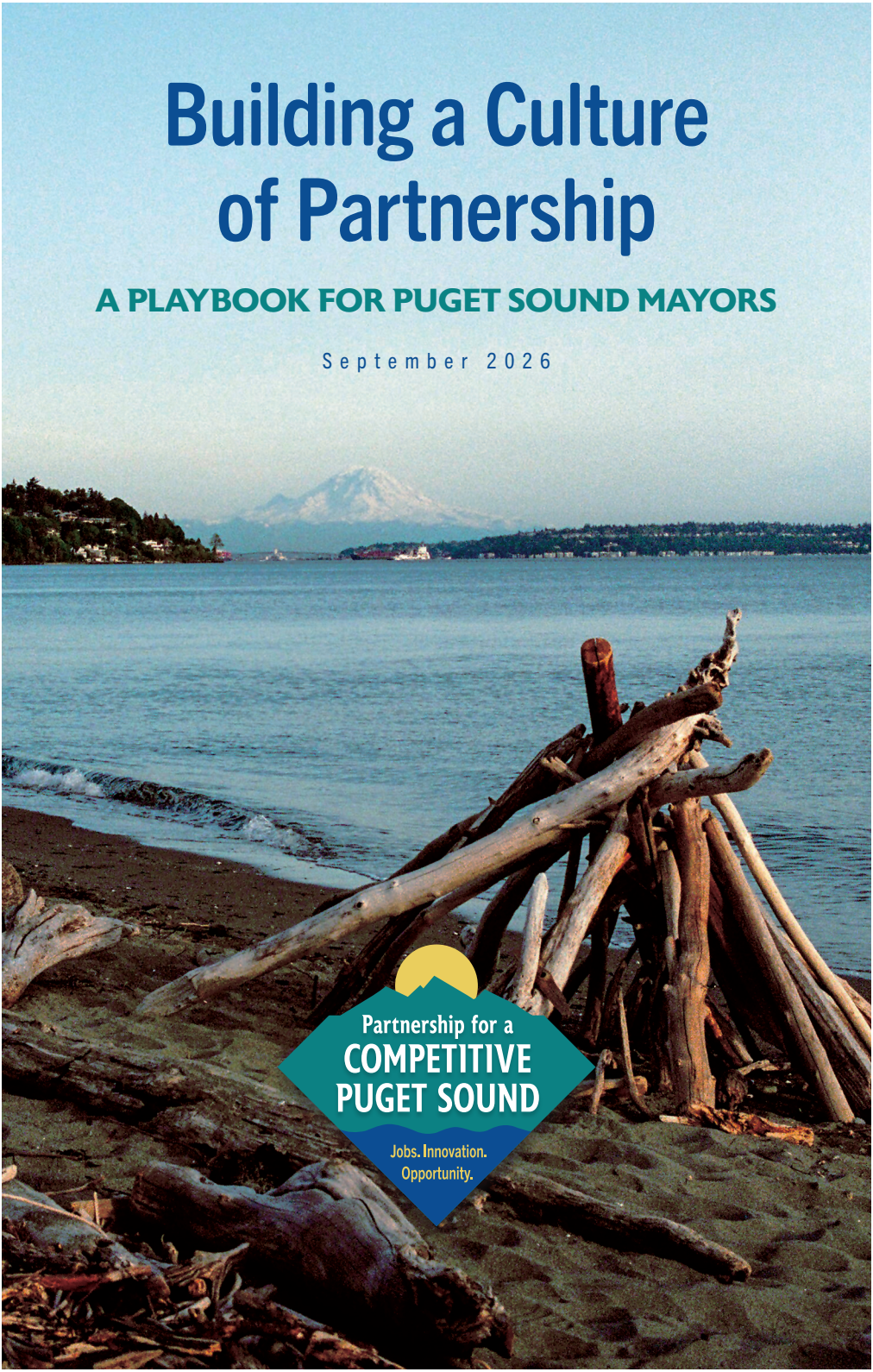
Building a Culture of Partnership

A PLAYBOOK FOR PUGET SOUND MAYORS

September 2026



Partnership for a
COMPETITIVE
PUGET SOUND

Jobs. Innovation.
Opportunity.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF PARTNERSHIP A Playbook for Puget Sound Mayors

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Jobs. Innovation. Opportunity.

