

Shoot Anything That Flies; Claim Anything That Falls: Conversations with Economic Development Practitioners

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Economic development practitioners face an uncertain environment in which their ability to bring about economic development is dependent upon factors over which they have little, if any, control. Using extended excerpts from open-ended interviews, the author explores how the economic development practitioners attempt to cope with uncertainty. The interviews illustrate both the frustrations practitioners feel about their work and the accommodations they make in doing their work. The author presents a speculative model, based upon Stone's work on system bias, of how the perspective toward developmental work held by the practitioner might increasingly tilt public sector actions toward the business community.

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This article contains excerpts from conversations where urban economic development practitioners discussed the problems of their jobs.¹ It is easy to be sympathetic with the difficulties faced by these quasi-public administrators. Much of their work entails the risk and insecurity of being in the private sector, yet receives the detailed scrutiny of those working in the fishbowl of the public sector. Seen in isolation these interviews provide a portrait of individuals valiantly attempting difficult and often thankless tasks. However, interpreted more broadly, these interviews suggest reasons cities are willing to make concessions to business that seem to have little economic development impact.²

The model suggested is not one of dominance by power elites or corruption or conspiracy. Rather the model involves the far more subtle process of system bias³ in which a search for administrative certainty and task closure leads to the public sector's favoring business interests. System bias occurs when public administrators, in an attempt to make their jobs more manageable, make ordinary decisions that systematically favor one interest group over another. As Stone indicates, "Bias is more likely to become apparent as the eventual outcome of a large number of interrelated decisions—many of which have low visibility."⁴ System biases emerge as a reasonable accommodation to the daily uncertainty practitioners, both economic developers as well as other public administrators, confront in their jobs.

According to the system bias model, business interests are favored because businesses, especially those seeking to expand or relocate, provide demands that are clearly defined and bureaucratically obtainable. Low-key, apparently reasonable demands provide a set of achievable goals for administrators working in an uncertain environment. As Stone claims, "The

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key is not business over nonbusiness, however, but bureaucratically and therefore predictable over nonbureaucratic and therefore unpredictable.”⁵

Recently Buss and Redburn have made similar arguments on how the possession of information in a complex environment can yield power to business and industrial developers.

Developers are often able to control the economic development decision process for several reasons. First, economic development is extremely complex, requiring detailed knowledge and experience in management, legal affairs, financing, construction and land economics in order to be successful. . . . Second, developers tend to be well integrated into both public and private sector networks that make decisions about development. Developers, or more likely their surrogates, are often members of public planning or zoning boards and commissions, local economic development corporations (EDCs), Private Industry Councils (PICs), or economic development task forces appointed by mayors, county commissioners or Chambers of Commerce.⁶

The interviews with the economic development practitioners are supportive of a model of system bias. First, they see that their work environment is complex and undefined and involves an uncertain technology; they feel that their jobs are not understood and that they must report to people who lack knowledge about their field. Furthermore, their work involves a difficult effort in bridging the gap between the public and private sectors.

In response, they seek out the appearance of some certainty in their task by adopting a philosophy of “shoot anything that flies; claim anything that falls.” To do so, practitioners can define their work as responding to a set of business demands (or requests). Working to actualize these requests provides the practitioner with a checklist⁷ of activities that replaces the broad, undefinable task of promoting community economic development with a set of concrete sequential steps. Certainty (at least, of what to do) is substituted for the uncertainty that permeates their work life.

If these speculations are correct, a compassion for the difficulties economic development practitioners face on their jobs turns into a concern for the consequences of their actions.

THE CAUSE: ENVIRONMENTAL UNCERTAINTY

Public debate on the appropriate role of the public sector in bringing about economic change indicates that the task, at best, is an uncertain one.⁸ In the interviews the practitioners presented a multifaceted view of how they perceive such uncertainty and the frustration they feel about not being sure of how to actually accomplish their jobs.

Most important, they saw only a weak relationship between their efforts and resulting changes, between action and consequence. In social psychological jargon, they felt they lacked fate control. This problem was compounded by doubts about whether or not municipalities had the wherewithal to affect major economic changes, the value of the information on which decisions might be made and, more generally, the efficacy of the technology and tools used in economic development.

The uncertainty about the causal mechanisms underlying economic development was paralleled in their perceptions about the role they played in their cities. First, several felt that their jobs were not understood by others in the community. To compound the problem, their work entailed bridging the gap between the public and private sectors, leading to questions about whom they were representing: Were they truly acting in the public interest?

Fate Control

Many of the practitioners were frustrated because they and their fellow citizens had little, if any, control over decisions that affected their local economies. This feeling was most clearly

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articulated by an economic development official from a Chamber of Commerce, who, when asked what bothered him most about his job, responded:

I guess the uncontrollable factors that you work with. For example, the downturn in the economy. We couldn't do anything about it. We lost one of our major manufacturers. We lost a major employer . . . and it is just . . . frustrating because it is something you can't deal with. You just ride it through. You do the best you can in the circumstances but it is frustrating. . . . We are trying to get employers, and here is a company that pulls out and goes to Mississippi . . . The problems you can wrestle with aren't so bad, but being victimized by those things over which you have no control is frustrating. (Chamber 1)

Or, as a city economic development official complained, "There is no answer to economic development. When a place is in the dumps, it's in the dumps. And, to some extent, economic development can help it, but it can't solve it" (Planner 1).

