

Recommended Strategies to Improve Perceptions of Economic Development

Michigan Economic Developers Association

March 1, 2020





**PUBLIC SECTOR
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Introduction

In spring of 2019, the Michigan Economic Developers Association (MEDA) engaged Public Sector Consultants (PSC) to develop and test a plan for increasing awareness and improving perceptions of economic development. After development and testing in one community, the lessons, documented here, are shared with MEDA's members in other communities across Michigan.

In order to select an economic development organization (EDO) to pilot the effort, MEDA offered the opportunity to participate to all its member organizations. Several nominees were reviewed and MEDA's advocacy committee selected Bay Future, Inc. (BFI)—the EDO for Bay County, Michigan—to participate in the six-month pilot because it was the best representation of the average EDO in Michigan and it had the resources to fully participate in this pilot project. Together, MEDA, BFI, and PSC worked as the project team.

The project team took the following steps to develop and implement the pilot:

1. Identified priority stakeholder groups, essential tactics, and strategic messages. The stakeholder groups prioritized for this project were local officials (elected and permanent staff), investors, and BFI's board of directors.
2. Developed a workplan with more than 100 ideas for communications activities for priority stakeholder groups across five primary tactics—website updates, personal outreach, print material creation or enhancement, email marketing strategy, and media outreach. These tactics used existing BFI resources, with staff time being the primary commitment. The workplan is included as Appendix A.
3. Conducted an email survey of BFI's contacts to measure their perceptions of economic development.
4. Met regularly, from April to October, to prioritize workplan implementation and support BFI, the organization responsible for implementation (both direct expenses and staff time).
5. Resurveyed the same group in October to determine if their perceptions of economic development changed. The report prepared by PSC after the October survey is included as Appendix B.

In six months, BFI's survey respondents:

- Reported an increased understanding of economic development¹
- Broadened their expectations of economic developers' roles²
- Increased their trust in BFI³

The project team does not presume that the activities undertaken as part of this work were the only reason for these positive shifts in perception; it does, however, believe they played a significant role. While the activities do require human resources, many are otherwise low or no cost.

¹ Survey respondents who reported their understanding of economic development as "very well" or "moderately well" increased 5 percent between the May and November surveys.

² When asked to identify the activities that are the responsibility of economic developers, 6 percent more respondents expected economic developers to attract and retain businesses and support entrepreneurs in a community in May than in November.

³ When asked whether BFI is an organization they can rely on, 9 percent more respondents answered positively in November than in May. This is because those who answered "I don't know" in May answered "yes" in November.

No single communications tactic will lead to significant shifts in perception; instead, incremental changes are more effective in changing perceptions. Strategies should be considered in light of an EDO's resources and customized to meet its needs. Based on BFI's implementation of pilot project activities, MEDA's EDO insight, and PSC's expertise in strategic communications, the project team has developed recommendations for communities that would like to see a shift in perception of economic development. The team is optimistic that with sustained efforts around some of these activities, perception of economic development could shift in other communities.

Recommended Strategies

The following recommendations include selected examples of how BFI employed workplan tactics that they believed would work for their audience. Unless otherwise stated, some recommendations do not have specific examples due to confidentiality concerns.

Recommendation One

Ensure EDO messaging and imagery connects economic development and quality of life.

Early in the pilot, the project team raised a concern that not all stakeholders were connecting economic development activity to a higher quality of life. The team worked together to brainstorm what quality of life means in Bay County and the list included the quality of multigenerational connections in the community, easy access to a Great Lake, and the county's affordable cost of living, among many others. With an awareness that a region's perceived quality of life can impact attraction and retention, the project team recommended BFI ensure its communications—written or graphic—include content representing a desirable quality of life. This also helps other audiences connect BFI (economic development) with this idea.

During the pilot, the project team identified that BFI's video banner on its website largely included traditional images of economic development—build sites, manufacturing facilities, and drone images of Bay City. It did not speak to the quality of life in Bay County and was not serving BFI as best it could. With this information, BFI quickly developed new content that featured images of people enjoying the community's amenities and integrated these with the existing images of build sites, manufacturing facilities, and drone images of the waterfront.

Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Ensure communications—written or graphic—include content representing a desirable quality of life (the best things about the community).
- Incorporate high-quality images of people in electronic and printed materials.
- Seek quotes from local business leaders about the region's quality of life from their perspective. Use this content strategically across electronic and print materials.
- Educate the community about the EDO's role in placemaking.

Recommendation Two

Highlight EDOs' role in economic development successes whenever possible.

While few—if any—economic development deals are the result of a single entity, many EDOs do not clearly communicate their role in attraction and retention activities. In order to establish trust with its board and investors especially, it is critical for an EDO to share accomplishments with the community. This can help build trust and solidify the community's understanding about the value of EDOs and what they can do in the future.

The project team recognizes this recommendation can have challenges. There are several ways to approach this recommendation while avoiding exaggerating or marginalizing a partner. First, it is important to discuss what the investors or members helped make possible and share credit when appropriate. Several wording choices could include:

- “Together with our partners . . .”
- “In collaboration with . . .”
- “Bringing together city officials and [insert name of business partners], we . . .”
- “Thanks to your investment, we . . .”

It is also imperative that all partners are identified and recognized. Forgetting even one when all others are recognized can be just as damaging to an important relationship, or even more so, than ignoring all of them.

Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Acknowledge all partners and share credit.
- Profile a business leader or community member who can share the value of the EDO's role in attracting or retaining a business, placemaking, or other EDO activities.
- Have prepared stories on hand for conversations about the EDO's role in a deal. These opportunities may arise in unexpected settings, so having a few ready is worthwhile.
- Publicly thank everyone who helped close a deal after the project is completed. This can be done on social media, or email newsletters, or could be an ad in a local paper—be creative, inclusive, and collaborative to make sure sensitivities are considered.

Recommendation Three

Create personal connections in mass communications whenever possible.

Websites, email newsletters, and other mass communication tools are effective ways to ensure a broad reach. However, those mediums can often feel sterile, informational, or impersonal. To help demystify economic development activity and build business relationships that can serve an EDO's mission, it can be valuable to incorporate the voices, images, and contact information of EDO staff, board, and investors into mass communications.

No matter the tactic, considering interpersonal relationships and connections between real people helps individuals connect with one another and can improve engagement. Providing high-quality headshots alongside contact information not only benefits prospective investors from outside the community, but also helps the reader make connections they might not if they were lacking this information.

During the pilot, BFI paid attention to this recommendation and shifted the tone of its messaging in email newsletters, featured its contact information more prominently on the website, and added staff capacity to conduct more face-to-face meetings with investors and other parts of the community.

On August 22, 2019, BFI posted an announcement on Facebook differently than it might have before. The announcement notified readers about BFI's new office location and included a photo of three BFI staff outside the new space. Including a cell phone image taken for the purpose of the social media content was a new activity. The engagement with this post was more than double its next-highest engagement rate.

Bay Future, Inc. Facebook Post



Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Prioritize personal contact with important audiences, e.g., board members, community partners, elected officials, and investors.
- Ensure that people who do visit the EDO's website know there are real people based in the community who are available to help. Include high-quality headshots and contact information on nearly every page of the website or ensure that the website has a page dedicated to providing the same information along with a concise explanation of who to contact for what purpose.
- Profile the EDO's staff, board, and investors into mass communications, such as email newsletters.
- Invest in high-quality headshots of staff and board for the website and other materials to help create connection.