Developed by Challenge Seattle

INTRODUCTION

What this playbook is and why it matters

The Puget Sound region is one of the most dynamic regional economies in the world. We have iconic companies, a deep talent base, world-class research institutions, and industries that define the future. We have every reason to be confident about what we have to offer.

And yet businesses increasingly say they don't feel welcome here, whether a small storefront or a large regional employer.

They describe traveling to other regions where public officials reach out proactively and help them solve problems both large and small. Too often, that same level of partnership is missing when they come home. When businesses have problems to navigate, like a permitting question, a regulatory hurdle, or a decision about where to expand, they often can't find a clear path through local government. And the signals coming from our public debates, our policy discussions, and the statements of our elected leaders too often take employers for granted rather than treating them as partners whose success the entire community depends on. We are in a fierce competition with other regions at a point in time when companies locally and globally are making consequential decisions about where they will locate and invest. We are in a critical moment for all of us to improve our business climate.

Today, businesses across Puget Sound want to be partners.

Today, businesses across Puget Sound want to be partners. They want to be asked, they want to contribute, and they want to help solve shared challenges. While rising costs, taxes, and regulations shape the business climate, so do the everyday interactions between businesses and local government. That's where mayors can play an outsized role and many

already are making economic development a genuine priority, building real relationships with their business communities, and finding creative ways to act within their authority. This playbook is built on their experience and is designed to help more mayors do the same.

Mayors and city councils are among the most important economic development leaders in the region, whether you were elected directly by voters or chosen by your council to lead.

Together, you have direct authority over the conditions that determine whether businesses feel welcome, whether they can navigate local government efficiently, and whether they see their city as a genuine partner in their success.

There is also a fiscal reality that makes this urgent. Many cities across the region are struggling with tight budgets, and due to state law and political realities, growing the tax base through economic development is critical. As mayor, you are balancing two priorities: strengthening your local economy while ensuring your city has the resources to provide the services residents expect.

Good news! Being welcoming and a great partner with businesses doesn't have to be expensive or complicated.

The culture of partnership is built from small decisions made every day: who gets a call returned, how quickly problems get resolved, and how economic success is talked about in your city. We can all start working on that Monday morning.

AT A GLANCE

How to use this playbook

Developed in partnership with many mayors from across Puget Sound, this playbook is a guide rather than a list of small-business programs. It offers questions to consider, real examples from cities across the region, perspectives from fellow mayors, and ideas you can adapt to your own community. Its goal is simple: to help you strengthen relationships with businesses and lead a city that is responsive, accessible, and ready to solve problems.

INSIDE THE PLAYBOOK

SECTION 1: Building a Culture of Partnership with Business

How to tell your city's economic story, build trusted business relationships, and solve shared problems.

SECTION 2: Economic Development Is a Team Sport

How to align City Hall around customer service, practical problem-solving, and economic opportunity.

SECTION 3: Improving Regional Economic Competitiveness

How to work with peer mayors and regional partners to strengthen your city and the region.

SECTION ONE

Building a culture of partnership with business

A culture of partnership isn't defined by one policy or one conversation. It is built by championing your city's role in the regional economy, being accessible and engaged with business leaders, partnering with businesses to solve shared challenges, and maintaining trusted relationships over time. This section explores:

- What is your city's economic story?
- How do you translate what you are doing for different audiences?
- How do you build the capacity to communicate consistently?
- How does being accessible turn into a competitive advantage?
- How do you partner with business to solve problems?
- What could be your rhythm to stay connected with business leaders?

WHAT IS YOUR CITY'S ECONOMIC STORY?

This is a moment to update your snapshot of what your city has to offer and get excited about it. Every city in this region has something real to offer businesses. In this competitive environment, now is the time to hone, sharpen, and get crystal clear about your city's economic story. Know your audience. You being candid about what you have demonstrates your genuine pride in what makes your city special.

- What makes your city a great place to do business right now?
- What are your city's strongest economic assets?
- What's your honest assessment of your city's reputation within the business community?

IN PRACTICE

The strongest cities don't stop at defining their economic story — they translate it into a focused strategy with clear priorities and actions.

