

EVALUATION

Conference
on
“Strategic Planning for Economic Development, Workforce Development, and the Optics, Imaging,
and Photonics Industry”
held on
Friday, October 18, 2002
8:30 am – 2:00 pm
at the
Hutchison House
Rochester, NY

Background

As part of Cornell University’s commitment to the development of the New York economy, and in particular the troubled economy upstate, faculty members and students from the City and Regional Planning Department (CRP)* had been doing research on the Rochester regional economy for four years prior to this conference. Earlier work illuminated the potential of a growing cluster of optics, imaging, and photonics firms (the “photonics industry” hereafter) in particular, and over the past two years, the Rochester Project on Economic Development directed by CRP Professor Susan Christopherson sought to develop the foundation for an alternative regional economic development agenda focused on the photonics industry.

Funded variously by the New York Federal Reserve Bank, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the US Department of Labor, and CRP itself, this body of work included:

- A social accounting (input-output) matrix model of the Rochester economy, looking at the impact of the photographic equipment and supplies industry (the “Kodak” sector) on other sectors in the regional economy.
- An analysis of trends in employment and sectoral growth in the Rochester region and in upstate New York.
- An analysis of training opportunities and of the potential for a training system serving the photonics industry in Rochester.
- An analysis of how the temporary services industry interacts with the photonics industry and serves their labor needs.
- A survey of 90 firms in the regional photonics industry (57 responses) covering a wide range of topics.
- Focus groups with the photonics cluster members, labor leaders, civic leaders and the staff of Rochester Resources Alliance to help develop an economic development agenda.

Co-sponsored by the Upstate Alliance for Innovation (a consortium of R.I.T., the University of Rochester, and SUNY Buffalo) and the Common Good Planning Center (a local civic organization), the conference on October 18, 2002 gave the Project team an opportunity to present their findings, frame them in a policy context supporting alternative economic development strategies, and introduce the experience of successful sectoral cluster development efforts from other regions.

* CRP professors Susan Christopherson, Matt Drennan, Ken Reardon, Pierre Clavel and Rolf Pendall; Ph.D. candidates Jennifer Clark and Saurav Bhatta; Masters students Kryz Cail, Wyeth Friday, Donovan Hart, Roberta Robles, and Tanya Mooza Zwahlen.

Objectives

Billed as a “strategic planning” conference, its explicit purposes were more (to quote the invitation):

- To give stakeholders in the region information that can guide their planning and decisionmaking
- To provide a forum for a “civic discussion” on the future of Rochester’s high-tech regional economy

“Our hope is that this discussion will help participants begin to develop a vision for the future of the Rochester regional economy and identify strategies that can realize that vision. Our conference will bring together people from firms, civic institutions, community organizations, universities and colleges as well as venture capitalists, economic development professionals, and workforce development professionals to address how to create a framework that can support high-tech industry and retain skilled manufacturing jobs.”

In fact, the convening function of this conference was paramount. The literature, the survey, and the focus groups had repeatedly emphasized that Rochester was a regional culture singularly colored by the dominance of a few big employers: deferential in its civic life, wary of organized labor, and not so much factionalized as fragmented overall. These people had just not spent much time in the same room with one another very often.

So, the immediate objective of the conference was subtext. In the course of their prior research efforts, the Project team had gained the confidence of people from a wide range of interested parties. Now, while ostensibly assembling those people to listen to them, the conference organizers were also assembling them to listen to each other. Their short-term objective was to get the participants to think beyond the interests or work of their own firm or organization – to think regionally – and to lift up potential points of intersection and collaboration.

In the long run, their objective was:

- To illuminate the burgeoning cluster of optics, imaging and photonics firms in the Rochester region;
- To document its role in and potential for the regional economy;
- To build support for a partnership of private firms, labor organizations, educational institutions, civic and community organizations and public agencies to foster its growth;
- Focused on the development of the existing regional workforce;
- Centered around an intermediary organization;
- With the goal of commercializing innovation in this sector, not just through the existing large regional employers (Kodak, Xerox, Corning, Bausch & Lomb), but by diversifying (and thereby stabilizing) the regional economy through the continued growth of a diverse array of smaller employers;
- That will generate more medium-skilled living wage jobs, including manufacturing jobs, as well as high-skilled jobs;
- Especially for residents in low-income communities.

The Range of Participants

An intense effort went into garnering a broad range of participants: a mass e-mailing, mailed invitations to a target list of 125, follow-up solicitations to invitee referrals. Registrants were sent two rounds of pre-conference materials plus an e-mail reminder. Unregistered invitees were pursued via additional e-mails, a mailing of initial conference materials, and select personal phonecalls, to make sure that as many key organizations as possible were represented. Organizers had anticipated attendance of between 50 and 70 people, and exactly 70 people registered for the conference, comprising the desired cross-section of photonics firms, labor organizations, educational institutions, civic and community organizations and public agencies. 56 attended (including three new registrants), 45 simply as participants with an interest

in the industry and/or the economic development of the region (the balance were speakers, facilitators, or evaluators). Of those 45, 14 were from private companies, 8 from civic organizations, 7 from labor organizations, 6 from community groups, 6 from educational institutions, and 4 from public agencies.