Recommendation Four

Use social media and email newsletters to drive traffic to EDOs' priority Web content.

Early in the pilot, the project team identified the need to update and enhance BFI's website. An organization's website is a cost-effective medium for building awareness and trust. Ideally, every channel—social media, email, print, and relationship development—will boost user traffic.

Some sections of BFI’s website lacked important information, like contact information, or had not been updated recently. PSC recommended that website content be concise and avoid specific references to time, such as phrases like “Last spring, we . . .” Keeping a log of webpages to periodically check for accuracy and setting calendar reminders can be useful in ensuring content stays relevant.

After a few critical updates were made to the website (e.g., the Welcome and About pages, among others), BFI implemented a brief email and social media campaign that directed readers to these updated pages, which saw noticeable traffic increases after that campaign.

Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Make website content timeless, avoiding references to time, such as “last year,” so that content can last and be used to support social media and other communications activities. When a story is included in a newsletter, online, or in a social media post, do not assume that everyone has seen the content—repurpose content with appropriate adjustments across mediums.
- Keep a log of webpages that should periodically be reviewed for accuracy. Some of those include staff and board listings, local attraction incentives, and sections on recent news.
- Educate the community on EDO activity or topics by pointing social media and newsletter readers to pages of the website that can help the community make sense of economic development current events.

Recommendation Five

Prepare high-quality, value-added engagement and learning opportunities for local officials.

Bay County has 18 municipalities with local officials who can serve as partners or barriers to economic development. BFI has a history of engaging local officials and educating them about economic development tools. In this area, the project team only undertook minor changes to the existing practice.

Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Invite local officials to an annual meeting.
- Attend or host periodic lunches with local officials to connect and provide them with resources.
- Meet with newly elected local officials who may be unfamiliar with economic development tools and provide resources they could refer to if needed.
- Create digestible content for the agenda of any meeting with local officials and include basic background, state why the EDO exists, and identify what it has done for the community.
- Include local officials who are already economic development champions in meetings with those new to economic development. If a peer explains what the EDO does and articulates its value, that endorsement can help build trust.
- Follow up with a substantive email or handwritten note that thanks these officials for their time and articulates the openness to partnership.

Recommendation Six

Face-to-face engagement with investors helps build trust and connection.

EDOs will benefit from having an engagement strategy for top investors and should be making as many face-to-face connections with them as possible. Even the highest-quality electronic or print communications cannot surpass personal relationship-building efforts in terms of impact. Websites, email newsletters, and large events can support strategic relationship development, but they are not a substitute for them.

By nature, it can be challenging to connect with investors. Some of the best methods to secure time with them are to send them a personal email; call to thank them for a recent gift; send a handwritten note and then call them to request a meeting; have one of their peers, possibly an EDO board member, make an introduction; or ask for advice. Many of these are classic relationship-building tactics in sales or fundraising industries.

Developing these connections can help EDOs become aware of what matters most to a majority of investors, determine when a current event needs addressing, or identify promising new opportunities.

No matter the method used to secure time together, a few key talking points should naturally be woven into the conversation:

- Thank investors for their financial support.
- Share a story of a recent success for the EDO and talk about its impact on the community and the investor's specific business or organization.
- Tell about upcoming activities and ask for the investor's involvement or advice, if appropriate.

In case of a lull in conversation, having a list of topics ready is highly advisable. For example, ask for the investor's perspective on a current event in the community related to economic development, find out more about their professional role, and ask what service of the EDO they value most and even what they think the EDO should not prioritize.

Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Have an engagement strategy for top investors and prospective investors.
- Profile significant investors in newsletters and on social media to publicly thank them for their investment in the community's future.
- Consider the value the EDO provides to this investor—identify what the EDO does for them and highlight what works for them.
- Be creative if it is difficult to reach an investor. Some ways to make progress over time are personal emails, calls thanking them for a recent membership renewal or donation, handwritten notes or emails sharing news they will find interesting, and outreach to genuinely seek their advice.
- Plan ahead for meetings and conversations to achieve strategic goals for an interaction.

Recommendation Seven

Provide high-quality, valuable experiences and information for board members.

In general, EDO board members are business executives in the community, and their time is limited and should be used strategically. Board members should serve as ambassadors for economic development in the community, so to keep these members engaged, on message, and ready to help, they must feel appreciated and like they have something to contribute. While confidentiality and sensitivity must be considered, if there are ways to inform or share information with board members in advance, it will strengthen their connection to the EDO.

Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Share good news with board members before sharing it with a broader audience.
- Solicit board member advice in board meetings as opposed to simply reporting on activities. Consider informal polling or facilitated conversation if there is an upcoming issue of importance in the community or related to the EDO's mission.
- Identify board members whose understanding of economic development would benefit from additional conversation outside of board meetings.
- Profile engaged board members in newsletters and on social media to publicly thank them for their time and talent.
- Find opportunities to include board members in meetings with local officials or investors and provide clear expectations of their role in the meeting. If you do this, send them a personal thank you after the meeting.
- Provide talking points and messaging about activities in the community related to economic development to ensure that they are all communicating with one voice.
- Consider focusing a board meeting agenda on an educational topic. Invite members to suggest topics.
- Invite board members to help leverage other priority stakeholders, such as local officials or investors, so they can become more engaged and more comfortable serving as an ambassador for the EDO and the community.

Recommendation Eight

Strategically leverage media opportunities.

Although this was not a priority for BFI during the pilot, some EDOs would benefit from a regular spot in a local newspaper. With newspapers shifting content online or shrinking their full-time or local reporters, many are looking for content partners. The space could be used to counter misinformation about pending or committed economic development projects, to thank investors, or to help develop a community's awareness of economic development tools. For a column to generate public discourse—without it seeming disingenuous—it will be important to plan content that is not solely a pitch piece for the EDO's projects and priorities. One way to do this would be to plan content on EDO activities, but be nimble enough to pivot if it might be more useful to discuss a current event or economic development strategy in the news. Be aware, this is a significant time commitment with a return on investment that is difficult to measure.

Other ways to strategically engage the media include placing op-eds in local or regional news outlets and regularly hosting both friendly and oppositional reporters at events.

Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Consider partnering with a local media outlet to have a regular space to maintain an ongoing conversation about economic development in the community.
- Craft op-eds in response to economic development news in the community or elsewhere.
- Make connections with reporters, in small settings but also invite them to larger EDO events.

Recommendation Nine

Find ways to increase EDO name recognition in the community.

During the pilot, BFI moved to a new office space on the ground level in downtown Bay City. The new space features street-level windows where BFI can prominently display its logo and mission in an area with high foot traffic. Because the space is shared with the local chamber of commerce, BFI has a unique opportunity to partner with them to communicate the ways in which they work together and how they are different.

Another way to increase name recognition is to sponsor events and projects, which could be related to placemaking, supporting local businesses, or other activities that relate to the core work of the EDO. EDOs should be careful to select sponsorships by strategically considering which priority stakeholders are likely to see the activity and prioritize quality of sponsorship recognition or visibility over quantity.

In order for these kinds of activities to lead to meaningful understandings of an EDO among the public, people will need to see something about the EDO numerous times before a person will take the step of seeking out information to learn more. It takes time to build brand recognition. If this is a priority of an EDO, board and staff should expect to invest in this activity for the long term rather than one burst of activity.

Ways to Achieve this Recommendation

- Maximize use of office location or project support to increase visibility.
- Strategically sponsor community events and projects that relate to the core of the EDO's work.