Redmond

Redmond is building on its competitive advantages by strengthening its technology, gaming, and commercial space sectors while preparing for growth around four future light rail stations.

Shoreline

Shoreline is intentionally reshaping its economy by investing in small businesses and startups, expanding neighborhood commercial districts, strengthening tourism and its creative economy, and using placemaking to create more vibrant destinations — all with the goal of creating 10,000 additional jobs by 2044.

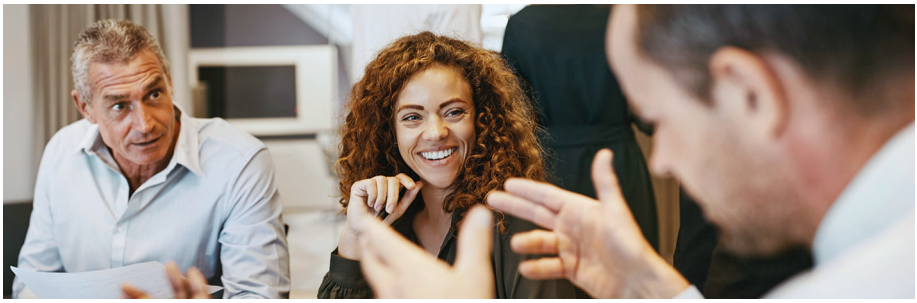
Bellevue

Bellevue is positioning itself for long-term resilience by diversifying its economy through emerging industries like life sciences and climate technology, expanding finance and healthcare, deepening its entrepreneurial ecosystem, and recognizing arts and culture as an economic driver.

How do you translate what you're doing for different audiences?

Businesses want to know you're a reliable partner. Residents want to know economic development benefits them, too. Each audience needs a different frame for the same work. Your council shares this work with you. When they understand the connection between economic development and the priorities you're working on together, they become better advocates for it, too, in their own districts, at the podium, and in budget conversations.

- How do you talk about economic development to your business community versus to your broader constituents?
- How do you connect economic development to the services and quality of life residents care about?



- How do you keep your council informed and engaged on economic development, not just at budget time?
- How do you use your existing channels, like your city's website, social media and earned media to put economic development front and center?

How do you build the capacity to communicate consistently?

- Who on your team owns economic development communications and is making sure that content shows up consistently on your website, social media, and in your regular communications? Are they working with other departments' communications staff to spread the content through their channels?
- When something good happens, like a ribbon cutting, a major employer announcement, or a permit milestone, how quickly and broadly does that message get out?

HOW DOES BEING ACCESSIBLE TURN INTO A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE?

It is special when a business leader can call you directly, get a clear answer, and know who is accountable. Don't underestimate how much that matters. Your ability to build real and meaningful personal partnerships is fundamental to our region's ability to improve our business climate. Your largest employers carry outsized weight for your local economy, in jobs, in investment, and in the ripple effects through smaller businesses that depend on them. That's worth a level of direct

access built around what they need. But accessibility isn't one-size-fits-all. A small business owner juggling every role in their company needs you to find creative ways to reach them on their terms, not necessarily the same channel that works for a large employer.

- Do your top employers know they can call you directly? Which business leaders are on your speed dial when an issue pops up?
- Who are the two or three highly networked people who will give you honest, candid information about what the business community is actually talking about and how they feel about their local government?
- When you meet with a business, try these four questions: What are we doing well? What are we missing? What do you need from us? What should we stop doing?
- Partnership is a two-way street. Businesses want to participate in your civic agenda, so come with an ask. Where can a business leader show up that's meaningful for your agenda?

IN PRACTICE

Sumner

Sumner Mayor Carla Bowman blocks an hour every week on her calendar so business owners can come talk with her directly. She uses the time to encourage them to think through business plans for growth and diversification, offering help with specific city staff when they ask.

MAYOR PERSPECTIVE

"It's about creating a community where businesses want to be."

— Mayor Carla Bowman, Sumner

HOW DO YOU PARTNER WITH BUSINESS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS?

The strongest partnerships are built around shared challenges and shared solutions. Whether the issue is transportation, workforce, permitting, infrastructure, public safety, or housing, mayors have a unique ability to bring businesses together with government to identify solutions that benefit the broader community.