Similar sentiments about the uncontrollability of the tasks were echoed by the planning and economic director in a rapidly growing community. To him, success as well as failure occurs because of exogenous events over which he has little control.

You can be just great because . . . the Illinois Department of Transportation makes some kind of decision. . . . What does that mean? Twice as many people will ride downtown. . . . Potentially gasoline stations, barber jobs, newspaper stands, the restaurants will have twice as many people stopping in, and I had nothing whatsoever to do with the decision. Now, all at once, the downtown can boom. So, a lot of things we do is luck from other people. (Planner 2)

He continued by describing that, often, change was attributable to locational factors over which no one had any control:

But there are economic advantages that some communities have that sort of seems just because they are located where they are. . . . they happen to be in a growth path or an interstate or an airport was located near where they were. (Planner 2)

In many ways economic development seemed a self-perpetuating process. As the city official in charge of economic development in a declining city lamented, "People want to go where it is a successful area. . . . And, then, the places where they really want it [economic development]—nobody wants to go there because it is not successful" (City ED 2).

Is the Technology Available Effective for Economic Development?

The practitioners discussed the different incentive programs used by localities, yet questioned whether or not such programs really had an effect. Perhaps there was an acceptance that such programs must be attempted even if their consequences were not fully known. To do something is better than to remain inactive.

This ambivalence was seen in the responses of an economic development practitioner from one of the larger cities:

Some people will argue . . . the kind of tools a municipal government has are relatively marginal. . . . Another school of thought will be, if you really believe business climate is the magic door to salvation, local government has a lot to do with it and how it performs and the image it gives off and the way in which it interacts with business. (Planner 3)

What cities can do is to be flexible enough with codes and regulations so as not to hamper business development. These concerns were reflected by the head of an economic development

commission, who saw the tradition-bound practices of local government as a handicap to developmental activities.

This city is so backwards We have adopted . . . codes . . . totally out of date. . . . A good example is [company name]. . . they went into an existing building and wanted to install state-of-the-art-computer work, which meant not putting computer wires into . . . conduits. The city insisted that they use conduits. Well, the economic development commission intervened as well as the Chamber of Commerce, and we got the city to change the code for that installation only. (Development Group 3)

Even trying to find out whether or not their tactics are working can prove frustrating. “I think part of the frustration is, at times, companies are terribly reluctant to tell you why you won or why you lost. You know, so, you get a general idea, understanding of the process, that yes we did the right kind of thing. What we could have done differently it’s difficult to say.” (Development Group 2)

In a humorous contrast, another planner joked about the limits of local action in bringing about economic development and offered the following possibility for city economic development efforts:

We could get about 20 guys and two or three cars and go out to the interstate . . . and we put up a road block, and every time a Fortune 500 semitrailer would come along we’d stop it and hold it hostage until the Fortune 500 business agreed to build a plant in our town, and that’s how we got economic development. (Planner 2)

More often, though, the practitioner had to learn to cope with failure.

But I also think you have to learn to accept rejection in this business, maybe more so than you do in an awful lot of other professions. . . . But you make so many calls and you’re going to make x number of sales. And that percentage may be different for different communities. But you usually lose more than you win. (Development Group 2)

Even the apparently simple task of getting and providing information was fraught with uncertainty.

We have these people who market these studies that will tell you what industry to target, but the problem is they are using data that is at least five years old and . . . all the factors are going to constantly change. (Development Group 2)

In addition, there was concern that having knowledge about problems might create difficulties since, in many cases, there is little that can be done to rectify the problem. One practitioner expressed concern about what a city would do if it had early information to predict which businesses were about to relocate.

One of the projects . . . I’ve worked on personally quite a bit is an early warning system for plant closings. . . . That is a good policy thing but it raises too many questions what local government can actually do once they get a case. . . . There is a danger that information will create false hopes and expectations. (Planner 3)

Underlying much of this sense about an uncertain environment was their own experiences that indicated many economic development decisions were based upon epiphenomenal factors.

You know, you get down to the bottom line as to why did the company go in a location. I would dare to bet more often than not it doesn’t boil down to what I said or did. . . . It boils down to where the company executive can moor that 23-foot sailboat I think more

often than not that decisions are made on those types of factors than they are on good hard economic data. (City ED 3)

Even when practitioners felt they were making progress, people in the localities might create difficulties⁹. For example, working with local business people, especially downtown retail merchants, can be frustrating. An economic development director (ED) for a small city complained:

We have merchants associations that are concerned about the health of the downtown but they are concerned in the limited sense. . . . The goal of every politician is to get elected. The goal of every business person is to make it through the year. . . . There is a furious debate taking place right now because the merchants are quite frightened that even one parking space might be lost. You see, parking is the be all and end all of economic development in this town. (City ED 1)

Her frustrations were echoed by the head of GEDCO, a public-private economic development group in a small manufacturing town:

[Dealing with] the downtown businesses is the most exasperating experience. Different in attitude. They just like the status quo. We redo the street scape. They won't even pull weeds in front of their store. They want the city to come out and pull the weeds. (Development Group 1)

Such frustrations also occurred when dealing with board members of economic development commissions who might be more concerned with what was good for their businesses than what might be good for community economic development.

