



CDFS-1563-10

# Involving Volunteers in a Community-Led Business Retention and Expansion Program

Joe Lucente

Assistant Professor and Extension Educator  
Ohio State University Extension and Ohio Sea Grant, Lucas County

## Introduction

Existing businesses create most of the jobs in local communities. They are a major contributor to a local government's tax base and are the real economic engines of the local economy. A community may choose to conduct a Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) survey in order to better understand its current local economic climate. The program is often led by a local coordinator who serves as a point person. However, the coordinator cannot accomplish the BR&E survey alone. It is important to enlist a team of community volunteers to help accomplish this task. The team is known as the BR&E task force and is recruited by the local BR&E coordinator for the various skill sets they provide. To better illustrate this point, think of their role in this scenario: The BR&E coordinator is the quarterback of the team. A quarterback alone cannot win the game without the help of team players. Thus, the role of the task force is likened to that of the offensive line, running backs, and wide receivers. The components work together to forge ahead and win. However, like team sports, the strength of the team (the task force) is critical.

## What background should the coordinator consider for an effective BR&E task force member?

The strength of any successful task force is tied directly to its "team" of community players. An effective task force often consists of the following types of professionals: a mix

of community business leaders, development officials, local government officials, education officials, religious and civic leaders, retired executives, and professionals. The most important thing to consider is the individual talent that a task force member should possess in relation to human relations, media relations, report writing, and computer, analytical, and organizational skills.

## How many people should be on the task force and for how long?

Typically, the number of task force members that the BR&E coordinator may want to recruit varies from program to program and is dependent on available resources, the business survey area, and the size of the local community. Some communities have been known to utilize anywhere from ten to thirty task force members composed of the aforementioned types of professionals. One year is the ideal time frame for service to the task force. A BR&E program should be continuous in its role in community and economic development and in its mission to better understand and help provide solutions to local businesses.

## What are the specific responsibilities/expectations of a volunteer BR&E task force?

The role of the volunteer task force in a local community BR&E program is multi-faceted. The specific responsibilities of the task force may include the following:

- Serving as a sounding board and providing advice and guidance to the BR&E coordinator in order to help set clear, attainable, and manageable goals for the BR&E program. Community-minded people that make up a task force often have an increased understanding for what is happening in the business community and are able to communicate that information to the coordinator. Additionally, the task force can also provide assistance in securing endorsements from local supporting organizations to help in publicizing the program and its benefits to the community.
- Working with the coordinator to serve on various subcommittees (such as media relations, data entry, analysis and reporting, policy, etc.) within the task force itself. It is important to be able to divide tasks among volunteer members to best utilize individual skill sets and avoid duplication of effort for overall group efficiency.
- Participating in the development of the business survey since the survey sets the tone for the type of information that is collected from local businesses. Also, the volunteer task force should conduct business site visits with the BR&E coordinator or other task force members in order to secure survey information. A local task force reviews the survey results and responds to the needs and concerns expressed by businesses (NRCRD). This serves as an important function because it can enable volunteer task force members and the coordinator to address critical issues that may arise.
- Participating in action planning and program assessment. This helps set a framework of looking ahead to identify action items (and to plan who will accomplish them, and how and when they will be accomplished). This also allows the coordinator and the task force to assess the overall performance of the BR&E program and its performance in addressing the needs of the local business community.
- Publicly announcing the results of the BR&E program. This step is beneficial in letting the public know who the volunteer task force members are and what their commitment is to the local business community.

- Welcoming new volunteers. Doing so will ensure a smooth transition in bringing new members up to speed for the continuous flow of the BR&E program.

### Conclusion

Involving volunteers in a community-led BR&E program can be an effective way to gauge the pulse of the local business community. The task force can be instrumental to overall program success by providing backgrounds rich in diverse experience pertaining to economic development and business operations. These members should be influential, knowledgeable business and community leaders representing a broad range of community interests (Woods et al., p. 5). Ensuring broad community representation is the best way to address the number of issues that will surely arise when dealing with community businesses. Broad representation can also help community businesses find the correct resources for their problems.

As with any team, task force members should be considered for their various skills, knowledge, and experience. They should also be able to process information in a timely manner and communicate concerns to the BR&E coordinator so that he or she may follow up with businesses in need.

### Further Reading

Ohio Business Retention & Expansion Initiative. *Welcome to the Ohio BR&E Initiative*. Ohio State University Extension. 19 February 2010 <<http://localecon.osu.edu/BRnE>>.

### References

- Woods, M., N. Williams, C. Allen, and J. Frye. *Retention and Expansion: A Local Economic Development Strategy, Circular E-928*. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, Oklahoma State University. 5. <<http://pods.dasn.okstate.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-2972/E-928.pdf>>.
- Business Retention and Expansion Visitation Program*. <[http://nercrd.psu.edu/Publications/BR&E/BREV\\_taskforce.pdf](http://nercrd.psu.edu/Publications/BR&E/BREV_taskforce.pdf)>.

## EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA.

Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension  
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868