Partnership also means representing your business community beyond city hall. When mayors advocate in Olympia, Washington D.C., or regional forums, they demonstrate that the success of local businesses is a priority and that the city is committed to creating the conditions for them to thrive.

- When a problem in your city gets identified, how do you translate that into a shared challenge with a role for businesses to play?
- How are you publicly framing your city's success as connected to your business community's success?
- How are you representing your business community's interests to other levels of government?
- How are you using your platform — earned media, public statements, your economic development strategic plan — as a signal of priorities?

IN PRACTICE

Kent Valley

Recognizing that aerospace and space manufacturing extends beyond city boundaries, Kent Mayor Dana Ralph convened the mayors of Auburn, Renton, and Tukwila, along with CEOs, educational institutions, and industry partners, to establish the Kent Valley Air and Space Manufacturing Roundtable. Rather than tackling workforce, supply chain, and competitiveness challenges city by city, the Roundtable provides a regular forum for local governments and industry to work together on the long-term success of one of the region's most important manufacturing clusters.

Edgewood

Edgewood established an Economic Development Advisory Board made up of local business leaders to advise the Mayor and City Council on economic development priorities. Rather than engaging businesses only when issues arise, the city created an ongoing partnership that gives the private sector a meaningful role in shaping decisions. Working alongside city staff, the board has helped guide commercial redevelopment, improve business recruitment efforts, and identify opportunities to attract new investment.

Bothell

Bothell recently started bringing together roughly 20 anchor employers, city leadership, UW Bothell, Cascadia College, and the Northshore School District to align workforce priorities and establish a more regular channel for employers to share what they need. The conversation serves to also gather employer feedback on the city's Economic Vitality Plan and other major initiatives affecting the business climate, including housing, transportation, and infrastructure.

WHAT COULD BE YOUR RHYTHM TO STAY CONNECTED WITH BUSINESS LEADERS?

You are extraordinarily busy. Your time is valuable, but this is valuable to spend time on. Finding a consistent rhythm for staying connected to the business community will pay off. The intelligence you gather, the relationships you build, and the signals you send all compound over time. Many mayors shared the ways they intentionally stay connected to their business community, from office hours and Chamber meetings to business visits and roundtables. Here are a few additional ideas that stood out:

- Walk a commercial district or industrial area to meet businesses who might not have regular access to you, or host a structured roundtable focused on problem-solving, not presentations.
- Call your top ten employers. Not to announce anything, but to ask what's going on and what they need.
- Ask at ribbon cuttings, expansions, or new developments about what helped or nearly prevented the project from moving forward.
- Survey your business community. Bellevue regularly surveys its business community to measure business satisfaction, customer service, workforce trends, investment plans, barriers to growth, confidence in the city's direction, and employers' willingness to recommend Bellevue as a place to do business. The results help city leaders identify emerging issues, track progress over time, and refine economic development priorities.

SECTION TWO

Economic development is a team sport

Your reputation within the business community is the sum of every interaction with your city, not just interactions with you. Word of mouth is powerful, often more powerful than any marketing campaign, and businesses talk to each other about how they have been treated in different cities. Setting the expectation for excellent customer service, making economic development a citywide priority, empowering staff to be creative, and exercising your own authority will help you show up as a partner. This section explores:

- How do you make economic development a citywide priority?
- How do you incentivize and empower your team to align with your economic development agenda?
- What does Nordstrom-level customer service look like in your city hall?
- How do you use your authority to make economic development happen?
- What are ways to get your team involved?

MAYOR PERSPECTIVE

"We try to run all our decisions through a pro-business, pro-growth filter."

— Mayor Cassie Franklin, Everett

HOW DO YOU MAKE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT A CITYWIDE PRIORITY?

Economic development doesn't just happen in the economic development office. It happens in permitting, HR, IT, parks, and beyond. Everyone has a role to play, but they might not recognize that without you explicitly making it a priority for them.

