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Texas consulting firm steers CRDA action plan

By Dennis Quick, Senior Staff Writer

Next year the Charleston Regional Development Alliance will begin implementing a five-year economic development plan for the Lowcountry. What, exactly, that plan will entail depends on the research and recommendations of Angelou Economics, an economic development consultancy based in Austin, Texas.

The CRDA selected Angelou Economics out of nine firms that submitted proposals. The competition got whittled down to four finalists, and based on its presentation, cost and personnel, Angelou Economics won. The firm began its Lowcountry economic study in August and will present its findings to the alliance in January.

Additionally, Angelou Economics was the only firm that proposed a temporary web site for the Lowcountry's economic development project. The web site, www.ForwardCharleston.com, expected to be launched this month, will include a project overview, project status reports, an online survey and a discussion board in which Lowcountry residents express their opinions about the region's economic development efforts and a calendar of upcoming town meetings and other events pertaining to the project.

Angelou Economics is analyzing the region's clusters—interrelated businesses and industries sharing markets, suppliers, technologies and employee pools. The cluster analysis will help determine for the region which kinds of businesses to recruit. The CRDA will use Angelou Economics' findings as a roadmap for luring businesses that pay higher-than-average wages and help improve the region's quality of life. Such businesses tend to be knowledge-based and technology-driven.

Since 1995 the 12-member firm, whose services have been employed by cities as different as Orlando and Santa Fe, by states as contrasting as North Dakota and New York, and by countries such as Portugal and the Czech Republic, has tailored its recommendations to its clients.

"They definitely do not believe in a cookie-cutter economic strategy," says David Bradley, president of the Greater Mount Airy Chamber of Commerce in northwest North Carolina. In November 2002 the Greater Mount Airy Chamber hired Angelou Economics to help offset the thousands of textile jobs lost in an eight-county region, including Mount Airy's Surrey County. Angelou Economics created a plan for each county and then rolled each county plan into a regional plan.

“They did a marvelous job,” says Bradley. “We’ve seen significant conceptual growth.” For instance, thanks to Angelou Economics’ recommendations, Mount Airy—a hub for some 100,000 shoppers—is creating an entertainment industry and to that end has received \$6 million in private investments. Additionally, the region has received \$1 million in industrial grants.

“First, we begin by conducting an analysis of local economic conditions,” explains Amy Holloway, Angelou Economics economic development vice president and the leader of the firm’s Lowcountry project. “We look at the community’s demographics, current businesses, workforce statistics, costs of living and doing business.

“Second, we believe wholeheartedly in the value of engaging the entire community in crafting a strategy,” Holloway continues. “Oftentimes, the best ideas come from within, so we spend a lot of time talking with and gathering input from the local community. Our public input process involves three techniques: conducting focus groups, one-to-one interviews and an online survey.”

Business leaders, elected officials, economic developers, education leaders and others participate in the focus groups and person-to-person interviews. “It’s a very diverse, very inclusive approach, and that’s another reason Angelou was chosen,” says Alliance President and CEO David Ginn. “Their proposal balanced the strategic planning and implementation side with the inclusive side. They talk to a lot of people in the community.”

Angelou Economics then writes a community assessment report. The report compiles the firm’s research data and the public input “to identify the community’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats,” says Holloway. “This report forms a base on which we can develop recommendations for improving the chances technology companies will flourish in Charleston.”

Once the report is completed, Angelou Economics targets the industries the community or region wants to attract and retain.

“We consider the community’s goals when identifying targets,” Holloway points out. “For communities interested in technology development, we will identify technology activities that complement the local business conditions. A technology target may be, for example, a sector of the software industry that supplies existing local businesses. It could also be a sector of the life sciences industry that needs to be located near [research and development] activities that are occurring within a local university.”

The firm’s final step is to write the strategic plan economic developers will use as a guide. Holloway notes that the plan’s recommendations are aimed at either improving local conditions—workforce development and education, business climate (taxes, incentives, cost of doing business, entrepreneurial re­sources), sites and

infrastructure—to meet the needs of targeted businesses or promoting the region to targeted businesses.

Holloway points out that it takes five to 10 years to feel the impact of an economic development strategy.

“We usually recommend that our clients spend the first one to two years after a plan is developed fixing internal problems and ramping up their marketing activities prior to going out and recruiting their target audiences,” says Holloway. “Then, it may take another two to three years of consistent marketing activities for their brand name to become well known and companies to begin expanding to the community.”

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