

Seattle: A Vital Economy for All

A Report by:

The Mayor's Economic Opportunity Task Force



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City of Seattle • Gregory J. Nickels, Mayor
Office of Economic Development

The Mayor's Economic Opportunity Task Force

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A Report by the Mayor's Economic Opportunity Task Force

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between June and December 2005, the Mayor's Economic Opportunity Task Force (EOTF) met to develop this set of recommendations to the City for improving Seattle's economic vitality.

The EOTF first convened in 2002 to examine the economic health of the city and to help identify opportunities for expanding Seattle's job base and improving its business climate. Our recommendations helped to shape the City's economic agenda over the next four years. This report builds on our 2002 recommendations and the foundation laid by the City and its regional partners towards a more vibrant, balanced and diversified economy. Our current focus includes strategies to reduce disproportionality in economic opportunity and to promote sustained economic growth so that all city residents can prosper.

The EOTF formed four subcommittees to focus their efforts and interests in the broad subject areas of land use, housing and neighborhood revitalization; expanding the city's jobs base; economic opportunity; and transportation and infrastructure. A summary of the key recommendations follow:

Land Use, Housing & Neighborhood Revitalization

- Streamline the City's interdepartmental permitting process;
- Create new finance and process incentives for affordable workforce housing development;
- Increase police presence and public safety resources in neighborhood business districts.

Expanding the City's Job Base

- Convene a Mayor's Education Summit to make Seattle more competitive in attracting talent and a better prepared workforce;
- Establish industry-specific advisory committees to address current issues impacting these industries;
- Continue to improve the City's permitting process to support new and emerging industries.

Economic Opportunity

- Enhance collaboration between workforce development stakeholders to better meet employer needs, improve service delivery and attract funding.

Transportation & Infrastructure

- Support the development of a regional transportation package that sustains and enhances key transportation needs;
- Address major maintenance backlog through concurrent City initiatives for dedicated and increased local transportation funding;
- Improve City permitting and coordination of transportation projects.

The EOTF brought together a broad spectrum of people to examine the current economic health of the city, with an emphasis on sustainability and broadly-shared economic opportunity. The information and recommendations gleaned from this process is intended to help shape the City's economic agenda over the next four years.

We appreciate the Mayor's commitment to implementing many of our recommendations during his first term. This set of second term recommendations are equally ambitious and the EOTF is prepared to continue its partnership with the City to help make these initiatives a reality.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2002, Mayor Greg Nickels appointed the Economic Opportunity Task Force to create an economic development agenda for expanding the city's job base and improving its business climate. EOTF members represent a cross-section of the city's business and labor leaders, higher education officers, workforce development providers, and small business owners. Across this diversity, EOTF members share the common goal of improving the economic vitality of the city.

EOTF members identified issues involving transportation, permitting and services for small businesses. Members also suggested new approaches for assisting distressed neighborhoods and industrial areas, and developed a range of ideas for promoting education and worker training, entrepreneurship and access to capital. In July 2002, the EOTF issued its first report containing 69 recommendations for improving Seattle's economy. Over the next four years, these recommendations helped to shape the City's economic agenda and improve its business climate, with 60 of the 69 recommendations met.

With the completion of many of the EOTF's original recommendations, Mayor Nickels asked EOTF members for their help in developing a new economic development agenda for the next four years. There is a far brighter outlook for the city's economy. Unemployment has decreased from 7% in January 2002 to 5.6% in October 2005. We've regained 71,200 of the 100,600 jobs lost during the recession, with 15 months of consecutive job growth.

However, there are continuing and new challenges. Transportation infrastructure, a key priority for the EOTF in 2002, remains a concern in 2006. Congestion significantly impacts the competitiveness of our region and city. Dedicated transportation funding has dropped to one-third of what it was a decade ago. Our region's economy depends on keeping people and goods moving, but the City has a \$500 million backlog of deferred maintenance for streets, bridges, and other structures. This backlog does not include the large investment needed for major projects, such as the Alaskan Way Viaduct, to maintain key links in the region's transportation system.