- How have you made economic development an explicit priority across all departments, not just the economic development office?
- What is the consistent message you are sending to your cabinet about their role?
- What is your signature initiative that requires the whole city to lean in and makes the connection between department work and economic outcomes clear?
- How are you prioritizing public safety and vibrant commercial districts as part of your economic-development agenda?
- How are you building a team that will tell you what you're missing, not just what you want to hear?

IN PRACTICE

Bremerton

Bremerton Mayor Greg Wheeler identifies Business Opportunity, Economic Growth, and Employment as one of the city's annual mayoral priorities, signaling that economic development is a responsibility shared across government.

Bellevue

Bellevue puts that philosophy into practice by ensuring its Economic Development Plan is being implemented by a cross-departmental core team with executive-level oversight. The result is an organization where departments can see how their work contributes to business growth, investment, and job creation.

HOW DO YOU INCENTIVIZE AND EMPOWER YOUR TEAM TO ADVANCE YOUR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENDA?

As you are setting the tone at the top with your cabinet and senior leaders, it's just as important to get the rest of your employees on the team. Staff who see their work connected to the city's economic health, and get recognized for it, will find creative ways to contribute that you haven't thought of yet. When employees understand how their work contributes to supporting businesses, creating jobs, and improving customer service, they begin to see opportunities to solve problems and collaborate across departments.

- How are you recognizing staff who align their work with your economic development agenda?
- How are you involving departments that don't see themselves as part of economic development — IT, HR, parks, finance?
- How are you incentivizing staff to surface and share what they're hearing from businesses?

IN PRACTICE

Snohomish

One of the biggest changes in the City of Snohomish didn't require new funding — it required a different way of thinking. Snohomish Mayor Aaron Hoffman repositioned the city's Snohomish Engagement and Economic Development (SEED) team to serve as a true front door for businesses. Instead of asking business owners to navigate City Hall on their own, they now have a single point of contact who answers questions, connects them with the right staff, guides them through the permitting process from the first conversation to opening day, and celebrates their success once they open their doors. The change not only made City Hall more approachable for businesses, it reinforced internally that customer service and economic development are shared responsibilities across the organization — not just the work of one department.

Issaquah

Empower staff to become champions for your business community. In Issaquah, city employees host Issaquah Buzz, a podcast highlighting new businesses, local entrepreneurs, development projects, and community events. It empowers employees to celebrate local businesses and build stronger relationships within the business community.

WHAT DOES NORDSTROM-LEVEL CUSTOMER SERVICE LOOK LIKE IN YOUR CITY HALL?

We have global businesses in this region whose names are closely associated with the very best customer service, highlighted by Nordstrom, Alaska Airlines, Costco, Amazon, and many others. Shouldn't our local government aspire to be known for the very best customer service in the public sector? It's a culture question that starts at the top: setting expectations for responsiveness, empowering staff to get to yes, and encouraging all levels of your team to think from the constituent's point of view, recognizing that a small business and a large employer may need to be met in different ways.

Cities aren't private companies. You operate within legal requirements, public process, and budget constraints that a private company doesn't have to think about. Good customer service in government means knowing those constraints well enough to be honest about them, and creative enough to find a path through them.

- How can you get staff at all levels to move from reflexive "no" to "how could we get to yes together"?
- What can you make easier? Pick a process, a form, or a timeline and make it simpler.

When you improve customer service, don't just wait for people to experience it. Tell them what you've done to make government work better for them.

If you reopen a permit desk, cut a wait time, or add a concierge option for businesses, announce it. Put that news front and center on your website, and use the channels you've already built — newsletters, social media, email lists — to carry more business and economic development news than they do today.

- When you improve how city hall works for businesses, how are you making sure they know about it?

MAYOR PERSPECTIVE

"All of our job description is customer service."

— Mayor Aaron Hoffman, Snohomish

IN PRACTICE

Snohomish

A small business in Snohomish faced a $10,000 parking impact fee that threatened to keep it from opening. Mayor Aaron Hoffman didn't take the number at face value. He asked staff to look again at how the fee had been calculated. They found a fairer reading of the code, and the business opened its doors.

Edmonds

Edmonds is redesigning its permitting process to better match the needs of different customers. Rather than requiring every project to navigate the same process, the city is creating three permitting pathways: a concierge service for major projects, an over-the-counter process for small projects, and a traditional review track for everything else. The goal is to provide the right level of service for the customer's needs.