Well, I had five bankers on my board here. I said, "This guy wants revenue bonds." They say, "We will make a good deal for him; the five of us will get together and present a package. . . . [the proposed developer] told them to shove it, and when I picked up the phone and asked him what it meant, he said, "This [bid] is not competitive. . . . you can't have five bankers on a committee. Number one you don't need that many, number two, they are not competitive when they work as a group." (Development Group 4)

Similar feelings were expressed by a senior planner and the economic development person for a rapidly growing suburb. He felt that the composition of the economic development commission

certainly causes a lot of funny situations. You know, I think in their minds, where does their personal self-interest and the interest of the city start or stop? And you know if you used the same set of criteria on the business development commission as you would on the zoning board or the village staff, none of them could work there. The chairman of our business development commission is the head of the big local bank. . . . I'm sure that the first bank they hear about is his. That's probably one reason why his company, the bank, is very happy to let him be chairman of our commission. And, I think especially on these economic development things, it is virtually the same everywhere. And, I think there is a conflict there, but I don't see any change or any solution to it. (Planner 1)

These problems were further complicated whenever the practitioners felt that local government held antibusiness attitudes. A city economic development person complained about problems his board and the city council (he blurred them in the interview) created for him. He was concerned with their antibusiness feeling and felt that the public officials believed

that a business is not supposed to make money, and that is an attitude I don't understand. . . . The mentality then goes on into commission meetings: Why do you need this? Why should we help you? Shit, that is an embarrassing question to be asking in a business. . . . You know, profit is a dirty word, and why that is, I don't know, but it is. (City ED 3)

Another planner from a suburb indicated the role conflicts between an economic developer, who wanted to provide incentives for business growth, and his city manager, who was not going to compromise to lure in business:

The firm says, we would like to have a reduction in property taxes, we would like to have a low-interest loan, we'd like for you to help us get employment assistance through the private industry council, and we'd like you to dedicate a street and give a certain zoning and rush through the review process. Right. Seven or eight items. And the village manager would say, well, it's interesting to hear your requests. Now, if you want to locate in our village, you are going to live up to our standards. Maybe we are willing to let you locate here. Not one [laughter]. And that is economic development from the village manager's point of view. Again, I'm overcharacterizing a little bit. (Planner 2)

In addition, there are the inherent problems of dealing with government, whether caused by the time horizons of politicians or the more general delays of bureaucratic decision making.

I think there are some inherent conflicts there because politicians tend to be more short-run oriented, and a lot of things we do as professionals take longer. I think the average decision to relocate a firm, I think, they estimate is three years from conception to the time they decide to move. . . . so these things take a long time—politicians tend to be more short-run oriented because of reelection pressures—so there is some inherent pressure there. (City ED 2)

Such uncertainty in their work environment has a direct effect upon practitioners' self-images as hardworking professionals by exaggerating the difficulties of succeeding at their work.

Career Isolation

Probably because of the uncertainty of the technology and the lack of a connection between action and developmental outcomes, the practitioners felt that they were isolated in their work, that very few people know or understand what they are doing for the community.

None of the people I work for have any experience in my kind of business, whereas if you work for a corporation . . . people know what you do in your job . . . but, by and large, you find [that] people who sit on these development boards haven't the foggiest notion of what makes this thing fly; same with government officials. (Development Group 1)

This same theme was echoed by an economic development person working at a Chamber of Commerce, who mentioned as a major problem

being the only person in town doing what you are doing. The minister has got another minister to talk to if it is a dull congregation or if he is having [a] fund-raising problem . . . but when you are dealing with a particular situation looking for a solution, there really is, sometimes, nobody. Sometimes you are forced to make a decision without, maybe, having all the comfort of full-informed consultation that you would like to have. (Chamber 2)

Even their bosses on the economic development commission might have little idea of what the practitioners do to promote development.

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I am not overly excited about the composition of the commission, who devote one hour a month to a meeting, maybe some additional work on the side. . . . And, I think that a lot of people look at this type of activity, whatever that may be, as being very glamorous, you know, stars and lights, and bells and whistles, and things like that. That you simply put an ad in whatever the appropriate publication is, because they don't know, and as a result of that, the largest company in the U.S. is going to read it, and they are going to bring in 500 jobs next week. That, I think, is their impression. (City ED 2)

Linkage Person

To compound the uncertainty in their work, the economic development person fills an unusual position, with the responsibility to link the public and private sectors. As a link person, reticulator, or meshing person,¹⁰ the economic developer has to work with private profit-seeking firms to accomplish a collective, public goal of bringing about community improvement. As the director of one economic development commission stated:

Well, my position, I think, is unique in that I don't work for the city. I work for the commission: I was hired by the commission; I'm paid by the commission. The commission is funded by community development block grant funds solely. . . . so I don't answer to the mayor. . . . Although the enabling legislation gave us broad powers, in essence, we can't do anything without city council approval, which is fine. (Development Group 3)

Uncertainty was compounded whenever there was a battle between the public and private sectors over control of economic development. The present head of GEDCO, a nongovernmental economic development organization, described the vagaries of his position over the last decade. The organization had just been re-funded as the principle economic agency for the city, replacing a city-run program. This reversed the process that occurred a decade ago when the city itself took over economic development. The director described how he was persuaded to leave GEDCO and join the city's effort.