Conclusion

After six months of implementing small changes in its communications methods using existing resources, BFI saw positive shifts in its constituents' perceptions of economic development and their trust in BFI. The tactics recommended through this project are accessible to EDOs with any resources they may have. The project team recommends EDOs spend time each year to evaluate the basics of their communications activities—audiences, messages, and tactics—to identify opportunities to refocus, refine, and reinforce stakeholder connections.

Acknowledgements

PSC would like to acknowledge the following people for their thoughtful collaboration on this project.

BFI Staff

- Trevor M. Keyes, president and CEO
- Megan Manning, investor relations and marketing manager

MEDA Staff

- John Avery, executive director
- Cassandra Jorae, director of marketing, communications, and administration
- Madi Scholtz, education, advocacy, and certified business park manager (former)

The Advocacy Committee of the MEDA Board of Directors

Committee Co-chairs

- Kurt M. Brauer, attorney/partner, Warner Norcross + Judd, LLP
- David J. Schreiber, business development manager, Wayne County Economic Development Corporation

Committee Members

- William Butler, senior business development manager, Detroit Regional Partnership
- Dan Casey, CEO, Economic Development Alliance of St. Clair County
- Valerie Christofferson, EDFP, director of economic development, Consumers Energy
- Amy Clickner, CEcD, CFRM, CEO, Lake Superior Community Partnership
- Karl Dorshimer, CEcD, EDFP, director of business development, Lansing Economic Area Partnership
- Todd Fenton, EDFP, economic development manager, City of Royal Oak
- James Franklin III, business development manager, Flint and Genesee Chamber of Commerce
- Rochelle Freeman, business and economic development director, City of Southfield
- Garrett Geer, vice president of government and public affairs, AKT Peerless
- Mathias Heppler, president, Heppler Engineering Group, LLC
- Malinda Jensen, senior vice president of board administration and government affairs, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation
- James McBryde, president and CEO, Middle Michigan Development Corporation
- David Miller, president, Cadillac Area Chamber of Commerce
- Mark Morante, MSF Fund Manager, Michigan Economic Development Corporation
- Mary Myers, CBSP, director of business development, Lake Superior Community Partnership
- Charlene Page, EDFP, senior business development representative of Oakland County, Economic Development and Community Affairs
- Christine Roeder, EDFP, senior vice president of growth and development, Michigan Economic Development Corporation
- Don Schurr, retired president of Greater Gratiot Development, Inc.

- Shannon Selby, director of economic development, Wayne County Economic Development Department
- Jennifer Spike, government relations specialist, Michigan Economic Development Corporation
- Tracey Tucker, economic enhancement director, Charter Township of Flint
- Alan Weber, director of business development, Detroit Regional Partnership
- Arnold Weinfeld, associate director at Michigan State University Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, College of Social Science, and Director for Workforce and Economic Development Partnerships, Office for Public Engagement and Scholarship, Michigan State University

About Public Sector Consultants

Public Sector Consultants is an objective, nonpartisan research and consulting firm based in Lansing and Detroit. Our services have been used to advance innovative solutions to difficult public policy challenges in Michigan and beyond for 40 years. Offering a full suite of services in research, implementation, facilitation, and evaluation, PSC has served hundreds of local, state, and federal government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private businesses. Since our founding in 1979, PSC has built a reputation as the consulting firm of choice for anyone working to better people's lives.

Clients use PSC's research, management, analytical, and advisory capacities to develop and implement policies and strategic plans; improve internal management; identify stakeholder priorities and address conflicts between corporate and community interests; and identify political, regulatory, and economic factors influencing corporate and agency decisions.

The firm is experienced in staffing complex organizations, managing sizable contracts, adhering to deadlines, and providing professional and clearly written reports. PSC has more than 60 employees and a roster of affiliated consultants.

Appendix A

Communications Workplan

Developed by Public Sector Consultants for Bay Future with the Michigan Economic Developers Association

April 2019

In March, Public Sector Consultants (PSC) met with the Michigan Economic Developers Association (MEDA) and Bay Future to identify stakeholders, messages and tactics to help improve perceptions of economic development in Bay County. In that meeting, we started a process that helped us to articulate Bay Future's communications challenges and identify ways to address them. An outline of that process is as follows:

- **Identify the audience.** Who can affect change?
- **Define the message.** Be explicit and tell the audience exactly what they need to know or are being asked to do. The persuasiveness of the message is key.
- **Determine how to communicate the message.** What's the best way to reach the audience? Some communications vehicles are better for an audience than another. The audience may not use certain channels of, such as social media. Multiple methods for communication are typically needed to reach maximum effectiveness by way of awareness and action taken. Some important things to consider when choosing a communications vehicle include:
 - Does the audience use that communication channel?
 - Is this a cost-effective way to reach the audience?
 - What is the "call to action"?
 - How does this tactic correspond or relate to another tactic?

Throughout this process it is important to be aware of and leverage any relationship(s) we have with the audience as well the broader political environment these tactics and relationship(s) are operating in.

Audiences

The audiences we identified together are as follows:

1. Local officials
2. Investors in Bay Future
3. Bay Future's Board of Directors
4. Developers
5. Partners, such as the Michigan Small Business Development Center (SBDC)

Within the scope of this project, we will focus on the top three audiences identified at our kick-off meeting. It is important to acknowledge that in many cases audiences overlap; many board members or local officials are investors, etc.

Tactics

These are the five primary tactics PSC recommends for developing awareness, building trust, and educating local communities about the role of economic developers in Bay County.

1. Website updates or enhancement
2. Personal outreach
3. Print material creation or enhancement
4. HTML email strategy
5. Media outreach

Think of these outreach tactics like a fine meal. Each tactic is like a course and each course builds on the other for a total experience. People are easily overloaded in today's information age. It would be a mistake to presume each audience is taking in everything you create for them. They need to absorb things piece by piece and they have different levels of attention and awareness each time. That means not relying too heavily on one tactic to perform more than is reasonable. For example, after an audience member receives a few emails from your campaign (note, you're tracking their clicks to your website so you know how much they engaged with your content) that might be the right time to reach out for an in-person meeting for personal relationship building. At that meeting you discuss items that were communicated in the email campaign and website contextualized for their specific interests. Leave a piece of print collateral behind for them to reference during the meeting and after the fact. The audience may not be aware, but what you have done is served them information repeatedly and that information eventually leaves an impression. Frequent and useful impressions warm the audience up to take action.

While we learned significantly about Bay Future through its presentation at our kick-off meeting and through our own research, we recognize Bay Future may already be doing some of these activities or that resources may impact implementation activities at this time. Our recommendation is that we work together to identify the tactics suggested below that will be possible and meaningful to Bay Future. We will do this through bi-weekly implementation calls and PSC will manage a task list that will help operationalize the plan.

Team and Roles

These are the responsibilities of the team participants for the duration of the project.

Melissa Jimison – Public Sector Consultants

- Advise on best practices regarding marketing and communications
- Lead bi-weekly calls between PSC, MEDA, and Bay Future, include colleagues as resources when appropriate
- Operationalize the plan and holding everyone responsible for their agreed-upon tasks
- Implement before-and-after survey of individuals identified by Bay Future
- Identify and bring in expert colleagues (search engine optimization, web design, etc.)

Trevor Keyes (or designee) – Bay Future, Inc.

