

## It's time to get down to business.

Consultants give us a map to improve economic development in Missoula

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Apparently it takes an independent analysis by outside experts to force Missoulians to face what we already know - that our city is woefully lacking when it comes to economic development. Now it is up to Missoula to take those findings to heart and start implementing their recommendations immediately.

Last week, two different consulting firms brought to Missoula by the mayor's Best Place Project laid out in stark terms what is wrong with the city's current approach to economic development - the chief problem being that Missoula really has no approach at all. The consultants, Jay Garner and Tom DiFiore, noted that community opinions matched their expert analysis for the most part - and that has not been the case with every city they have visited.

That analysis says that Missoula's many assets - among them, its university, its educated work force and its overall high quality of place - are not being marketed to the wider world. When prospective employers do stumble upon Missoula, they have a great deal of difficulty tracking down which organization to talk to. And when, or if, they do, that presentation - at least the one the consultants were given - is unprofessional and wholly unconvincing.

The reports also note that downtown Missoula lacks free wireless Internet and Missoula's economic development agency lacks a comprehensive, professional-looking website. These are resources prospective businesses rely on to find out more about a community, and they are resources existing businesses need in order to effectively compete in a global marketplace.

The Missoulian supports the process and the team in place, and asks that Missoula businesses and the community at large get involved with this very important project.

But perhaps the most sweeping recommendation offered by the consultants is for Missoula to create a new 501(c)3 economic development organization, rooted in a public-private partnership, to focus on business recruitment, expansion and tourism promotion.

The new entity, tentatively called the Missoula Economic Partnership, would not only be responsible for economic development, but also for tourism promotion; the plan calls for moving the Missoula Convention and Visitors Bureau under the umbrella of the new organization to accomplish this. Doing so would create a unified brand and strategy for economic and tourism development which, in the consultants' opinion, are inextricably connected.

As Missoula implements these recommendations, some very difficult decisions will need to be made. Fortunately, Mayor John Engen's Best Place Project team is already in a good position to decide exactly how to proceed, and how to go about getting the community's support.

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*Continued from page one*

The Best Place Project was created just a few months ago with the idea of forming a public-private partnership to respond quickly to some of the recent economic hits Missoula has taken, such as the closure of Macy's downtown and Smurfit-Stone Container Corp.'s mill in Frenchtown.

The project committee was responsible for finding the money to bring the Atlanta-based National Community Development Services and Garner Economics to Missoula. Now, the committee must take a close look at the recommendations and start implementing them - which will be no easy task, since one concern raised in their findings is how to reorganize or possibly repurpose Missoula's existing economic development corporation, an organization they say is not currently effective at economic development.

Bringing free Wi-Fi to downtown Missoula and building a website appear to be simple tasks to

accomplish in this plan, but repurposing how Missoula-area folks work together for economic development is not so simple. Not simple, but a challenge that the mayor's office and the Best Place Project team will undoubtedly handle with the best interests of Missoula's citizens and businesses in mind.

It also won't be easy having local government lead the effort, especially since, as the reports note, one common complaint is that local government often acts as a barrier to business creation and expansion. But involving local business leaders provides hope that the plans will come to fruition.

The Missoulian supports the process and the team in place, and asks that Missoula businesses and the community at large get involved with this very important project. Missoula already was in transition. Now we have a map. It is up to us to take control and steer the city to a robust, re-energized future.