The city manager wanted to form a community development department, and he wanted me to head it, and I wasn't particularly enthused about working in a governmental environment. But he indicated he was going to reduce his contribution to GEDCO, which was half its budget, so I said, "You never explained the benefits of the job to me like that before, so [laughter] I think I'll take it." So the economic development efforts shifted over to the city, and GEDCO went on with a volunteer director. (Development Group 1)

Uncertainty over where an economic development program should be housed reduced the stability of the organizational environment. As an economic development effort fails, or as an economic situation in a community changes, there is a tendency to change organizational form to combat the problem. This response was criticized by a former director of an economic development corporation in a small, nonsuburban city who lamented:

In some towns it creates nothing but confusion. Sometimes they have a Chamber of Commerce group function with an economic development program; people aren't satisfied. Then it spins off and forms a private corporation and they do it, and then the city gets pissed off, and they set up a community development organization, and the county [also] does it; so in an area with limited funds, you have four organizations wasting money. And they go through cycles like this, and it is utterly stupid. (Development Group 4)

The problem of linkage was compounded for the public sector employee who had to bridge the gap between the private sector and other city officials. Often this person wore multiple hats, simultaneously working in overlapping positions, some of which were seen as curtailing business

development, others of which were intended to promote development. As a city planner lamented:

I'm the planner, I'm the economic developer. I'm the transportation guy, capital programming guy, board and commissions guy, zoning, 15 or 20 different things. . . . You got a growth community, you're an economic developer. (Planner 1)

However, in such circumstances, conflicts between the different roles are inevitable.

Well, they had a little bit of a problem defining exactly what E. D. is, how much of my role is business advocacy and how much of my role is business policeman. I do business licensing, which is not an advocacy arrangement. It is setting up hoops for business to jump through. (City ED 1)

These sentiments were echoed by the planners who were also responsible for economic development. As one said, describing his relationship with the business community, "You know, on the one hand, you are trying to induce them in and, on the second hand, you tell them to stop, you don't like their plan. On the one hand, you are regulatory and, on the other, you are booster. Yah. There is some conflict" (Planner 1).

Such conflicts might simply reflect the different responsibilities of the public administrators. However, far more serious issues of personal and professional ethics can occur. As one planner, who shortly after the interview left his city job to join the private sector, stated:

There was a good reason why this stuff stayed in the Chamber. The Chamber doesn't have to pass the test of integrity or implied conflict of interest or what not. When I go out and negotiate a joint venture deal for the village. . . . There aren't any rules. There are several million dollars out on the table. There is no public hearing. There is no due process. Pure old-fashioned power. I got, you need. Here's a time schedule. What's your bottom line, what's mine? How can we help each other? And, I don't say anything is bad on it. That's the wave of the future. That's how we build roads here.

You know you are walking a thin line between private and public, and the economic developer really is asking to be looked at by a very different microscope. When I am director of planning I have no budget to wine and dine people. . . . An economic development guy gets a budget, and he goes on entertainment, and nobody is supposed to ask what he does with it. I have to think about that because one of the nice things about the planning profession [is]. . . . There is a lot of good feeling and a lot of nice things about saying, "Look, I really work for a higher ideal. I'm clean and I have a white suit and [I] have a microchip and I slay mountains and I look out for the public interest." (Planner 1).

THE CONSEQUENCES: A SEARCH FOR CERTAINTY

Coping with uncertainty is far from easy for the economic development people. They are ambivalent about the actions they must take, vacillating between efforts at "credit claiming," that is, taking credit for apparent achievements, and a search for professionalism, that is, taking credit for properly undertaken actions.

At times, the practitioners portrayed their work and the expectations of their bosses as an effort to "shoot anything that flies, claim anything that falls," that is, to look for credit, no matter what their real role was in bringing about the change. However, they felt that it was wiser for them personally to credit successes to businesses and politicians rather than claim it themselves.

Still, most of the respondents are professionals at their tasks and know full well how much they can actually accomplish. They would rather be judged on their efforts and the

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professionalism of their efforts, process tasks that they can control, rather than on the uncontrollable outcomes. They express cynicism at the credit claiming while at the same time realizing its importance. And, in many ways, they express a somewhat idealistic view of the possibilities of what they might accomplish.¹¹

To further complicate the picture, many of the practitioners indicated satisfaction with being part of the "inner group." They identify with business, in part, because business people seem to know better what they want and present a more coherent set of goals than local government, a set of goals that provide them with a focused set of tasks to perform.

Credit Claiming and Proceduralism

In an environment in which success is difficult to achieve, and the relationship between action and outcome is uncertain, there is a temptation to credit claim. This idea was most dramatically expressed by the head of a public-private economic development organization who stated that

there is a phrase that many people won't admit to, but "shoot anything that flies; claim anything that falls" [laughter]. I think a lot of people busy themselves with these retention surveys, whatever, and going to trade shows, and ostensibly you are doing something even if it is the wrong routine. . . . God, he is out there marketing. A lot of people think that Wall Street is just waiting to hear about [this city]. . . . but I think most boards are enthralled with the marketing aspects. You send out some material, and they are going to love you. (Development Group 1)

That is, to show they are doing something, there is a tendency to try to claim credit for actions that supposedly bring about economic development, irrespective of the perceived effectiveness of such techniques.

The economic development practitioners argued that their use of such ineffective techniques was a response to board pressure. A city economic development official complained when describing his advertising campaign, a technique most practitioners thought accomplished little.

We do some advertising, I guess, more in defense than really an offensive program. What I mean by that is *Plant Site and Area Development*, *Business Facility*, all have their state, their community reviews. At that time, we put something in. I'm criticized more by absence than I am by their presence. An executive of the economic development commission will pick up *Site Selection Handbook*. "Here is article on . . . Where is this city's ads?" . . . I personally don't believe in a lot of promotion and attraction efforts. (City ED 3)

They lamented that such concerns with action and promotion efforts turn economic development into pure boosterism.