- Identify before-and-after survey participants
- Participate in bi-weekly calls between PSC, MEDA, and Bay Future
- Share key insights into Bay Future’s resources, capacity, and community
- Agree to and implement tactics to help change the perception of economic development in Bay County
- Share challenges and successes openly throughout the implementation phase in order to inform PSC’s final report

Madalin Sholtz (primary contact), **John Avery and Cassandra Jorae**- MEDA

- Participate in bi-weekly calls, include colleagues and board members as appropriate
- Serve as subject matter experts on economic development as needed

Website Updates or Enhancement

The website represents the most cost-effective option for building awareness, trust, and education. Done well, a website provides ways for priority audiences to connect with it, leads those audiences through a narrative, and helps the audience understand its mission. After examining the Bay Future website, www.bayfuture.com, PSC recommends a series of tactics to enhance its appeal and functionality for key audiences.

Every piece of communication, whether social media, email, or print, would ideally point back to the website as the primary source of information about Bay Future and all it offers. We can tell Bay Future has invested thoughtfully in its web presence; attractive, rich imagery, a mobile-friendly website, and streamlined design demonstrate this. We are curious about the content beyond the Member sign in page and about the definition of a Member since that language is not used elsewhere.

The following are our recommendations regarding website enhancements that increase value for Bay Future’s priority audiences. We can measure impact with these tactics by looking at Google Analytics reports, gathering anecdotal information, and reviewing our before-and-after survey results.

Activity	Local Officials	Investors in Bay Future	Board of Directors
Content Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and create a place on the website for content aimed at local officials • Outline the services of Bay Future for local officials • Highlight resources on how to start a business • Highlight tools available to local business for expanding/growing their operation • Explicitly offer the opportunity to meet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add introductory language to Investors and Partners page of site expressing gratitude and reciprocity with Investors • Outline levels and benefits of investment in Bay Future on the Investors and Partners page • Add contact information for those interested in learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informally survey board members to identify if their needs are met by the website – board engagement through seeking their expertise is a good practice and would help serve a key audience • Ensure educational materials on the tools of economic development are available • Consider adding the responsibilities of the

Activity	Local Officials	Investors in Bay Future	Board of Directors
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure an offer to meet to discuss needs is prominent with a phone number and email. 	<p>more about Investment opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider if there are additional benefits of investment that can be offered at higher levels • An offer to meet to discuss needs should be prominent with a phone number and email. 	<p>board (generally) to the board page</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An offer to meet to discuss needs should be prominent with a phone number and email.
Design ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One tab on the landing page that identifies this audience – or at least a tab of a drop down • Add a tab or page with a list of services for that audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in BFI should link to form for 2019 and beyond, should also articulate benefits and suggested levels of investment (if it's available online at all). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider deleting unnecessary links from bios of board members
Search engine optimization (SEO) ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify words that local officials are interested in and include those in content geared towards those officials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use specific words that are what your potential investors would be searching for online 	
Story ⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and create profiles of local leaders with whom Bay Future has a good relationship and feature where appropriate • Have the testimonial tell a story of the value of Bay Future in a deal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the story of why investing in Bay Future matters • Acknowledge and appreciate investors publicly through captions, etc. • Create profile and feature where appropriate; should highlight benefits of investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are here to help with the needs of the community and investors, elevate their role. • Create profiles and feature where appropriate • Acknowledge and appreciate publicly on captions, etc.

⁴ When designing web pages, pay attention to the [F-shaped pattern of reading on the web](#).

⁵ Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of increasing a website's visibility in unpaid search engine results—often referred to as “organic” or “earned” results. In simple terms, SEO is all the things a website must do to achieve a higher ranking in search engine results without paying for it through advertising.

⁶ High quality visuals can go a long way in storytelling. Although it's more expensive than using existing images, professional photography can help establish credibility, help the audience connect to the person and can help tell the story. Consider ways to ensure images help make the desired impact and tell the story.

Personal Outreach

Even the highest quality electronic or print communications cannot top personal relationship-building in terms of the impact it can make on “hearts and minds”. All of the previously mentioned tools; website, email, and print materials, can support strategic relationship development, but should not be a substitute for it.

In a community like Bay County, we would expect many people are already connected to each other or have some level of familiarity with it. Despite that, there are still key decision-makers, prospective investors and others who operate outside of Bay Future’s reach. Personal email outreach, handwritten notes, making and receiving helpful introductions, meetings for coffee or a meal are all strategies that develop relationships over time and can lay the groundwork for education, trust, and awareness.

In a bi-weekly call, we recommend discussing Bay Future’s constituent relationship management tools if one exists to ensure it is able to meet their needs. If not, we could talk through options.

Activity	Local Officials	Investors in Bay Future	Board of Directors
Identify top “targets”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify top municipal leaders who could use personal relationship with someone at Bay Future Determine who in the organization’s “inner circle” has an existing relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify investors most important to develop a relationship with (to thank them, keep them connected, cultivate them for a new or larger investment, etc.) Identify what about Bay Future matters most to them Identify who can help connect you through conversations with board and researching their networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify board members whose understanding of Bay Future’s mission needs strengthening OR who have the most meaningful network for Bay Future’s mission Consider inviting them to meetings with local officials or investors; identify opportunities for engagement
Cultivate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get an introduction from a peer if one isn’t easy/natural through regular channels Use this opportunity to solicit their advice, what would help you serve them If you can meet, consider bringing a peer who is already close to Bay Future In conversation do articulate Bay Future’s role in previous investments in Bay County. Attending municipal meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thank them. Use this opportunity to solicit their advice, what would help you serve them If you can meet, consider bringing a peer who is already close to Bay Future In conversation do articulate Bay Future’s role in previous investments in Bay County. Attend and present at regional service meetings like Kiwanis, Rotary, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get an introduction from a peer if one isn’t easy/natural through regular channels Use this opportunity to solicit their advice, what would help you serve them? Do they need additional materials to fulfil their responsibilities to Bay Future? If you can meet, consider bringing a peer who is already close to Bay Future In conversation do articulate Bay Future’s role in previous

Activity	Local Officials	Investors in Bay Future	Board of Directors
			investments in Bay County.
Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow up with thoughtful, personal messages – examples of economic development done well elsewhere, data that’s relevant to their interests, etc. Handwritten notes make more of an impact than ever before 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure records are tracked and managed in a way that helps maintain investor relationships, prompts follow up, etc. Set goals around investor contact frequency – existing and prospective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set a goal around board member contact frequency outside of board meetings
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep annual meeting Consider hosting a small event targeting newly elected officials, but invite any municipal leaders Consider if you can take a municipal leader to a site of recent development; walk them through Bay Future’s involvement, introduce them to others who would speak on behalf of your value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep annual meeting Consider hosting intimate events that give investors access to someone or something they need. Ideas: quarterly breakfasts, circles of investors who are in the same industry, higher quality event opportunities for higher level investors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep annual meeting Consider focusing board meeting agenda on an area for improvement/education with the board Invite board members to help leverage other priority audience engagement opportunities. Through engaging others, they will become more engaged and hear more about how Bay Future talks about itself.

Print Material Creation or Enhancement

A wide range of print materials can be used for various purposes. In our experience print materials are most effective when paired with another form of communication to help build and maintain the relationship between the stakeholders involved. Due to the relatively higher cost of print materials and the fact that they are not able to be revised easily, it’s important to produce useful, memorable items that leave a good impression. That means balancing timely and evergreen content. Consider what the product is needed for, how it will be used by the audience, and whether it can help deepen the impression you are trying to make via your other communication vehicles.