The Design

To ease potential barriers inhibiting attendance, the conference was scheduled for less than a full day (9am–2pm), registration was free, a catered buffet lunch was served, and it was held in a familiar locale (which also happens to house the offices of Rochester’s established labor intermediary, the Industrial Management Council).

The program (see attachments) featured:

1. An hour-long plenary session featuring a PowerPoint presentation by Professor Christopherson that introduced the work of the Rochester Project on Economic Development, summarized its findings on the Rochester photonics industry, and framed them in the context of regional, cluster-focused, workforce-oriented alternative economic development strategies. Half the time was allotted to discussion.
2. Three concurrent, 1½ hour sessions, each with a facilitator and a recorder, each featuring a guest expert and/or an expert with local ties.
3. Unstructured discussion opportunities over lunch.
4. A reconvening of the whole intended to set forth themes from the prior discussion, and set priorities for developing a strategic plan for regional economic development in the photonics industry.

Throughout, participants were assured that the Project team would be generating a full report and framework for action, to be distributed for comment in December.

The Process

Organizers desired that the conference would “bring people up to speed, expand the horizon of discussion, and obtain buy-in” to a strategic planning process. While the team wanted to introduce its findings and ideas, it also felt that “buy-in” was more likely if participants felt that the ideas they were buying into were their own. So, while the plenary and concurrent sessions each led off with an expert presentation, the bulk of the time was reserved for discussion.

Realizing that this meant that their role at the conference would be more that of facilitators than researchers, the entire team trained with Rama Hart, a consultant in Appreciative Inquiry. This technique promotes behaviors in a group discussion that enhance generative thinking and deter inhibiting criticism. By focusing on garnering the vision and ideas of participants and fostering their exchange with each other, the team sought to build their sense of personal investment, their interest in collaborating, and their motivation to put effort into an agenda of future activity.

Observations

Opening Plenary

The Keynote proved the right note on which to begin. Christopherson’s plenary presentation, amiable in tone and apparently note-free, placed salient facts supported by graphics about the region’s photonics industry within a policy framework. By documenting a growing, mutually-enhancing cluster of optics/imaging/photonics firms (which others would expand, to include biotech for example), who draw most of their revenue from customers outside the region, the essential message was one of promise – that photonics could be a major engine for rebuilding the regional economy both as an innovation hub and as a manufacturing center.

About a quarter of the people in the room began taking notes from the beginning, about half by the end. After 7-10 clarification questions for the speaker, an exchange of comments and questions among participants occupied the balance of the time. No person dominated, all sectors of participants were involved, both problems and ideas for addressing them were advanced, and several participants commented on the apparently widespread desire to collaborate, especially on the part of labor representatives.

Concurrent Sessions

Though self-selected, the distribution of participants into the three concurrent sessions proved almost even (17 in Session I, 14 each in Sessions II and III).

Albers' Session I PowerPoint presentation ran long but was well-illustrated, attention levels and notetaking activity were intense, and the half-hour discussion that followed – moderated by a CRP student -- was highly engaged.

Session II moved more quickly into a lively exchange of ideas so balanced that facilitation seemed largely unnecessary. No obvious leadership here, nor much notetaking.

Session III took on more of a call-and-response format, wherein participants would offer a comment, then Herman would respond each time and add a few points of his own. Here participants seemed more reserved, and while the assigned scribe took notes on a newsprint easel, few others did.

To the extent Appreciative Inquiry was used by the team's facilitators for these sessions, it was invisible. Whether that means it was properly used, seldom used, or just unnecessary, I cannot say.

Closing Plenary

The concluding plenary session was the least successful in design, doomed by an ambition too great. The published agenda called for "developing a strategic plan for regional economic development" ... in 45 minutes. The actual plan was for the organizers to extract 4 themes from the day's discussion – still a tall order given four hours, four sessions, and a very robust and far-ranging debate. These four assertions were posted on the wall, and participants (who had been supplied a set of self-stick stars, color coded to indicate their sector) were asked to place one of their stickers on a continuum from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" by each statement. At the suggestion of one of the participants, they also rated the long-term importance and short-term urgency of each assertion. The themes were:

1. We need a shared regional industry ecosystem to attract capital and industrial growth.
2. We need to organize coordinated leadership across scales in the development process.
3. We need to organize multiple stakeholders to increase political impact on economic development priorities.
4. We need to organize intermediary organizations which can facilitate "real time" communication between firms and workforce development service providers.

