

Recruiting businesses changes, but doesn't end amid virus crisis, officials say

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Publix CEO Todd Jones (left) and N.C. Gov. Roy Cooper attend the Publix distribution center ground-breaking ceremony in February

GREENSBORO — The business of recruiting jobs to the region doesn't grind to a halt when the travel and handshakes stop.

But scores of Type-A men and women who doggedly look for new businesses to lure to town have had to pivot to new strategies for what they do.

"You don't go dark in a time like this," said Brent Christensen, CEO of the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce. "If anything, you overcommunicate and that's what we're doing."

Christensen said that means reaching out to companies from outside the area but, at this crucial time, also contacting local companies, whether they be in hospitality, retail or any category that's being hit hard by the coronavirus outbreak.

In the end, helping local companies keeps the economy strong and makes it more attractive to outsiders when times improve.

"Economic development prospects will take note of the communities that are most resilient," Christensen said.

Hundreds of businesses once on the hunt for new locations are turning inward to keep the doors open and employees working. But others may be searching for ways to expand more urgently than they have in years.

Some of those businesses being hurt are obvious: Travel and tourism, airlines and big-jet builders, restaurant chains and retail centers are all on hold as their customers temporarily vanish.

For Christensen and other business recruiters, that means working to connect the companies in North Carolina and the Triad most affected by COVID-19 with experts and resources they might need.

Christensen said the chamber is holding conference calls every day that are open to its 1,300 members. Those calls have featured Small Business Administration loan experts one day and a business lawyer the next, among others.

Even the state's most far-reaching industry hunters are turning toward the once-strong business sectors that need help quickly.

"We'll be focusing on where we can have the most near-term impact, and that is on assisting affected businesses and individuals already here in the state," Christopher Chung, the CEO of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina, wrote in an email. His group is a partnership between state government and private donors.

"Impacted companies include those experiencing supply chain disruptions or workforce disruptions related to COVID-19. It also includes businesses in the tourism and hospitality

industry that are feeling the brunt of the economic impact. For those companies especially, we're helping them navigate and connect to potential resources that can assist," Chung wrote.

He said, however, many companies want to step up production and hiring because they make or want to begin making "high-demand products and services" such as personal protective equipment for medical personnel.

One national business consultant said that could lead to a better future for some industries in North Carolina, even as others suffer from collapsed business demand.

"We're getting a lot of interest from our clients in the life science field," said John Boyd, a national business consultant based in Princeton, N.J., who helps companies find new sites to open operations. "So much of our nation's pharmaceuticals and medical devices are made in China that it is just strictly intolerable. It's really hitting home. What you will be seeing is a 'reshoring' of manufacturing in the life science industry."

What does that mean for North Carolina? It means that the Research Triangle and Piedmont Triad — what Boyd calls the "I-40 Corridor"— are top targets for manufacturers and research companies who want to be in areas where those industries are already strong.

"Your geography is in the bullseye," he said, because Greensboro has a workforce highly skilled in manufacturing and, heading east, the medical and academic communities are generating experts who can help companies find workers for their expansions back in the United States that can't be interrupted by international crises.

Christensen, Chung and Boyd all agree that communities must continue to balance those outside contacts and deals they were pursuing before coronavirus struck.

Loren Hill, president of the High Point Economic Development Corp., said companies are still contacting his group. And he heard from a new client Friday afternoon, even as millions of people were setting up their remote offices.

"We are reaching out and reassuring them," Hill said.

Stan Kelly, whose Piedmont Triad Partnership is an umbrella group that connects Hill, Christensen, Winston-Salem leaders and others together in the region, said his group is adjusting to the fact that many companies will suspend their searches for new locations at this time.

"We are certainly making changes to our short-term marketing plans as global companies are busy responding to their employees and customers related to the virus and are not focused on new locations during this turbulent time," Kelly said in an email.

Chung, Christensen and Hill said that they are continuing to talk with those companies that are interested, setting up video conferences and sharing data.

That's one thing, Christensen said, that most companies are well-stocked with: More data about cities across the country is available to companies hoping to expand than ever before.

That's why relationships, Christensen said, continue to make the difference in a world where many communities may statistically stack up evenly.

For that reason, Chung said, his statewide group will continue to pursue those leads.

They're "even circling back with old projects and leads that 'went cold' in the past couple of years but that may be open to restarting their search for a new location," Chung said.

When those companies reenter the marketplace and revive their expansion plans, Boyd said, they may see a changed economy.

After being left adrift with Chinese imports on hold for weeks, some companies will be looking for ways to invest in U.S.-based suppliers and distribution channels, Boyd said.

"Incentives will be more robust than ever before — politicians will be inclined to pony up," Boyd said. "Even for those people that are fundamentally opposed to incentives, they may view it as a necessary evil to get beyond this current crisis."

And while those companies are looking for incentives, they may find that workers, even those that have been unemployed, will be speaking out loudly in favor of the \$15 minimum wage, as their value has increased during this crisis, Boyd said.

Those workers are being seen as essential — from restaurant cooks to cash-register operators — to keep supplies and food coming to a traumatized public, Boyd said.

"That movement will get a loud voice coming out of this crisis because of those unskilled workers — their brand is going to be enhanced," he said. "Calling them first responders isn't out of line."