Print material could also act as a support for providing evidence for an argument being made in person. Data and charts generally help build “trust” in an argument because of the visual representation of the information, helping the content become real and tangible. However, to have the largest impact it needs to be relatable to the interested party and that party needs to take it in several times. In the following table, we define some messages and print tactics with the specific audiences we have prioritized.

Activity	Local Officials	Investors in Bay Future	Board of Directors
Introductory Leave-behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits/offerings • Quote well-respected municipal leader, perhaps a board member or founder • Share outward facing mission statement • Tools available to local business • Identify staff contacts • May consider two versions: one for new officials, one for more familiar ones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive to website • Primary message is gratitude, return on investment, reciprocity, impact, continued need • Articulate levels of support and show value of higher investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting materials • Outline expectations • Determine what would be helpful for them as they go about business in the community
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the design simple and consistent, avoid dense copy to enable readers to skim • Point readers to more dynamic content on the website • Include a list of services • Consider a rack card or post card style item • Include images of people they can connect with – people build trust in people easier than institutions • Familiarize staff with minimums for image resolution to avoid pixilation, assures more professional impressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the design simple and consistent, avoid dense copy to enable readers to skim • Include a running list of offered services • Point to one board member that can be a point of contact • Should include images of people they can connect with – investors build trust in people quicker than institutions • Familiarize staff with minimums for image resolution for print materials – avoids pixilation, assures more professional impressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be more substantive for this audience • Consider a polished, professional look and feel that would bring them pride through association with Bay Future • Familiarize staff with minimums for image resolution for print materials – avoids pixilation, assures more professional impressions

HTML Email Strategy

Email marketing using an HTML email service is a relatively easy and affordable method for communicating directly with a defined group of contacts. (Bay Future now uses Constant Contact.) It is a best practice to either: 1. Tailor email communications for particular audiences or 2. Ensure each mass email highlights something for each audience. Similar to how the website will be further organized with audiences in mind, emails should be sent to segmented groups based on their needs and interests whenever possible. Regarding communication frequency, some audiences may need less and others more, especially at a time when the organization is intentionally trying to change the opinions of key stakeholder groups.

We recommend using part of a bi-weekly meeting for a conversation with Bay Future around its existing email strategy and experience. PSC may recommend tools like A/B testing⁷ to better understand audience’s reaction(s) sender, frequency, design, or content. We can measure impact by looking at engagement of each audience through open rates, click through rates and survey data. We could also discuss preview text and the value of using descriptive text for hyperlinks.

Below PSC presents a set of messaging strategies for consideration.

Activity	Local Officials	Investors in Bay Future	Board of Directors
Content development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on local perspectives Provide a service by updating them on development “wins” in Bay County Explain the tools available to local business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give credit to investors for making it possible for Bay Future to do the work it does Be sure to communicate throughout the year about the benefits of investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider a regular board email if one does not exist, ensure it provides a service rather than only asks for help, keep them on the regular newsletter list as well Identify board education needs and supplement meetings with this information with emails reinforcing the message
Design ⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Point the readers to more dynamic content on the website Include a running list of offered services Point to one peer member that can be a point of contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue Investor Spotlight in newsletter, but shift to a story model (with gratitude slant) or personalize in some way depending on agreements with sponsors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use images, charts, infographics and brief video as appropriate

⁷ A/B testing, or split testing, is a marketing practice whereby two similarly sized groups receive the same email except for one difference. After the email is sent results can be measured to determine which variation on the email performed better for that audience. This is the best way to know what will work for a particular audience.

⁸ For all audiences, keep the design simple and consistent, avoid dense copy to enable readers to skim.

Activity	Local Officials	Investors in Bay Future	Board of Directors
Subject line	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the audience what the email is about in as short a phrase as possible • Relate to the audience of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the audience what the email is about in as short a phrase as possible • Relate to the audience of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the audience what the email is about in as short a phrase as possible • Relate to the audience of interest
Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affirm and build the narrative in the website • They are experts in local affairs • Demonstrate how Bay Future was a useful tool for growing local businesses⁹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the impact of investment in Bay Future • Highlight an investor who is proud of their involvement • Refer to a “growing list of investors” • Demonstrate how Bay Future was a useful tool for the investor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are our economic development stewards here to help with the needs of the community and investors. • Help manage relationships and offer experience with economic development outcomes
Frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly • Want to be involved and know what’s going on. • Keep them engaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly • Consider this essential for investor cultivation and stewardship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency will depend on frequency of board meetings and should be spaced between meetings • The board needs to feel involved and useful. • Invite them to participate in the work being done.

⁹ Some examples of PSC’s work on similar profiles is available here: <https://michigansaves.org/commercial-building-financing/>

Media Outreach

Some economic development organizations (EDOs), especially those without major cities, have had success educating audiences through a regular presence in the local media. A regular economic development column in a local newspaper, a meeting with the local newspaper’s editor, or a well-timed letter to the editor can create dialogue while educating. This same strategy could be applied to radio outreach as well.

If Bay Future considers this strategy, we would recommend it be toward the end of or after the implementation phase after other activities have taken place so that additional attention would be driven to a honed communications presence online, in print, and in person.

Activity	Local Officials	Investors in Bay Future	Board of Directors
Identify local media consumed by audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bay City Times</i> • mlive • Others • Op-eds and letters to editor will get the attention of this audience • Build relationships with reporters, editors, others holding power at key outlets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business materials produced by chamber of commerce • Local newspapers, like <i>Bay City Times</i> • Build relationships with reporters, editors, others holding power at key outlets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board will be reached likely through the activities identified for other audiences.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counter bad information circulating for local officials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank investors for making your work possible when you can fit it into any earned media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use quotes from board members when you’re able.

Appendix B

Michigan Economic Developers Association

Bay Future Economic Development Survey Results

11.22.19

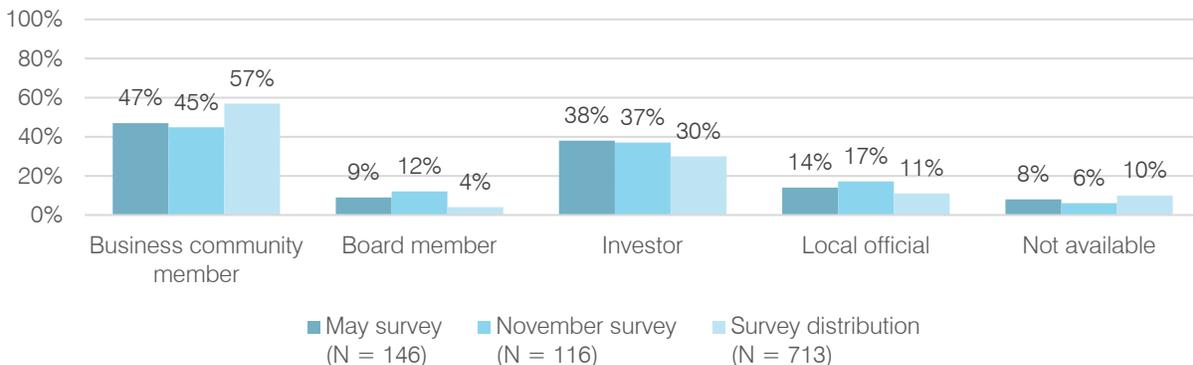
Introduction

The Michigan Economic Development Association and Bay Future, Inc. engaged Public Sector Consultants (PSC) to conduct a stakeholder survey in the Michigan Bay Region as part of a statewide initiative to understand community perceptions of economic development. The survey was first sent in May 2019 and then resent in November 2019 to evaluate how communication efforts around economic development had affected community perceptions. The Bay Future Economic Development Survey was distributed to the same 713 individuals in May and November. In May, 146 people responded to at least one survey question and 116 people responded in November.

