area.

“These are all great things, but in the end somebody has to be in charge of them. Departments are stretched thin,” she said. “My recommendation would be having someone that oversees this. Otherwise things will fall by the wayside and we won’t really get them accomplished.”

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