

Action Items for Wilton EDC – May 2020

Prepared by AdvanceCT

Overview

The Town of Wilton engaged AdvanceCT in April of 2020 for support in the creation of strategic action items for the Economic Development Commission. What follows is a write-up of recommendations for long-term goals and EDC action items to meet these goals.

The EDC has engaged with the business community to determine its needs and opportunities, specifically as related to being located in Wilton. AdvanceCT utilized the EDC's feedback to inform these goals and their respective action items. These recommendations cover approximately a three-year period.

Goals

- Assist businesses experiencing challenges related to COVID-19.
- Increase new development and business expansion.
- Engage existing businesses to ensure retention and encourage expansion within Wilton.

Action Items

Assist businesses experiencing challenges related to COVID-19.

Learn about COVID-specific resources and connect local businesses to these resources

(EDC/Office of First Selectwoman) – Over the course of 2020, and likely into 2021, many businesses statewide will be grappling with challenges related to COVID-19, particularly revenue losses and challenges related to implementing safety protocols. The EDC should act as leaders and advocates for the business community in Wilton during this time, and this should remain the priority for the group over the course of the crisis. EDC members should stay up-to-date on any business reopening guidelines released by the Governor's Office and engage local businesses to determine what questions they have about implementing these guidelines and about generally maintaining their operations. Questions to be anticipated include opportunities for funding/financing, implementing safety protocols, acquiring PPE, training employees about certain protocols, etc. While the EDC does not need to know the answers to all these questions, members should know where to direct businesses to find these answers. The state's website (ct.gov/coronavirus) is a strong resource that directs users to a number of different topic areas. EDC members should take time to learn about this site and other relevant resources to be able to provide

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adequate guidance to Wilton's businesses. AdvanceCT and the Department of Economic and Community Development are also resources for information on questions related to specific business needs.

These efforts should be ongoing past the completion of the COVID-19 crisis and until the business community starts experiencing new growth.

Consider assisting Office of First Selectwoman with implementing local programs to support affected businesses (EDC/Office of First Selectwoman) – There are opportunities for local intervention related to supporting businesses impacted by COVID-19, and the EDC should work to brainstorm creative ideas that may get consumer dollars flowing within Wilton. One example of a program already implemented in Wilton and other towns in Connecticut is “Eat Local-Win Local”, where residents are entered to win a number of gift cards from local restaurants when they purchase takeout. This program is being administered by the Office of the First Selectwoman where residents send in pictures of their receipts. Restaurants benefit by selling more meals, and customers benefit by being entered into the gift card pool. This concept can also be implemented for businesses other than restaurants like retail (e.g., Wilton is currently offering “Shop Local-Win Local”). The EDC should work with municipal staff and elected officials to determine opportunities where Town policies can be enacted to support businesses’ implementation of certain government-mandated protocols. For example, if outdoor dining only is allowed for restaurants, the EDC should discuss with land use staff and the Planning & Zoning Commission ways that the Town’s zoning regulations can be altered to allow greater access to outdoor dining for more businesses. At each EDC meeting, members should discuss any new government mandates or guidelines released and how those may be facilitated at the local level. Ongoing discussion with local staff and elected officials will be necessary at least once per month to ensure information is being communicated to businesses in a uniform manner.

These efforts should be ongoing past the completion of the COVID-19 crisis and until the business community starts experiencing new growth.

Engage remote workers (EDC) – Perhaps one opportunity to arise from the COVID-19 crisis for Wilton is the increase in remote workers who live in town but work elsewhere. As some companies are anticipated to make their work-from-home policies more lenient as a result of this crisis, the EDC should look to engage these individuals to better understand their needs, both in the short-term and in the long-term. This information should be collected through an online survey, created and distributed by the EDC in collaboration with the Town. Survey Monkey is a good tool for this purpose. Perhaps these results spur a discussion on broadband and the ways the Town can work with the State to provide better and more consistent access to Wilton residents. Perhaps this represents an opportunity for the creation of a second coworking space in town, as more home-based workers want to escape their home offices periodically. Perhaps the EDC can bring together these remote workers for networking events after the crisis has subsided, representing an opportunity for increased business connections and collaboration among these

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individuals. The EDC should connect with Wilton's remote workers through the Town's website, social media, and other public locations to determine what their needs are, what resources can address these needs, and how this might best benefit the local economy.

These engagements should be started now and continued over the next three years. Needs will likely change over this time period.

Increase new development and business expansion.