Respondents

The survey was distributed to individuals who represented the business community, investors, local officials, and Bay Future Board members. Exhibit 1 shows the percentage of responses from each group to both the May and November surveys, as well as the percentage of each group to which the survey was distributed. The percentage of responses received from business community members was lower than the percentage of surveys sent to people representing the business community in both May and November. The percentage of responses received from board members, investors, and local officials was higher than the percentage of the survey distribution to representatives of those groups. A higher percentage of board members and local officials responded to the survey in November than did in May.

EXHIBIT 1. Respondent Representation

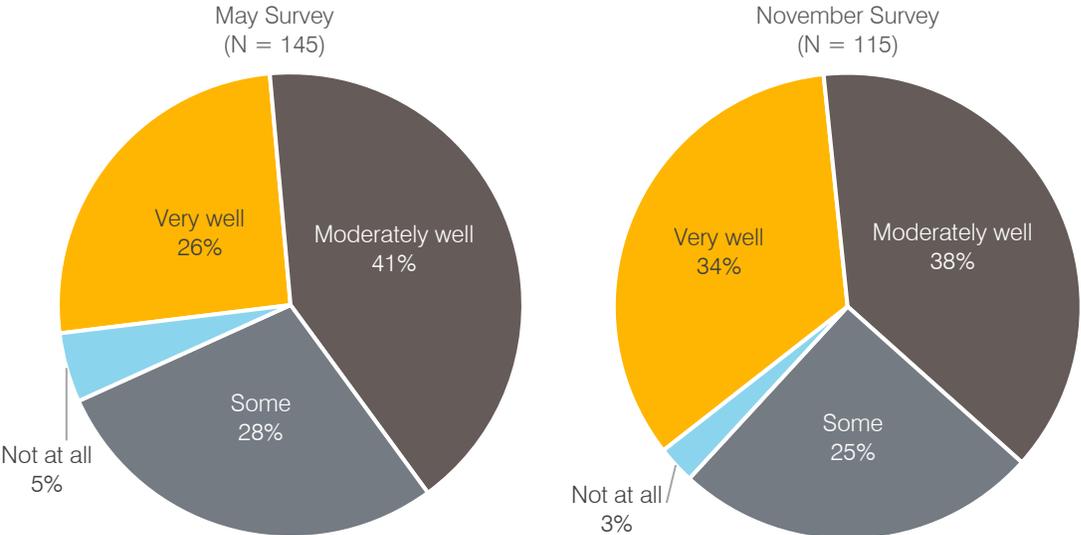


Respondents could represent more than one group, so percentages total higher than 100 percent.

Understanding of Economic Development

Most respondents believe they understand the players, concepts, and tools of economic development. As indicated in Exhibit 2, in May, about two thirds of respondents (67 percent) said they understand these things either very well or moderately well. This percentage increased slightly in November, with 72 percent responding either very well or moderately well. The percentage who said they understood economic development very well increased from 26 percent to 34 percent between the two surveys.

EXHIBIT 2. Understanding of Economic Development



Respondents also gave open ended responses describing what the term “economic development” means to them. The responses included collaborating; attracting, growing, and sustaining businesses and jobs; and stimulating the economy. One respondent said:

“It is a term that should be inclusive to all the activity that brings a higher quality of life to a region. It primarily includes attracting and retaining businesses in our area, as well as supporting venues that attract people from outside to come and play in our community. It is assisting organizations that plan, develop, and implement activities to grow and increase awareness of all the positive attributes of our region.”

Some respondents also said that Bay Future is what comes to mind when they hear the term “economic development.”

Expectations of Economic Developers

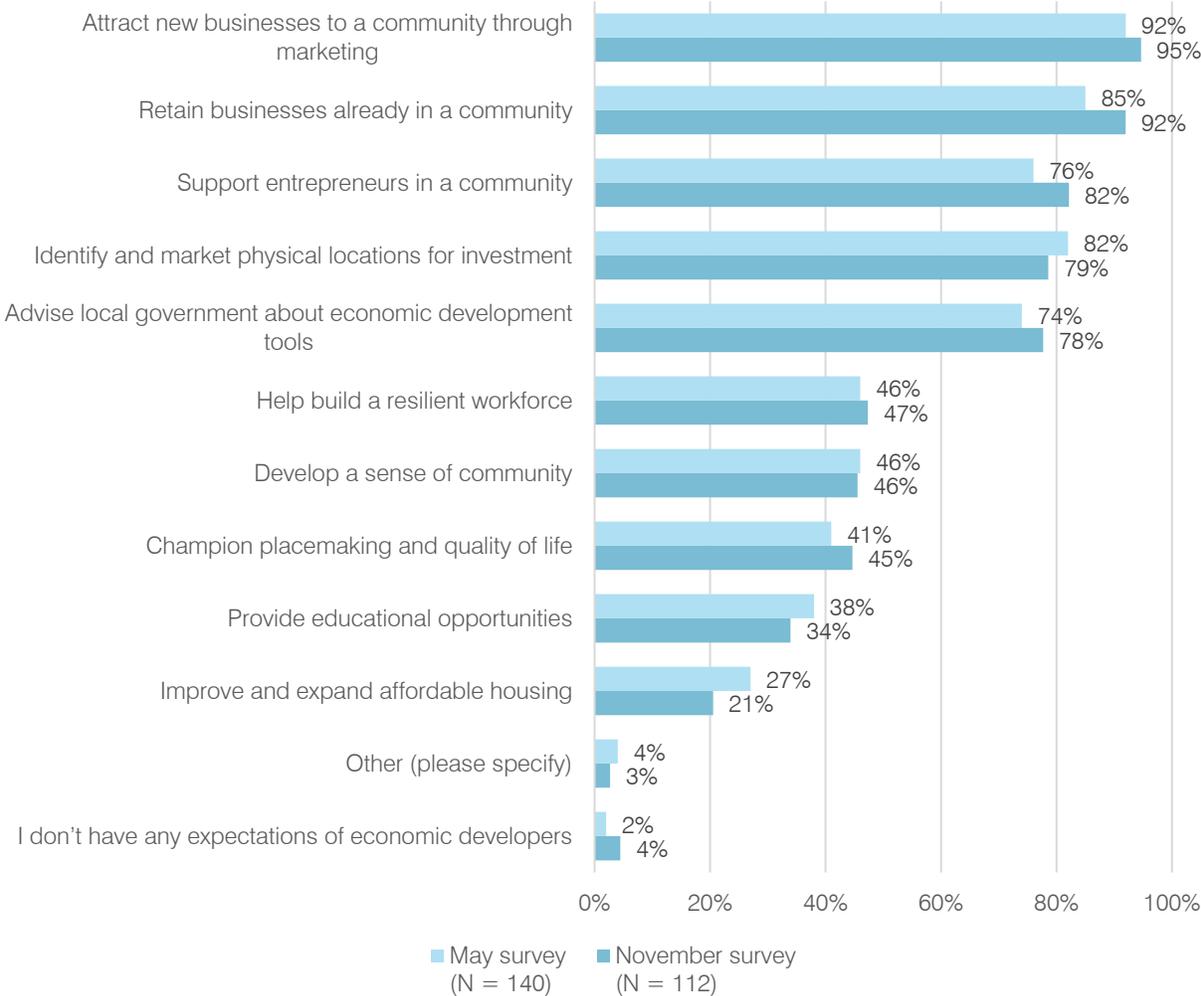
Respondents shared what their expectations of economic developers were and then ranked those expectations in order of importance.

