Book review of Local Economic Development: A Guide to Practice

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Local Economic Development: A Guide to Practice

In community after community the local planner is becoming increasingly involved in the economic problems facing our cities and towns, with at least partial responsibility for guiding the retention, enhancement, and expansion of the community's economic base. At times he or she takes the lead, serves on economic development committees, or merely provides the data for other organizations. In most cases, however, the planner is being asked for answers to questions that he or she is ill prepared to answer. How many planning directors or senior staff planners are formally trained in, for example, pro-forma analysis, marketing evaluation, job retraining, real estate feasibility, and project leveraging? The answer is very few. Indeed, both university-based planning programs and the American Planning Association-sponsored short courses are regularly filled with planners attempting to develop these new skills. The materials used in these courses are usually borrowed from real estate sources or case examples. For too long there has been no basic introductory, comprehensive text that is designed to educate and train planning practitioners, board members, and students involved in local economic development. Emil E. Malizia's book Local Economic Development: A Guide to Practice makes a solid contribution to that end.

Malizia states his goal as prompting the involvement of public organizations and private entities in joint projects that balance the profit motive and social responsibility. He falls short of that goal, but he leads us close enough to learn a great deal about the workings of the much-heralded public-private partnership.

The book has nine chapters. In each the author focuses on an individual component of local economic development. His topics include an explanation of the nature of local economic development; the different modes of economic development planning; the key strategies available to determine feasibility; and a polemic on steps that should be taken at the national level to promote local economic development. He includes several exercises designed to test the reader's understanding of the material. Five appendices focus on decision theory, entrepreneurship, the criteria for obtaining an Urban Development Action Grant, financial ratio information, and an overview of market studies.

The book has three particularly strong points. The writing is clear, concise, and relatively free of jargon. The material is basic, current, and well researched and will be of some help to any person involved in local economic development. The framework is serviceable and comprehensible to planners because it surveys the gamut of issues related to local economic planning.

At the same time, the book has some shortcomings. First, Malizia attempts to meet the needs of a wide audience but becomes too generalized. For example, the untrained professional, looking for both general knowledge and tools and techniques, will find some of both, but not in a pattern that is directly applicable to his or her day-to-day work. The book, in short, is not a manual of practice. The beginning student looking to understand the economic development process in a building-block fashion, moving from the general to the specific, will be frustrated by the chapter divisions. There is little apparent coherent flow to the book. The reader must move back and forth in order to gain a sense of coherence. Finally, although the author has minimized jargon, the book still is written in a planner's language, a tongue that is foreign to most lay people. The latter clearly could benefit from a comprehensive glossary of key words well beyond the few definitions that are provided. In brief, attempting to reach a diverse readership, the author falls short of his mark.

A second shortcoming concerns substance. The author fails to review comprehensively the participation of state government in local economic development. Massachusetts, for example, has twenty-four individual programs to stimulate local economic development. Most require the involvement of the local economic development planners. Without an explanation of the role of the states, a true perspective on local economic development cannot be achieved.

Finally, the book suffers from several small but grating problems. Malizia's chapter divisions and recommendations for reading are confusing, and the book flows poorly. In fact, often he seems to place the chapters randomly. Although his test questions will appeal to college instructors, they will be frustrating to professional planners—particularly since he does not provide "school solutions." Two of the appendices—one on decision theory and the other on entrepreneurship—seem out of place and add little to the book. And last, he makes little reference to actual case examples of cities that have applied the concepts based in the book. Planners want to know where the concepts have been applied and how effective they have been. Malizia's failure to make extensive reference to applied experiences represents a lost opportunity.

Is the book worth purchasing? If you are a planner, student, or layperson with little knowledge of local economic development, yes. If you are a practicing planner looking for a step-by-step manual, detailed information on the local economic development process, or the experiences of other communities, then this book will not help much.

Despite its shortcomings, this is a good book. Emil Malizia is to be commended for pulling the disparate parts of local economic development together and for cogently explaining the critical elements of the system. In the final analysis, this book is of significant benefit to those who need basic knowledge about local economic development.

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