And, unluckily, boosterism gets involved in economic development a lot more than maybe it should. You just want to run out and pat people on the hand and buy lunches and have a slide show. I think, to some extent, it discredits us all because it is a quick shot with little impact, but it is flashy, and it is so appealing to the mayor and these guys, you know. . . . Joe went out and had lunch with this corporate president on Tuesday and he is already doing things. (Planner 1)

More generally, by setting up incentive programs to lure in businesses to communities, practitioners could show they were taking action even if they were aware that such programs were often ineffective.¹²

Usually Somebody Else Gets the Credit

Though admitting much of what occurred was either formalistic or “shooting anything that flies,” the practitioners were hesitant to claim personal credit. Perhaps the reluctance is simply a realistic self-assessment that economic development practitioners really are accomplishing little on their own.

Even if we are successful in our negotiations. . . . We will not get credit for it. The company will get credit for it as having chosen [city] because that is the way the game is played. You must give credit to the company. . . . But, basically, I don't think, unless you have unraveled some very unusual problem and found a unique solution to it where otherwise you won't have gotten it. It is pretty hard to take credit for anything. (Chamber 1)

In part, this lack of credit is attributable to a realistic self-assessment of how much they contribute to development versus capital investors.

You can't be in a position where you want every development to have your name on it. I may be the facilitator, but I am not the one investing the money. That's my board of trustees. That is a private developer. It is not me. At no point do I lay two stone atop one another with my own hands. So you have to be able to step back and give credit where credit is due. Although you may have sweated many long hours, remember nothing gets done in town on your say so. (City ED 1)

However, the lack of public credit they can take is in part attributable to the need to maintain political support.

We've taken the position that we don't get elected. . . . We normally attempt to get the mayors or the political officials involved in taking credit for participating and taking credit. . . . But we also recognized that its important that people also know that this organization was involved. . . . The press release is written on our stationery with quotes from the mayor. (Development Group 2)

However, such credit to the politicians might be assigned with a degree of cynicism:

[The mayor] likes it when he can announce something. Like when we bought our first building when we had our first demolition contract. He loves to get his picture taken with bulldozers. He likes to make announcements, and, therefore, he likes me to communicate everything through him. Fine. I firmly believe in that. I don't want to get in the newspaper. Its not my fault the writers put my name in all the time. I don't call them. That's what makes a lot of the city council professionally jealous. (Development Group 3)

Still there is a compensating factor. In many ways the economic development person's success is the success of the city.

If you have a high profile economic development program in place, you are high profile with it. . . . Even if your name isn't attached to it. Well, Oakbrook. I don't know who the E. D. person is in Oakbrook, but Oakbrook is in the paper every day. . . . And their value is assured to their next employer. It's either get your name out there or get your town's name out there. (City ED 1)

Idealism and Professionalism

At least, rhetorically, some of the practitioners expressed a rather strong sense of idealism. They indicated that their work had the potential of achieving a common, collective good. An

economic development professional with specialized certification in his field reflected on the personal rewards the job provided.

I think the rewards, the psychic rewards, the ego rewards, are very, very strong. . . . I think it is as much quiet satisfaction of being part of making things happen even though you know that the contribution may never be told. . . . I think it is being recognized for having that expertise . . . when people call you as perhaps their first source to help them out in their situation. . . . Ultimately, if you are fortunate, you do an economic development project or a new business opening. . . . There are 25 people at work there or 50 people at work there, and I played a pretty good part in helping bring that about. It's a sense of community involvement, community accomplishment, what you are doing for other people. And that is a fairly strong incentive, being able to do good while doing what you really want to do and getting paid for it besides. (Chamber 2)

However, new plants and major accomplishments are somewhat unusual and, as already indicated, might be attributable to factors over which the economic development practitioner has little if any control. Under such circumstances the professional shifts his or her self-evaluation to the quality of the procedures that would facilitate economic development. One person showed me an updated data base that tracked every available site in his rapidly growing community. Another described the strategy of sending out customized packages—rather than simply publicity brochures—of descriptive material to companies that inquired about the city. They were attempting to act in a professional fashion.

The contrast between professional action, a controllable activity, and uncontrollable outcomes was described by an experienced Chamber official, when I asked him about what success meant to him.

Success . . . depends on whether you are results oriented or program oriented. I think when you have done your program well . . . we can't promise you results because we don't make the decisions. The best thing we can do is to develop and implement and maintain a professional economic development program, and the results are beyond us. . . . But success, in my term of reference, is when you have a fully developed, implemented, professionally operated program. I call that success. (Chamber 1)

Working with Business and Government

The professional obligations of the economic development practitioners might be to the overall community, to expand its tax base, or to provide increases in the amount of employment. However, practitioners felt that government and developmental boards encouraged formalistic actions that would have little effect in improving the local economy. In contrast, working with and for businesses might provide a more effective way of accomplishing something. Their efforts to satisfy business demands might associate their actions with resulting economic changes, no matter whether such changes would have occurred anyway. Working for business provided a way of achieving credit claiming for the practitioner.

