



# The Civics of Community and Economic Development

## Understanding the Underlying Foundation for Community Success

When community leaders think about community and economic development, they often immediately focus on **what** it is that needs to be done: building an industrial park, recruiting new businesses, supporting existing businesses, launching a new tourism campaign, revitalizing the downtown. All of these strategies, if well executed, can positively contribute to the economic condition and quality of life of their communities.

### Strategies

In effect, the community is focused on the **green** portion of the figure at right: *strategies*.

“What strategies should we implement in order to lead our community toward our desired vision?”



Indeed, successfully implementing appropriate strategies is what delivers results—plain and simple.

### Capacity

What is often not considered is the critical nature of *capacity*. Capacity to implement—or lack thereof—determines the success of the strategies. Without properly directed human, financial, and technical resources, good strategies either never get off the ground or simply stall. Strategies can only succeed with a foundation of the needed capacity (the **gold** portion of the figure).

### Civics

As infrequently as capacity is considered, the *civics* of the community is usually even less thought about, and is more nebulous. In fact, a sound understanding of the civics of a community is virtually never examined in the course of developing and implementing an economic development strategic plan. **Civics, however, is the ultimate foundation of community progress.** This is the **brown** portion of the figure.

Civics can be defined as: 1) the social science of municipal affairs; and 2) the study of government with attention to the role of citizens—as opposed to external factors—in the operation and oversight of government. As the definition suggests, civics is *how* citizens work within their own system to manage and advance their government and community.

But just how do you go about determining the effect of civics on community and economic development?

The results of successfully implemented **strategies are tangible**. Improvements to land, building, and infrastructure can be seen. Jobs and community-facility improvements are vital and dynamic elements within communities.

**Capacity is also tangible.** Human (development organizations), financial (budgets and loan funds), and technical (information and knowledge) resources are tangible and measurable.





**Civics is intangible.** Just how do you measure the impact of the civic nature of a community? On one hand, a community that constantly wars with itself—or does not even work to accomplish any collective advancements—seems to stand still or even regress. On the other hand, many communities complete projects and initiatives in a relatively smooth and consistent fashion.

The main difference that accounts for success (or the lack thereof) is the civics of the community. Building Communities offers the **Four Stages of Civic Condition Model** to better understand these dynamics and their effects on community and economic development.

Presented more fully in the book *Building Communities: 25 Strategies to Advance America*, the Four Stages Model stipulates that there are four overarching conditions that dictate a community’s capacity to envision and enact its desired future.

**Apathy Stage.** Communities in the Apathy stage are characterized by having little, if any, drive amongst their civic leaders (elected and non-elected). Apathy Stage communities are characterized by a lack of vision and drive for community achievements. The community may be comprised of many accomplished individuals who have laudable family and religious values, but is simply lacking a civic focus and character. These communities typically adopt a position that they cannot really control their destiny; that state and federal government serves only as a regulator rather than a partner; and that any attempts to change those conditions will fail.

**Argumentative Stage.** Argumentative Stage communities demonstrate a collective willingness to move forward, but generally have not developed their ability to do so.

Argumentative Stage communities are characterized by a group of civic leaders that do have goals and dreams for their community. These communities, however, generally lack both the professional capability and the needed overall unity to carry those dreams forward.

**Action Stage.** Action Stage communities are characterized by a track record of consistently identifying and advancing development projects. Action communities have a high level of willingness and a high level of ability. Action communities typically have a sense of direction that allows them to immediately identify whether proposed projects are consistent with that overall direction. Projects that are inconsistent with that direction are typically discarded. Projects consistent with it are embraced and advanced.

**Alliance Stage.** Alliance Stage communities make a paradigm shift from project orientation to community orientation. That is, it is simply not enough for them to succeed with advancing community development projects—it is necessary to examine how each of these projects serves the larger goal for the community. Alliance communities, therefore, advance a portfolio of projects, each with a specific purpose that is consistent with the stated overall direction of the community.

Four Stages of Civic Condition Model				
Stage→	Apathy	Argumentative	Action	Alliance
Motivation	Association	Authority	Achievement	Actualization
Willingness	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ability	None	Low	High	High
Object	No Focus	Project Focus	Project Focus	Community Focus