Expectations

As shown in Exhibit 3, in both May and November most respondents expect economic developers to attract new businesses through marketing, retain businesses already in the community, support entrepreneurs, identify and market physical locations for investment, and advise local government about economic development tools.

Except for “identify and market physical locations for investment,” the percentage of responses for these expectations was slightly higher in November than in May. For example, 95 percent of November respondents said they expect economic developers to attract new businesses through marketing compared to 92 percent in May.

EXHIBIT 3. Expectations of Economic Developers

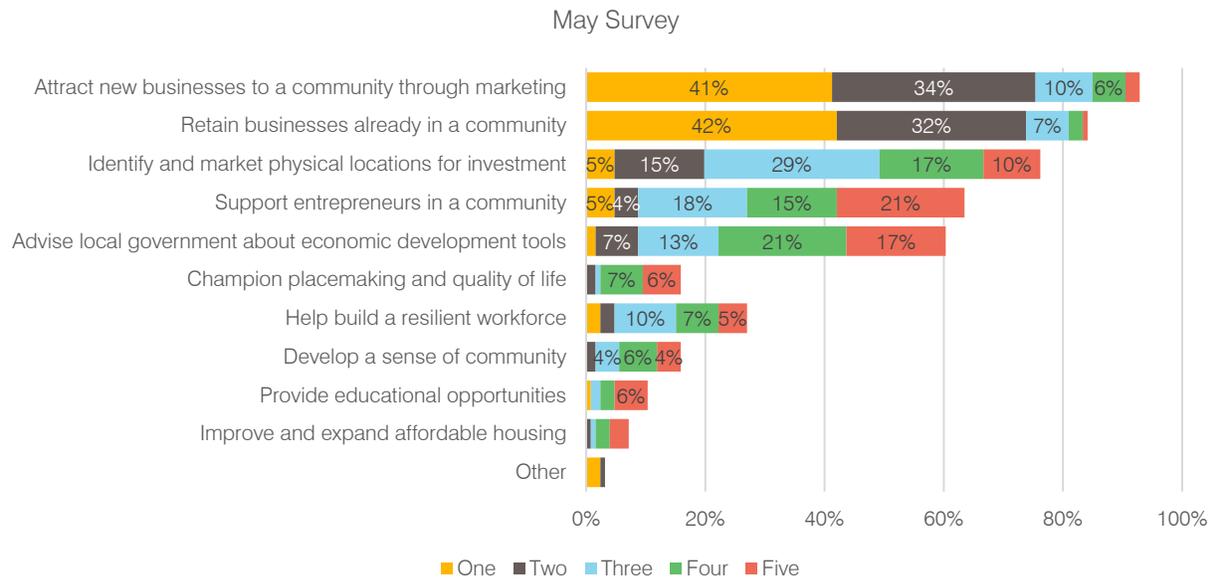
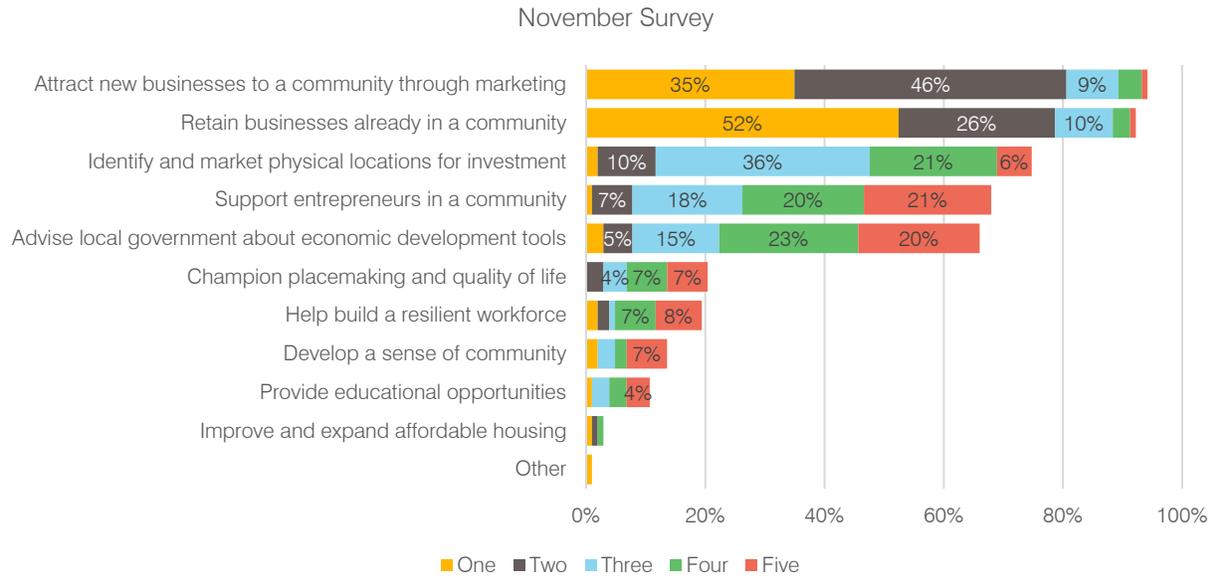


Respondents could represent more than one group, so percentages total higher than 100 percent.

Ranking Expectations

After choosing what their expectations of economic developers were, respondents ranked those expectations in order of importance. Exhibit 4 shows the expectations from the November and May surveys that received a ranking of one to five. The expectation receiving the most number one rankings, 52 percent in November and 42 percent in May, was “retain businesses already in a community.” This was followed by “attract new businesses to a community through marketing,” at 35 percent in November and 41 percent in May. These two expectations were also the two that received the most top five rankings in both surveys, followed by “identify and market physical locations for investment,” “support entrepreneurs in a community,” and “advise local government about economic development tools.”