In response to a direct question on whom do they really work for, and after some hemming and hawing, the head of a multicity agency responded:

I guess our philosophy is, when we are working with a company regarding a location, we are working for that company. That company is directing us. They are the boss. Okay. They are basically what we call our prospects. . . . Oftentimes they want something from the city. . . . I think the cities have grown to understand that, while . . . we are, over the long pull, working for the community. . . . We are, in fact, working for the company, and we are trying to get the best deal we can for the company. (Development Group 2)

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However, what might be good for a new company (and by implication the city) need not be to the advantage of other local firms.

So, really, what you provide is what the prospect asks [for]. . . . And, this is what a lot of our [local business] people don't understand. They say can you tell us who you are talking to and you say, you know you can't. . . . The prospect quarterbacks the visit. Now, if he says, okay, I'm open to your suggestions, then we have a plan; we take him, show him the city, and show him our industries. Give him every plus feature we can. But here again we are also honest with him. We don't try to misrepresent. There is nothing worse than to locate somebody on the basis of misrepresentation. They're mad and so is everybody else. So we're honest with them. (Chamber 1)

You bargain first with the company and then hope that the city is able to match the needs of the company. To illustrate this point, in a minidrama, an economic development practitioner symbolically addressed the city manager:

Well, you pay me to serve this client, and I am looking out for the best possible deal for this client . . . the client is the prospective business. I may bring you a deal that you don't think is in the best interest of the city. Your job is to turn it down . . . I'm still being paid by the city to work for the client . . . So, again, our job is to help these people with the project. . . . number one they are coming into a strange community . . . and we feel that once they show an interest in the community, it is our responsibility not only to tell them the positives but the negative things. (Development Group 1)

It seemed easier for practitioners to adopt a probusiness attitude. Throughout the interviews practitioners with private sector experience wondered about the effectiveness of people training in planning or community development in working with business.

I don't think there is anything as valuable as learning how business approaches things. I don't think that a lot of people coming out of a planning background [can do the job effectively]; they might have information about municipal business needs, but I think that, number one, a business person has a much different perception than a government employee. A business person has to live through those problems that a business is likely to encounter. . . . elected officials, they have this urgency they have to get something done before the next election, and this is not a quick fix kind of business we are in; you have to take the long view (Development Group 1)

The flexibility needed in business in contrast to the rule-bound behavior in government was shown by one of the more senior people in the economic development field. His complaint seemed to indicate the unwillingness of public officials to take risks in packaging economic development deals.

The private sector is easier to work with. Because I found a lot of public sector people are just protecting a little niche . . . they don't really want to stir anybody up, they can't be outspoken or they are gone, so they literally do what they have to do . . . does everything by the book, has no imagination, doesn't ask. He doesn't ask, "It doesn't say we can't do it, let's try it." That the kind of thinking I like, especially on financing projects. Those are the kinds of things you have to do. If you are wrong, they will tell you. What can they do to you? (Development Group 4)

In this proclient view of economic development work, local government should provide the transfers that business cannot afford or lacks the legal powers to accomplish.

The proper role of government is financing and incentives and to bridge the gap between a project that won't be economically feasible without it or to remove obstacles that an industry cannot remove for itself such as land assembly. (City ED 1)

Even more succinctly an official from a larger city claimed:

Local government basically has the power to hand out money in different ways and, that is basic, you know. That is basically what we do. We give out a tax abatement. We give out an IRB. We'll put in a road. We expend funds. (Planner 3)

It is even just for a city to expend the funds, since local government will receive the tax profits from such growth. The director of GEDCO, a not-for-profit development group, made a concise argument for government subsidizing risk rather than business.

Government will provide the facilities, and I think in terms of an industrial park; they have the financing, and, if GEDCO owned the industrial park, we would have to pay taxes on it, and then we would have to have an engineer and we don't have that kind of money . . . if sales don't go the way you project, you're in trouble; but, the city, they have financial resources. They can hold onto the land easier than a small private development corporation, they have engineers on their staff, they have planners . . . so I think the cities should invest in industrial parks, besides which, they are going to get the tax revenue. (Development Group 1)

Personal Responses to Working with Business

Economic development practitioners gained prestige through working with leading business people. This sense of prestige involves working with the movers and shakers while being part of the action. This theme was reflected by a Chamber's economic development official:

But talking about the ego gratification and the prestige, I am dealing with business owners and managers of large corporations, I have access to these people on a more regular and different basis than the people who work for them. . . . I do get to socialize with people who, from an income, from a social level, can buy and sell me ten times over before lunch. Obviously, you don't compete with them in the country club level. . . . But, again, there is the prestige of being included among those people for art openings, or other kinds of things. You are thought of as being a community leader in that respect even though . . . I drive a Datsun and they drive a you-know-what. (Chamber 2)

Another person responded similarly:

My picture is in the paper so often that, a lot of time, there is instant recognition. . . . There is a lot of self-gratification. A lot. Again, because I'm exposed and in a position of leadership with the movers and shakers. I mean I have lunch with the publisher of the paper three times a month. (Development Group 3)

It is not simply working with such people but being part of the actions that these movers and shakers bring about. The head of a development group argued, "By and large, the people we deal with want to be the movers and shakers. They want to be the ones who are successful. So there is an electricity there" (Development Group 1). Or as another economic development person in a smaller city stated when asked about the positive aspects of his job:

I like being a part of virtually everything major that happens. And I don't mean the Chamber does it all, but there aren't many things happening in [city] that we don't have some role in it or at least have some knowledge of it. . . . I like being part of what goes on.
(Chamber 1)

SPECULATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

By themselves, these interviews portray the frustrations of the economic development practitioners in attempting to bring about local economic improvements. They feel that they lack control over development, are often misunderstood at their jobs, and, against their better judgment, participate in an environment that encourages "shooting anything that flies and claiming anything that falls."