HOW DO YOU USE YOUR AUTHORITY TO MAKE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT HAPPEN?

You have a deep toolkit to draw from: executive orders, regulatory discretion, budget allocation, and the ability to convene and direct your whole organization are powerful levers.

While you can often feel hemmed in by real political, budget, and legal constraints, your creativity with your own authority can be a superpower.

A good question to ask yourself regularly: what can I make easier?

- What can you do by executive order or administrative action?
- Where do you have regulatory discretion and how are you using it to reduce friction for businesses?
- How are you using your budget to signal economic development priorities?

- What is the one thing only you as mayor can do right now that would make a meaningful difference to the business community?
- Where could outdated fees, development requirements, or rules around historic and nonconforming uses be standing in the way of investment?

IN PRACTICE

Everett

Mayor Cassie Franklin challenged Everett staff to rethink the front end of the permitting process. Rather than waiting for incomplete applications to cycle through multiple rounds of review, the city is piloting an AI-assisted permit application tool that helps applicants submit more complete applications from the start. The goal is to reduce unnecessary delays, improve customer service, and make it easier for residents and businesses to move projects forward.

WHAT ARE WAYS TO GET YOUR TEAM INVOLVED?

- Recognize staff publicly for great customer service to businesses, and make sure it's something people actually want, not a plaque nobody asked for.
- Bring your cabinet into direct contact with the connection between their work and economic outcomes. A tour, a joint site visit, or a conversation with a business owner does more than a memo.
- Review how your departments are performing on business customer service.

SECTION THREE

Improving regional economic competitiveness

We are all part of a regional team and we operate in a regional economy. Economic development doesn't stop at your city limits. The decisions made by neighboring cities, regional organizations, and state agencies affect your competitiveness and vice versa. This section explores:

- How do you build relationships with peer mayors?
- How do you work with your regional economic development partners?
- How can you get your regional allies on your team?

HOW DO YOU BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEER MAYORS?

Mayors across the region are already building strong relationships and joint efforts with their peers, but most of that happens ad hoc. There is real, untapped value in being more intentional about working with your fellow mayors on economic development.

- Who are the mayors in your region that share your priorities on economic development?
- When did you last reach out to a peer mayor just to compare notes on what's working?
- Are there opportunities you're currently pursuing separately that you could win together?
- What shared challenges in your community could you address more effectively with a coalition of mayors behind you?
- How are you coordinating with peer mayors before making decisions that affect the broader regional economy?

IN PRACTICE

Cities Across Puget Sound

Everett mayor Cassie Franklin did a mayor exchange with Renton mayor Armondo Pavone. She went to Renton to learn about his city and what was working there. He came to Everett and did the same. Simple, low cost, and both mayors left with ideas and a stronger relationship.

Shoreline helped organize an informal North Side Business Alliance with five neighboring cities: Kenmore, Bothell, Mountlake Terrace, Woodinville, and Lake Forest Park. No new budget line, just standing monthly meetings to share resources, tour each other's projects, and coordinate regional advocacy.

HOW DO YOU WORK WITH YOUR REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS?

You aren't alone in this endeavor. Figuring out how to leverage Greater Seattle Partners (GSP), the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC), the Ports, higher-education and workforce partners, and the associated development organizations (ADOs) will help to fill in gaps not in your span of control, get smarter about economic development projects, and unlock additional resources for you and your team.

- Does GSP know your city's economic story well enough to tell it accurately to a company considering the region?
- How are you working with your ADO on business retention and expansion in your community?
- How are you using PSRC's data and planning work to inform your economic development priorities?
- How are you partnering with your Port on business attraction, logistics, and major employer relationships?
- When a business comes to you with a need outside your span of control, do you know immediately who to call?

HOW CAN YOU GET YOUR REGIONAL ALLIES ON YOUR TEAM?

- Get specific with your ADO, GSP, and PSRC about what you actually need from them, and hold them to it.
- Ask GSP directly what companies considering the region are hearing about your city, and if you don't like the answer, find out why.
- Use PSRC's data to pressure-test your own economic story. It will surface gaps you haven't seen on your own.

Acknowledgements

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