An adequate supply of affordable housing is essential to sustaining the city's job growth. The city can no longer rely on surrounding "bedroom" communities to provide housing for in-city jobs. Rising rent and home prices make it difficult for many Seattle residents to afford housing. Average rent in the Seattle area exceeds \$900 a month and low-income residents often cannot afford rent without help. The median price of a single family home in the Seattle area is \$325,000, 50% higher than the national average. Many households earning less than the median income are being priced out of owning a single-family home in Seattle.

Many business owners have difficulty finding local workers with specific occupational skills and are recruiting employees from out of state. One EOTF member remarked that his greatest concern is the city's future workforce being left to low-wage jobs. The city's youth need to be adequately prepared to access jobs and opportunities at all levels. However, the condition of the city's K-12 public school system places us at a competitive disadvantage.

There are some clear challenges to Seattle's economic growth. However, Seattle has tremendous assets in its workforce, its diversified businesses, world-class research institutions, vibrant arts and entertainment industry, and unmatched natural beauty. As we noted in 2002, these assets form a firm foundation for expanding our economic vitality and making prosperity available to all of the city's citizens and communities.

We appreciate the opportunity to develop this economic "blueprint" for the next four years and are pleased to present the EOTF's 2006 recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

LAND USE, HOUSING & NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION

Land Use

Since the EOTF first issued its report in 2002, the City has made a concerted effort to improve its permitting process. There have been significant strides to reform permit requirements, simplify the City's land use code to better address neighborhood priorities and encourage urban sustainability.

In acknowledging these achievements, the Subcommittee recognizes that work remains to support the city's economic growth. Businesses and housing developers continue to struggle with ambiguous, and sometimes conflicting, permit requirements that cross department lines. As the city moves towards a denser and pedestrian oriented urban environment, there can be conflict between certain City policies and the very businesses we want to retain, expand, or locate within the city. There needs to be more effective ways of resolving these issues through balancing business needs, growth anticipated by the comprehensive plan, and other City policies such as neighborhood plans.

- A. Raise SEPA thresholds in urban centers to the maximum allowed under state law (but leave Design Review threshold the same).
- B. Continue to streamline the interdepartmental permitting process between DPD, City Light, Law, SDOT and SPU, especially in coordinating response time, transparency, and finality of requirements. Establish permit response timelines for other departments. Make more extensive use of inter-departmental teams to promptly and effectively resolve issues with departmental approvals to facilitate project development.
- C. Establish benefits that more fully identify and incorporate needs of neighborhoods surrounding downtown into the Center City Strategy. Once established, fully communicate the benefits of the strategy to these surrounding neighborhoods.
- D. Develop principles and processes to provide flexibility in balancing business and neighborhood needs with car-oriented businesses (e.g. drive-through banking in business districts with Pedestrian Overlays); consider "portability" of the entitlement of existing businesses and processes such as design review.
- E. Improve enforcement of existing land use regulations, as they relate to operating businesses, particularly in industrial areas, to maintain the city's industrial land base from non-permitted uses.

Housing

Affordable housing is essential to attracting and retaining the workforce necessary to support a growing economy, strong families, and healthy neighborhoods. In addition to its direct investment in housing, the City has implemented code reforms and offered housing incentives, many stemming from the EOTF's 2002 report, to reduce the cost of new housing development. Public, private, and non-profit affordable housing partners have created new housing across the city for low-income individuals and families.

Still, it is difficult for many to afford housing in the city. In addition to those at the lower range of income levels, those earning less than 120% of the area's median income find it increasingly difficult to buy their first homes. Moderately priced condominiums are of increasing importance to many people in achieving home ownership, but lack of access to, as well as the cost of, liability insurance has created a disincentive for builders interested in constructing such projects.

New incentives and tools are needed to encourage affordable housing production and preservation, and to reduce the affordability gap between home prices and what working families can afford.