More broadly, the interviews suggest how public administrators or quasi-public administrators attempt to cope with uncertainty in their work. My evidence is based entirely on economic development practitioners. I suspect analogous processes hold for any public official working in areas of both high visibility and high uncertainty with an unpredictable technology.

Such practitioners attempt to find procedures and routines that provide a checklist of activities that they can accomplish. Many perform routine tasks, acting as liaison between business and local government, facilitating obtaining permits, or reconciling conflicting demands from separate parts of government. In general, they act as ombudsman for the business community. Others define their successes by providing information about the community, maintaining lists of sites for development, keeping on top of sources of local funding, and similar tasks.

Still, both ego and, perhaps, maintaining their jobs, require visible successes, successes that are obtainable only with the cooperation of businesses, especially those about to relocate or expand. Accordingly, these practitioners require ways of claiming credit for visible outcomes. They can receive public thanks from businesses by establishing "one-stop" clearance points for obtaining permits. Such attempts to have available a set of activities helpful to the business community leads economic development practitioners to act as a pressure group to provide incentives to the business community, incentives and concessions that some authors claim are public-to-private transfers.¹³

Whether we are talking about small accommodations or massive relocations for industrial development, the tilt seems to be toward the business community. It is through the day-in-day-out relationship that emerges as the practitioner tries to survive in a difficult work environment, that the public sector's bias toward business needs is increased. A set of business demands (or requests) becomes a checklist that changes an undefinable task into one with a set of concrete sequential steps. Certainty (at least of what to do) replaces the uncertainty that permeates the profession.

What is implied is that economic development practitioners will push for localities to make concessions so that they can show some progress in their work. The bias toward business emerges because it makes the practitioner appear as if he or she is accomplishing something. Such mechanisms are consistent with ideas presented by Stone in both his theory of system bias and his later elaborations of models of "ecological power" in which "the power-wielder is effective without having to engage in direct action to prevail over opposition or to prevent opposition from developing."¹⁴ Stone indicates how business gains an advantage merely because it is simpler and more bureaucratically advantageous for public officials to work with business. As he explains:

A favorable predisposition might come about in any of three ways. . . . First, and most obviously, a group could achieve a positional advantage through the selection of

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spokesmen to serve its interest in strategically vital offices. . . . Second, a group might enjoy a positional advantage by virtue of the fact that the occupants of important places in the governmental system share the group's perspective on leading policy questions. Third, a group might possess an advantage in that their leaders have informal ties to and enjoy the respect of major officeholders. Since their views are expressed in a relationship of mutual trust, the group leaders can expect a sympathetic hearing.¹⁵

The position and network linkages of the economic development practitioner satisfy all three conditions for businesses' obtaining a positional advantage.

Equally important, this "bias" is shown in a low key fashion. It is the sum of many small decisions rather than one or two dramatic capitulations through which the public sector tilts toward the business community. As Stone argues, "Lower visibility provided a protective cover under which advocacy could take place relatively free from the sanctions of unfavored groups."¹⁶ For the economic development practitioners, business people dominate supervising boards, the practitioners see the greater efficiency of business over government and certainly indicated respect for successful business people.

Speculating more generally, it appears that the interviews provide suggestions about some mechanisms of public-private cooperation. It seems that public-private cooperation is likely to occur when there is uncertainty about the task to be performed and there is ambivalence on the part of the public sector in terms of either the effectiveness of the technology to perform the task or the values reflected by the use of the technology.

When such circumstances exist, and business people and government people are asked to work together, the bias toward business values is reinforced. The mere fact that the public sector has asked for cooperation communicates that public officials feel the task is beyond them. Yet, the business people consulted are those who have been successful in their respective careers. As such, they bring to the public-private board strong beliefs about what values should be reflected in decisions. They are able to impress these beliefs upon their public sector counterparts, not because of any superiority in talent or resources, but simply because they seem to know, while the public sector counterparts only get involved in such cooperative arrangements because of an uncertainty about what to do. The private sector makes suggestions, suggestions naturally enough in its own self-interest, and in lieu of other viable alternatives, such suggestions are adopted.

Clearly, the interview material presented on economic development practitioners does not prove this model. However, the material is consistent with it. The practitioners find the tasks they confront and the technologies to solve the problems uncertain and that business seems to know what it wants more so than does government. Though realistically cynical about the efficacy of their activities in bringing about local economic development, they undertake probusiness activities anyway. And, to make such activities psychologically easier, either as cause or as consequence, they seem to identify with the leaders of the business community.

In their efforts to cope with an uncertain and difficult job, the economic development practitioners, as reasonable people facing administrative uncertainty, make decisions that tilt the system toward the business community.

