



Written by: David Braton

We can all relate to a driver who doesn't stop and ask for directions. We also know people who for some reason never check a map, even though it's at their fingertips, to see where they are going. Fortunately, leaders in our community stopped the car, got out and asked for directions on our economic development journey. Community leaders, city and county officials, Main Street, Chamber of Commerce and Gage County Economic Development hired AngelouEconomics to provide the city and county an economic strategy. The results of their work will be presented Monday, Aug. 16, in the Hevelone Center at Beatrice High School. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m.

Presentations by AngelouEconomics and community leaders will be from 9 a.m.-11 a.m. We strongly encourage all residents of the county to attend. To most of us economic development is just too much to grasp. **Simply put, economic development is about creation of better jobs.** Most residents may not realize it, but Beatrice has been an economic model for other communities in the region, even internationally. In the late 1990s the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. produced a documentary on Beatrice's success. We've expanded manufacturing and have an enviable community college, a solid infrastructure, a great school system and a historical downtown. Beatrice has enjoyed these successes and has maintained business and population. But we must accept the economic world's saying that if you aren't growing, you're losing ground.

AngelouEconomics received hundreds of surveys from county residents. In fact, our community response was overwhelming to them. Dozens of individuals also participated in personal interviews. The results reflect what the community thinks are the needs and wants of Beatrice and Gage County. AngelouEconomics used its resources and years of experience to interpret these findings and apply what they believe is a model to continue the past economic success of Beatrice and Gage County.

Having this kind of study does not guarantee economic development success. It can be a road map to Beatrice's economic growth. It can be the catalyst that creates new jobs, more business, and most importantly, more residents. But like the driver who doesn't take the time to look at the map on the journey, this economic road map is only good if we use it. Leaders in the community took a bold step in asking for directions. Now the map, known as a Strategic Plan, will be given to us. Now we must use it.

Reaction to the idea of using AngelouEconomics has been mixed. Some say we aren't going to learn anything we don't already know. Others say it won't do any good. Some question if we'll see a return on our \$65,000 investment. After an initial review we've heard there isn't any earth shattering ideas that will take Beatrice and Gage County to the next level. The strategic plan calls for us to first organize the trip, start our engines, and then increase speed to get us to our economic development destination. That means economic infrastructure needs to be reviewed and the economic development community, that being all the sponsoring entities, moving in the same direction, preferably on the same bus.

The plan suggests a "one stop economic shop." AngelouEconomics recommends being customer friendly when it comes to acquiring building permits, dealing with zoning issues and

the like. You want a variety of restaurants and shops? That will come AngelouEconomics says when you give people a reason to come to the center of your city with events, maybe establishing a business incubator, educating our young people to become entrepreneurs, and providing a community atmosphere where people want to work and live.

We feel AngelouEconomics has hit the mark in its strategic plan. It is not the perfect map to economic success in Beatrice and Gage County. By using this as our guide we'll change our thinking on economic development. We may find our path takes us on a byway not even described in this report. That's okay. Economic development is a journey that has detours and bumps in the road. It's not necessarily about factories and manufacturing. It's small business, tourism and bringing people back to their roots of Nebraska, particularly Gage County, to enjoy life and work.

We encourage our readers to come Monday with an open mind. In other words, see the map.

We challenge our leaders to listen to the experts. Test their recommendations. **Dare to accept change to be a better economic development community. In other words, use the map.**