Prepare data package to promote business recruitment (EDC/Office of the First Selectwoman) –

The EDC should update existing data sources (e.g., EDC website, *It's Working in Wilton* video) that includes information relevant to business decisionmakers, developers, and commercial realtors. This information should include:

- Distance/access to major transit networks (I-95);
- Travel time to major regional hubs (Stamford, Hartford, New York, Boston);
- Transportation (freight rail and public transportation options);
- Workforce (educational attainment, unemployment rate, size of labor force);
- Key industries (number of establishments and employees, percentage labor force employed in key industries);
- Large institutions (higher education, largest employers, other relevant facilities);
- Socioeconomic factors (household income, poverty rate); and
- Other relevant data to business decision making.

In addition to relevant real estate information collected through the inventory mentioned above, this broader dataset should be provided to business owners, developers, commercial realtors, and other relevant parties so they can immediately develop a strong understanding of what locating in Wilton will look like.

This project should be completed in year one with updates made on an ongoing basis.

Create an identity and brand for Wilton (EDC) – The EDC should work with elected officials to determine an identity for the town from the perspective of attracting businesses. Members should review industry data for the town to determine which core industries are represented and which are industries that they would like to see grow. Feedback from the business community and residents should also be incorporated. This feedback can be collected from a survey, focus group, public forum, etc. Based on the collected information, the EDC could work with municipal staff and/or a marketing consultant to determine how and where to share this business recruitment message as part of the Town's broader economic development efforts. The EDC should play a role, in collaboration with elected officials, in

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determining “what we want to be when we grow up” and create branded materials such as data packages (to be given to businesses considering located in Wilton), a website, real estate brochures, and other items relevant for economic development that reflect that vision. This vision identity could be tied in with a larger identity for the town overall or could remain specific to economic development.

This work should be started in year two and will likely continue into year three.

Engage existing businesses to ensure retention and encourage expansion within Wilton.

Create a business contact list (EDC/Office of the First Selectwoman) – In order to be able to adequately engage existing businesses in Wilton, the EDC should create a contact list to facilitate this effort. This list should include company name, address, contact name and title, phone number, email address, industry, and number of employees (if possible). The EDC should engage with municipal staff to collect any business lists that might already exist. The Tax Assessor, Town Clerk, and Land Use Department may hold lists. Additionally, the Connecticut Secretary of State’s website has an extensive list of businesses. EDC members should combine these contacts and refine them into an easy-to-use spreadsheet to facilitate business visitations and other forms of engagement.

This list should be created in year one.

Participate in ongoing business visitations (EDC/Office of the First Selectwoman) – The EDC should continue to engage with Wilton’s businesses by visiting them periodically. This is one of the most critical roles the EDC can play in supporting the Town’s economic development staff. As ambassadors to the business community, the EDC must have an understanding of their needs and who to involve to address any specific issues. After each visitation, EDC members should do the necessary follow-up in connecting business owners with relevant municipal staff and/or outside organizations like AdvanceCT, DECD, SBA, SBDC, and more. The EDC may consider creating a survey with standard questions asked at each visitation to facilitate the conversations.

These visitations should be completed on an ongoing basis. The EDC must determine its capacity and set a monthly goal for visitations.

Engage with economic development partner organizations and connect them to local businesses (EDC/Office of the First Selectwoman) – The EDC should develop an understanding of the types of resources available to businesses in Wilton and work with municipal staff involved in economic development to ensure that there is broad knowledge of these resources. As part of this effort, the EDC should stay up to date on the following organizations and how they support businesses:

- AdvanceCT;
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- Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD);
- Connecticut Main Street Center (CMSC);
- The Workplace;
- Connecticut Small Business Development Center (SBDC);
- US Small Business Administration (SBA);
- SCORE;
- Norwalk Regional Chamber of Commerce; and
- Fairfield County Community Foundation.

Additionally, the EDC should seek to proactively make connections that may support the business community. For example, as the group develops an understanding of the workforce needs of local businesses, it might connect with the local school district or regional community college to determine ways to incorporate teaching these skills into existing lesson plans. Another opportunity might lie in connecting local food producers with restaurants that might want to utilize local products.

These engagements should be completed on an ongoing basis.

Engage home-based businesses (EDC/Office of the First Selectwoman) – Home-based businesses can be a major component of a municipality’s economic base without municipal officials even knowing it. To determine how to best support this segment of the local economy, the EDC should work to draw these business owners out of their homes. There should be at least one event per year coordinated with a topic of particular interest for these types of businesses. For example, the EDC can partner with the CT SBDC to host workshops on topics like growing your customer base, obtaining financing, and more. By advertising this on the Town’s website and in many public spaces (community center, grocery store, public park, etc.), the EDC can reach the most people. Once the EDC has interacted with these businesses, it should determine what the greatest needs are. Perhaps some are ready to graduate to commercial space, while others may be interested in seeing a coworking space in town. The EDC should work with these businesses to ensure they are positioned to growth their economic impact on Wilton.

These engagements should be completed on an ongoing basis.