- A. Create a public/private financing mechanism to increase workforce homeownership affordability. (Example: Partner with private employers to create a loan pool using a "shared equity" model.) Evaluate whether Location Efficient Mortgages could be coupled with this financing mechanism.
- B. Create new financial and process incentives to enable private developers to participate in affordable workforce housing development through density bonuses, expedited permitting, fee reductions, transferable development rights, or other incentives in return for affordable housing. Ensure that any change or incentive that results in reducing the cost of development also reduces housing costs to the consumer.
- C. Convene a workshop/speaker series to illustrate national best practices and increase public awareness of the possible ways to address workforce housing affordability issues.
- D. Take a leadership role in supporting passage of State legislation for further condominium liability reform that will reduce the cost of insurance, improve its accessibility for affordable condominium projects, and maintain reasonable consumer protections. Explore the creation of incentives or private sector insurance pools to provide adequate protections for homeowners and developers.
- E. Focus additional outreach and marketing of City's home ownership programs, especially in areas experiencing gentrification, such as Southeast Seattle and the Central Area.

- F. Develop a Housing Levy reauthorization proposal based on resource levels needed to meet traditional low income housing and community development needs, as well as emerging “workforce” housing needs. Begin to place Housing Levy in the queue with other potential ballot measures to maximize potential for Housing Levy passage in 2009.
- G. Take a leadership role in supporting passage of State legislation authorizing Tax Increment Financing.
- H. Preserve and rehabilitate existing housing stock to maintain current supply of affordable housing. Focus efforts on areas at risk of losing housing stock, including Southeast Seattle, the International District, South Lake Union, and Downtown.
- I. Actively promote development of detached accessory dwelling units for communities that have expressed interest, such as in Southeast Seattle, and evaluate legislation for possible expansion of detached accessory dwelling units to additional areas.

Neighborhood Revitalization

Strong neighborhood business districts are vital to Seattle's economy, contributing to robust communities and new job creation. Neighborhood business districts provide the place where many small businesses are created and cultivated. In urban centers and villages, the City should take advantage of opportunities to create new investment, while ensuring that existing residents and businesses survive and thrive. Certain neighborhoods have challenges such as low employment, low income populations, or a declining retail environment. These neighborhood business districts need to be supported with focused economic development efforts to address these challenges. For these and other neighborhoods, the greatest priority is a safe environment for residents, business owners, and visitors.

- A. Increase police presence and increase public safety resources allocated to neighborhood business districts. Coordinate public safety initiatives with other neighborhood-based initiatives that encourage active community involvement.
- B. Encourage new mixed-use development around transit centers, such as Southeast Seattle, to catalyze neighborhood revitalization and reinvestment through appropriate increases in height or density and disposition of transit agency acquired property.
- C. Increase funding to strengthen neighborhood business districts, with a priority on those districts facing declining market share and experiencing difficulty sustaining their businesses.
- D. Promote best practices of mixed-use development that enhance neighborhood character and housing goals. Identify actions that would promote mixed-use development with commercial that has typically been single use (grocery, big box retail).
- E. Explore tax relief, such as an increase in the amount of revenue exempt from Business & Occupation Tax, and other creative options to mitigate impacts of light rail construction on small business. In addition to construction period relief, develop mitigation packages that build for the future in terms of increased business development, job retention, and expansion.

EXPANDING THE CITY'S JOB BASE

In June 2002, the Mayor's Economic Opportunity Task Force recommended that the City "develop targeted, pro-active strategies, partnerships and programs to support and attract existing and new industries that are key to the city's job and tax base." By "targeted" the Task Force intended that the City strategically focus upon a few key business sectors for development and retention.

In response to the first round of EOTF recommendations in 2002, the City continues to develop and implement industry sector-based economic development strategies to facilitate growth in Seattle's leading industries. These industries (manufacturing, maritime, healthcare, music, film, biotechnology, information and communication technology, and sustainable building) contribute to the diversity of the city's economy and job base; provide considerable job growth potential; offer accessible, family-wage jobs; and fit well with Seattle's comparative advantages. The City's focus on industry sectors is well-aligned with the Prosperity Partnership's industry cluster approach. The City will be taking a significant role in implementing this regional strategy.