EXHIBIT 4. Most Important Expectations

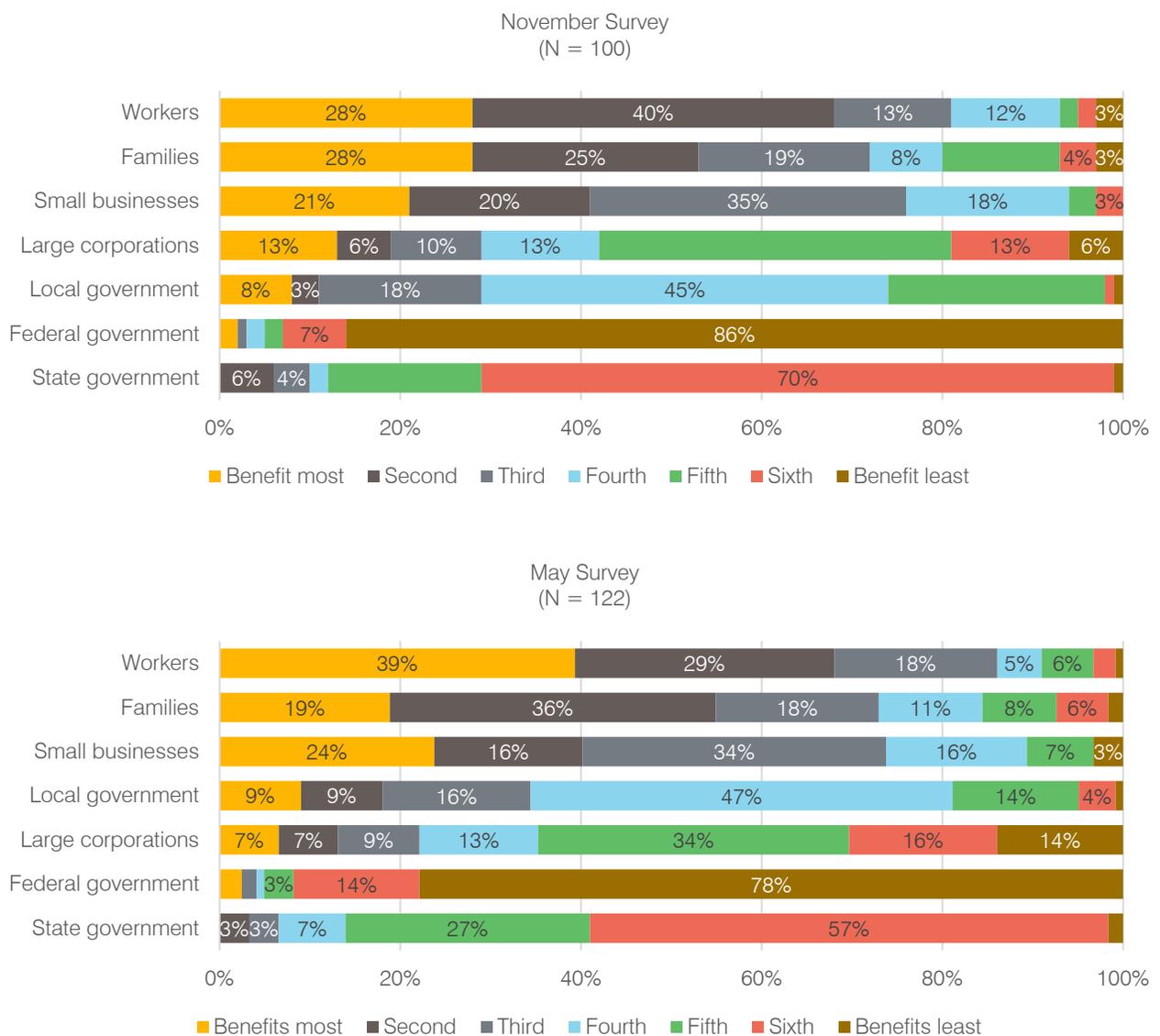


November survey N = 103; May survey N = 126

Beneficiaries of Economic Development

Respondents believe that workers, families, and small businesses benefit the most from economic development. As shown in Exhibit 5, 68 percent of respondents ranked workers as either benefiting the most or second most in both November and May. Over half said families benefited the most or second most, and around 40 percent said small businesses benefited the most or second most in both the November and May surveys. There was a difference between the two surveys when looking only at who respondents said benefited the most from economic development. For example, 39 percent chose workers in May compared to 28 percent in November and 19 percent chose families in May compared to 28 percent in November.

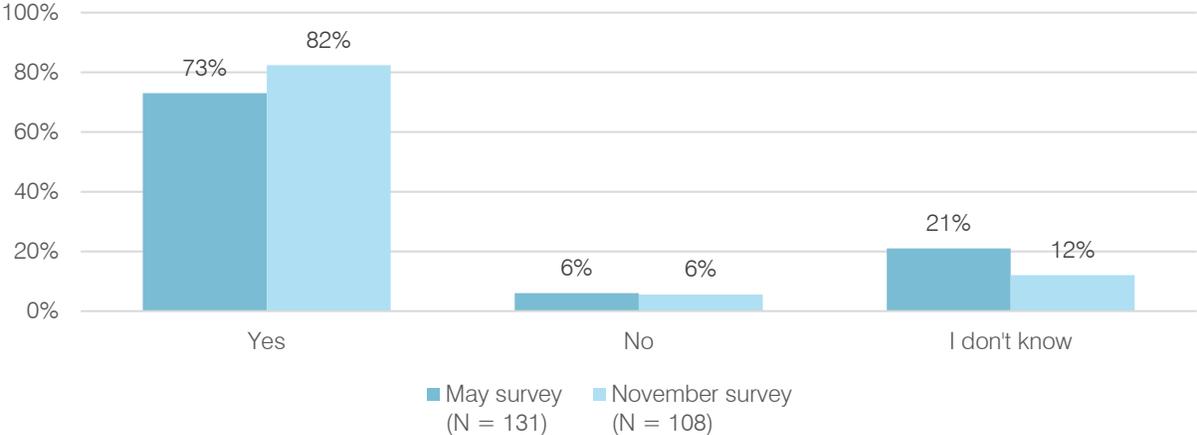
EXHIBIT 5. Groups that Benefit Most from Economic Development



Reliability of Bay Future

In May, nearly three quarters of respondents (73 percent) said that Bay Future, under its current leadership, was an organization on which they could rely. That percentage increased slightly in November to 82 percent. See Exhibit 6.

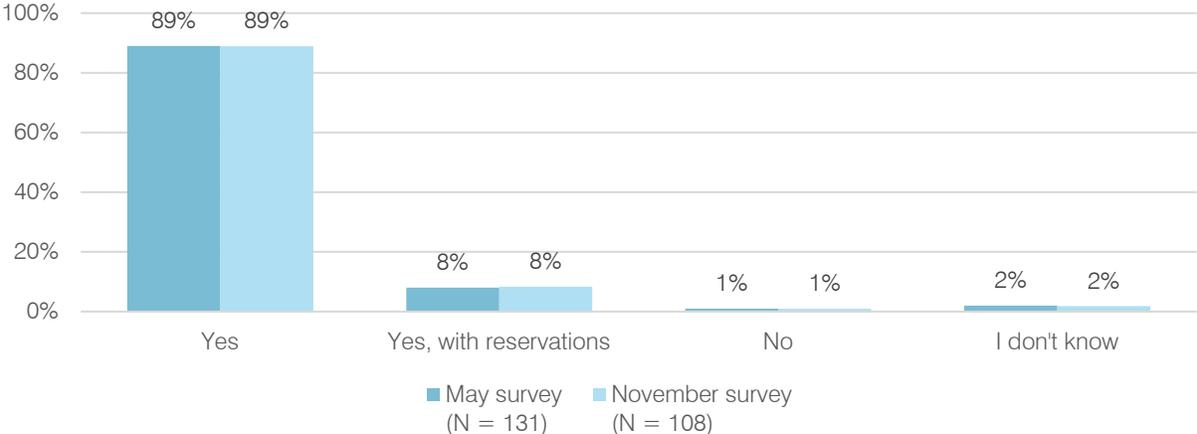
EXHIBIT 6. Respondents Who Can Rely on Bay Future



Value of Economic Development

As seen in Exhibit 7, there was no change in the percentage of respondents who said they value economic development between the May and November surveys, with 89 percent of respondents saying they did value economic development.

EXHIBIT 7. Respondents Who Value Economic Development





Michigan Economic Developers Association
www.medaweb.org