THE BEYOND SERIES | ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE | ABSTRACT

Beyond the Deal

From Economic Development Recruiter to Community Strategist

The economic-development director is no longer simply a recruiter. The job is becoming Community Strategist.

Lead generation, site selection and incentives still matter, but they are downstream activities. The harder work is upstream: reading how markets are changing, helping leaders choose what growth fits the community, building the capacity good investment requires and refusing projects that consume more future than they create.

THE NEW PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The economic-development professional must move upstream—from salesperson for place to Community Strategist who helps leadership choose what growth to pursue, builds the systems that support it, connects appropriate investment to public objectives and measures what the community gains over time.

THE COMMUNITY STRATEGIST MODEL

READ	CHOOSE	BUILD	CONNECT	LEARN
Interpret markets, institutions, capacity, risks and the community's strategic position.	Help leadership decide what kinds of growth fit public objectives and constraints.	Develop the infrastructure, talent, sites, partnerships and institutional capacity strategy requires.	Match suitable private investment to community direction without treating the community as a product.	Measure outcomes, update assumptions and carry lessons into the next decision.

A DIFFERENT OPERATING SYSTEM

COMMUNITY AS PRINCIPAL	EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP	STRATEGIC MEASURES
The practitioner's first duty is to the community's long-term strategy, not a transaction count.	The role belongs inside the leadership system where cross-functional choices are made.	Track capacity, fit, public value, implementation and learning—not leads and announcements alone.

EXECUTIVE IMPLICATION

PROFESSIONAL SHIFT	INSTITUTIONAL SHIFT
Recruitment should execute strategy; it should not substitute for strategy.	Build a repeatable executive operating system rather than relying on a heroic individual.

BOUNDARY AND USE

The model is a practical proposition grounded in established economic-development practice. Its application will vary with institutional authority, market conditions and community scale.

THE GOVERNING IDEA

Stop selling the community as a product. Start governing growth as a strategy for the community.

OFFICIAL MANUSCRIPT

David M. Smitherman, Beyond the Deal: From Economic Development Recruiter to Community Strategist. The Beyond Series, Bear Strategies, 2026.

CONTINUE THE WORK

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