If the point here was to galvanize the salient points of the day's discussion, or crystallize critical choices in how to proceed, these missed the mark. It is unclear if these were real highlights or an editorial. They were so obtusely worded, and the rating system was so poorly understood, that I question if the response has any meaning.

Nonetheless, the conclusion of the conference was a success, in part *because* at this point the organizers' design had laid an egg. The objective was to get buy-in, to motivate, to foster engagement in forging next steps, remember? Well, that's what happened: the participants took over. In about 20 minutes, a wide range of contributors had generated a list of next steps, and everyone left (eventually, after a lot of lingering sidebar conversations) energized.

Participant Recommendations for Next Steps

Here’s what the participants suggested:

- Debrief the guest experts about what they have learned today before they move on to other things.
- Schedule now when this group will reconvene, perhaps to offer feedback on the full report and framework for action by the Project team following its distribution in December.
- First, e-mail all 57 companies who responded to the survey of Rochester photonics firms about the results of the conference, so that they are kept in the loop.
- Then, get press coverage of these developments, emphasizing good news for the region out of the photonics industry.
- Begin a strategic planning group that meets soon.
- Expand the stakeholders at the table.
- Develop a clear Mission Statement first.
- Build an ever-expanding e-mail listserv for ongoing communication of developments to all stakeholders.
- Develop the Rochester Regional Photonics Cluster website as a center of information exchange for the industry and other stakeholders.
- Build the capacity of the Rochester Regional Photonics Cluster to be the convener and intermediary for this effort.
- Work with the education and training sector to build programs of study that will develop a workforce for the industry.
- Develop mentoring of younger workers by older workers (“Work ethic is as important as job skills.”)

Feedback from Participants

A simple follow-up email survey was sent to all Conference participants who had submitted an accurate email address upon registration – 38 in all -- and 20 responded (54%). A compilation of their responses is attached.

They were asked four questions, and encouraged to comment:

1. What are the key points that you took away from this conference in regard to building the future of the photonics industry in the Rochester area?
2. How did the conference change your views on (a) what needs to be done for the photonics industry to contribute to the economic development of Rochester, (b) how to get there, or (c) who should have a role?
3. Do you think it can be done? Yes Maybe No
4. Are you willing to work on making it happen? Yes No

If the desired outcome of the conference was widespread buy-in to pursuing a strategic plan for developing Rochester’s photonics cluster, it appears to have succeeded. Although the survey respondents may have self-selected toward a more positive sample, the tally in response to questions #3 and #4 was:

3. Do you think it can be done? Yes: 15 Maybe: 5 No: 0
4. Are you willing to work on making it happen? Yes: 18 No: 2

Comment

Where there's a will, there's a way ... but first there has to be a will. Notwithstanding the wording of the written agenda, building the *will* to do strategic planning was the more important accomplishment of this conference, and a more reasonable expectation than *doing* strategic planning.

As a regional sectoral development strategy, the approach of the Rochester Project on Economic Development to this point has seemed almost counter-intuitive. Usually you bring people together, then research their situation. The Project did things the other way around, and that may be its genius. In the course of doing the research first, they gained the interest and trust of a lot of people from different sectors, built their curiosity about the research findings, and brought them together only when the team had something to offer them.

What this conference offered them that they needed most may have been to lift up photonics as a ray of hope. Woven through the content of the discussion and behind the evident enthusiasm of the participants, there was a poignant desire for *some* good news after so many stories of so many layoffs for so long, some warranted hope for the economic future of the region. This is a region that has had unusual stability until fairly recently, where many have felt taken care of by big corporate parents, then betrayed, then unsure of what to fix on next.

Essentially the message from the Project team was: we've looked at the big picture, you've really got an edge with this photonics thing, you did it yourselves, and you can make it huge ... if you work together.

More than research findings or policy recommendations, conference participants seemed to discover their own good will and emerge with a desire to use it. Inadvertently, the conference also revealed just how far they are from having a way -- a real strategic plan.

The critical next step is to harness the Project's information and guidance to a truly representative group of Rochester players that are empowered to forge and implement such a plan, and to do it fast enough to take advantage of the momentum from this conference.

Ned Rightor
MXCIX

Attachments:

Conference Agenda
Conference Description and Session Goals
Description of Concurrent Sessions
Key Questions for Concurrent Sessions
Speaker Bios for Concurrent Sessions
List of Conference Registrants
Post Conference Participant Survey Responses

MXCIX does cross-sectoral executive recruiting, program evaluation and consulting projects, and a growing amount of policy research work investigating the changing nature of employment relationships, work, and the conduct of careers that characterize the New Economy. In all three of those capacities, we have worked extensively with foundations.