Though each sector has challenges specific to their industry, overarching issues—such as business retention and attraction, marketing, workforce development, and the city's overall business climate—have significant impact on the growth and development of each industry. Developing policies and programs that encourage a diverse and thriving local economy, foster business growth and competitiveness, and prepare Seattle residents for future jobs is critical to the economic vitality of the city.

- A. Convene a "Mayor's Education Summit" inviting stakeholders throughout the city to develop an action plan to address and resolve problems faced by Seattle Public Schools. An improvement in the quality of Seattle Public Schools will make Seattle more competitive in attracting talent and will provide a better prepared workforce. This summit should consider links between K-12 and the workforce training system, emphasizing that Seattle Public Schools need to prepare students for a range of post-graduation options, including college, apprenticeships, and vocational training.
- B. Establish select industry-specific advisory committees to create an ongoing forum for the Mayor and the Office of Economic Development (OED) to interact with business leaders, and understand and address current issues impacting their industries, and broader overarching business climate issues.
- C. Leverage City investment in, and coordinate marketing efforts (e.g. funding, branding, and ad campaigns) between the Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Downtown Seattle Association, enterpriseSeattle, and the Seattle Chamber of Commerce to create and communicate a strong brand image for the city. This brand image will not only support tourism, but also be instrumental in attracting businesses and individual workers.

- D. Develop programs and adopt policies to support the growth of Seattle's sustainable building and alternative energy industries. Consider recommendations of the Green Ribbon Committee, provided those recommendations are supportive of the business climate.
- E. Continue to improve the City's permitting process to address specific issues in new and emerging industries, such as biodiesel.
- F. Maintain a thriving arts and culture community and foster growth of Seattle's music industry. Create an efficient and effective permit process for special events and live performances. In addition, review public safety regulations and enforcement policies to maintain safe streets while creating a vibrant night life, positive street activity, and a thriving music scene.
- G. Support lobbying efforts to increase funding for the state's tourism industry.
- H. Support the proposed state film incentives package to improve the city's ability to attract film production.
- I. Market and promote Seattle's economic ties to Alaska via the Alaska Yukon Exposition anniversary event, as well as the Seattle-Anchorage Economic Development and Cooperation Agreement.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Seattle employers report difficulty in finding qualified workers with specific occupational skills, especially in Seattle's key industries, and have begun hiring workers from out of state to fill job openings. The difficulty finding qualified workers spans entry-level to executive positions. Many workers have not developed the necessary skills to advance to higher paying jobs or are not employed in jobs with "career ladder" growth opportunities. Immigrants, youth, people of color and underemployed individuals face particularly high hurdles. The workforce and education system, while offering a wide array of employment and training services is disjointed and "silo-ed", creating confusion among stakeholders and hindering their ability to attract new funding.

Wealth in Seattle is unevenly distributed. The gap between the wealthy and the poor has grown, and there is inequitable distribution along racial lines. The availability of middle-wage jobs seems to be shrinking and Seattle has a large number of "working poor" residents, those who have a job but struggle to meet Seattle's high living costs. To address these disparities, the City strives to create a robust economy AND broadly shared prosperity. To achieve this, it is essential that the city has well-trained workers to fill industry demands for talent.

Unfortunately, the existing workforce training system is disjointed and in need of greater coordination and collaboration. Enhanced collaboration between workforce development stakeholders would more effectively meet employer demands for qualified workers across a wide range of jobs, improve service delivery, and increase the ability to attract funding. This collaboration would help the workforce system address the continuum of needs across workers, including job training and retraining, ESL, apprenticeship programs, transportation needs, day care, etc.

- A. Convene a series of discussions and workshops with existing workforce development agencies, educational institutions, employers, funding providers, and other workforce stakeholders. The goals of the workshops are to increase collaboration between workforce agencies and to better address the needs of local employers by improving training and job matching services and coordinating funding priorities.