NOTES

1. The interviews were conducted while preparing a survey on economic development practitioners. A total of 20 practitioners working within one day's driving distance of DeKalb, Illinois, were chosen to represent different types of economic developers. Of the 20 people, several were from utility companies and banks, and one was from a consulting firm. This article focuses only on the dozen individuals who work either for a city, a city-based Chamber of Commerce, or urban-based public-private economic development organizations. A total of three are city planners working in economic development, three are city economic development specialists, two work for a chamber or an economic development organization housed in a chamber, and four work for a public-private economic development

organization. Their names and locations have been disguised. I followed a loose protocol in formulating the vocabulary of the survey questionnaire, but, more often, I let the respondents discuss the issues they thought would be most useful to my survey. As the work progressed, it became clear that these practitioners were presenting far richer material than needed to design a survey. Much of what they said might constitute a chapter on economic development practice for a book like Studs Terkel's *Working* (New York: Random House, 1972). All the interviews were examined using the logic of analytical induction as described in Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (New York: Aldine, 1967). No themes are included in this article unless they were mentioned by at least three of the practitioners. Though the quotes are chosen selectively for clarity and color, unless indicated in the body of the article, the nonquoted respondents expressed similar ideas to those whose words are presented here.

2. These suggestions are part of the broader question of public-private cooperation in economic development. It is generally assumed that such cooperation is necessary, a point I am willing to concede, as well as good for the common weal, a point I am not willing to concede. Contrast the panegyric to public-private cooperation found in R. Scott Fosler and Renee A. Berger, eds., *Public-Private Partnership in American Cities: Seven Case Studies* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1982); Cheryl A. Farr, ed., *Shaping the Local Economy: Current Perspectives on Economic Development* (Washington, DC: International City Management Association, 1984); P. Porter and D. Sweet, eds., *Rebuilding America's Cities: Roads to Recovery* (New Brunswick, NJ: The Center for Urban Policy Research, 1984); or Howard J. Grossman, "Regional Public-Private Partnerships: Forging the Future," *Economic Development Quarterly* 1 (1987): 52-59 with the more cynical interpretations contained in such works as L. Thompson, "The Politics of Economic Development: A Qualitative Case Study," *Urban Resource* 1 (1983): 33-40; Bryan D. Jones and Lynn W. Bachelor with Carter Wilson, *The Sustaining Hand: Community Leadership and Corporate Power* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1986); Susan Fainstein, Norman Fainstein, Richard Hill, Dennis Judd, and Michael Smith, *Restructuring the City: The Political Economy of Urban Redevelopment* (New York: Longman, 1983); David Fasenfast, "Community Politics and Urban Redevelopment: Poletown, Detroit and General Motors," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 22 (1986): 101-123; and John Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). The former praise the accomplishments of public-private partnerships, the latter question, who benefits?

3. Clarence N. Stone, *Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent: System Bias in the Urban Renewal Program of Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1976) and Clarence N. Stone, "Power and Social Complexity," in *Community Power: Directions for Future Research*, ed. Robert J. Wasté (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986), pp. 77-113. I would like to thank Richard Feiock for the suggestion of interpreting my material in light of Stone's theory.

4. Stone, *Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent*, p. 189.

5. Stone, "Power and Social Complexity," p. 96.

6. Terry F. Buss and F. Steven Redburn, "The Politics of Revitalization: Public Subsidies and Private Interests," in *The Future of Winter Cities*, ed. Gary Gappert (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1987): p. 292.

7. By a "checklist," I mean a set of definable and achievable tasks. As literature on evaluation points out, there is a tendency for people to want to be evaluated on process measures, which are potentially controllable, rather than less controllable outcome measures. A checklist is simply a list of processes to be accomplished.

8. Though already somewhat dated, Kenneth M. Dolbeare, *Democracy at Risk: The Politics of Economic Renewal* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1984) provides a good summary of the themes that enter into this debate.

9. Later, I discuss some of their criticisms of local government. I suspect their criticisms of business are primarily targeted at the smaller, local businesses.

10. For a typology of different types of linkage functions in the public sector, see Herbert J. Rubin, "The Meshing Organization as a Catalyst for Municipal Coordination," *Administration and Society* 16 (1984): 215-238.

11. For another discussion of handling uncertainty in the public sector, see Robert McGowan and John Stevens, "Local Governments' Initiatives in a Climate of Uncertainty," *Public Administration Review* 43 (1983): 127-136.

12. For summaries of the "tools" and concessions that practitioners have at their disposal, see Ernest Sternberg, "A Practitioner's Classification of Economic Development Policy Instruments, with Some Inspiration from Political Economy," *Economic Development Quarterly* 1 (1987): 149-161. John P. Blair and Robert Premus, "Major Factors in Industrial Location: A Review," *Economic Development Quarterly* 1 (1987): 72-85, present summaries that indicate concessions have little affect upon business location decisions. Recently Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin have indicated that concession making is most likely in cities least able to afford them. See for example, Herbert J. Rubin, "Local Economic Development Organizations and the Activities of Small Cities in Encouraging Economic Growth," *Policy Studies Journal* 14 (1986): 363-388 and Irene S. Rubin and Herbert J. Rubin, "Structural Theories and Urban Fiscal Stress," in *Cities in Stress*, ed. M. Gottdiener (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1986): 177-198. Edward J. Ottensmeyer, Craig R. Humphrey, and Rodney A. Erickson, "Local Industrial Development Groups: Perspectives and Profiles," *Policy Studies Review* 6 (1987): 569-583 indicate that the directors of local economic development groups do not see a direct connection between their actions and economic development progress.

13. For examples, see Todd Swanstrom, *The Crisis of Growth Politics: Cleveland, Kucinich and the Challenge of Urban Populism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985). Also, see Jones and Bachelor with Carter Wilson, *The Sustaining Hand* and Fasenfast, "Community Politics and Urban Development," pp. 101-123.

14. Stone, "Power and Social Complexity," p. 105.

15. Stone, *Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent*, pp. 18-19.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 197.