Potential outcomes to be achieved via the summit include:

1. Develop a Seattle area "workforce collaborative" model (based on models in other metropolitan cities).
2. Identify and narrow gaps in service delivery.
3. Enhance employer and employee (or job seeker) access to the local workforce training system.
4. Improve job placement and matching between employers and job seekers.
5. Enhance training programs for "career ladder" and family-wage jobs.
6. Create an industry-specific workforce demonstration project.

TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE

Transportation

In 2002, the EOTF identified transportation as the number one priority of the business community and citizens at large. Transportation continues to be the paramount issue for the city's economic vitality. An adequate and viable intermodal transportation system is critical to future economic development and quality of life.

Seattle is faced with "opportunities of a lifetime" in the Alaskan Way Viaduct, the Mercer Corridor, and Link Light rail that must be seized now. These opportunities may not return again for years when the problems will be worse and the costs much greater. In addition to these major projects, significant investment is needed in the City's existing transportation infrastructure to maintain our transportation system.

The Subcommittee recognizes that these opportunities and their implementation are best addressed from a standpoint of regional integration, coordination, and cooperation. It is also recognized that transportation is first and foremost an issue of developing dedicated funding, particularly in a climate where funding measures are at risk.

- A. Support the development of a regional transportation package that sustains and enhances the economy, including funding necessary for:
 1. Replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall,
 2. Expanding the capacity of the SR-520 Corridor,
 3. Implementing improvements to the Mercer Corridor, and
 4. Keeping freight mobility a priority in any transportation funding package.
- B. Communicate to citizens, the State Legislature, and the regional & statewide business community, the importance of the Viaduct Tunnel option to the region's economic development.
- C. Support Sound Transit in funding completion of the Link Light Rail Project to Northgate and other regional high-capacity transit expansions.
- D. Work with the Legislature and other regional partners to redirect the Monorail's current sources of funding to Seattle's major transportation priorities and investigate an alternative transit system on its corridor.
- E. Support an increase in bus service allocations to better match bus service demand.
- F. Support legislation to increase local options for tax-based transportation revenues.

- G. Support concurrent City initiatives for dedicated and increased local transportation funding to deal with major maintenance backlog on Seattle's roads and bridges.
- H. Continue to improve City permitting and coordination of transportation projects:
 - 1. Provide consistent and predictable notification to affected stakeholders prior to transportation street closures/restrictions and permit fee increases.
 - 2. Strengthen intergovernmental coordination with other transportation agencies in the region.
 - 3. The City should continue to work toward implementation of "one-stop" permitting to make securing multiple permits more convenient and less time consuming.
- I. Standardize transportation data to achieve consistency when presenting data and advancing recommendations.
- J. Consider expansion of a street car network, including north to Interbay.

Infrastructure

In addition to transportation, basic infrastructure is critical to the city's economy and its ability to attract and retain businesses. Competitive rate structures support key industrial activities and commercial businesses in the city. The Mayor and City Council should strive to maintain both commercial and industrial rate structures that support the economic vitality of key industrial activities and commercial businesses in Seattle.

- A. Reduce the city's electrical power supply costs by reconsidering policies on hedging with appropriate safeguards.
- B. Continue the City Light Advisory Board.
- C. The City should also adopt a "benchmark" program to track rates being assessed in other regions to assure that City Light industrial and commercial rates remain as competitive as possible.
- D. Continue to encourage waste reduction, in lieu of requiring mandatory recycling:
 - 1. Review administrative rules relating to "significant amounts of recyclables" to account for total waste reduction already achieved.
 - 2. Work with businesses to develop waste reduction and recycling strategies that balance environmental and business needs.
- E. Relocate utilities underground in coordination with transportation and other projects, keeping in mind economies of scale and the need for utility integration in the project's timeline.
- F. Encourage the development of a robust broadband network by private providers, leveraging City government resources and assets.
- G. Determine utility rates independent of overall budget decisions.