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730 PEACHTREE STREET SUITE 540 ATLANTA GEORGIA 30308 404 880-7242 FAX 404 880-7246

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Market Street brings original insights and clarity to the evaluation and revitalization of the places where people live, work and grow. Through honest and informed assessments, *Market Street* can equip you with the tools to create meaningful change. Our solutions merge our experience and expertise with the economic and social realities of our clients. *Market Street's* community clients are successful at creating stronger programs, increasing operational budgets, and creating new quality jobs that improve the quality of life in their communities.

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INTRODUCTION

The shift in the United States from a manufacturing-based economy to what is known as the “New Economy” has changed the nature of what constitutes a successful community development strategy. To achieve long-term health, a community must succeed in all of the primary pieces of the community development puzzle. Communities remain competitive by creating a quality environment and marketing the advantages and amenities that will provide the needed edge over an increasingly diverse array of competitors for businesses and people.

Critical to the success of this strategic process is the inclusion of feedback and opinions solicited from a broad range of community stakeholders. Community input was gathered in Caldwell County through individual interviews with business and community leaders, focus group meetings, and an online survey.

The number of constituents by industry that responded to the online survey is not consistent with Caldwell County’s overall economic structure by percentage of employment. Because “educational services” was the predominant employment category of respondents, this reality may have influenced the overall tenor of the survey results and the dynamics of the key findings. While *Market Street* appreciates the conclusions drawn by those in Caldwell County’s educational community, we have factored many focus group and interview discussions – as well as the full breadth of quantitative research – into the development of the *Consensus Community Strategy* that we feel reflects a comprehensive view of Caldwell County’s strategic priorities, opportunities and challenges. Ultimately, Caldwell County’s *Strategy* will not reflect the viewpoints of particular constituencies at the expense of others, but strives to represent consensus concerns as they relate to the community’s growth and realization of its preferred future.

BACKGROUND

Caldwell 20/20 contracted with *Market Street Services*, a national community and economic development consulting firm headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, to develop a *Consensus Community Strategy* and five year *Implementation Plan* for its community development efforts. This plan will help Caldwell County recreate itself as a modern community that will determine its own civic, economic and social future. Furthermore, the processes required to see the *Consensus Community Strategy* and *Implementation Plan* to fruition will build the capacity and cooperation necessary to maintain and further develop a holistic strategy for Caldwell County.

This *Community Input Summary* is a companion document to the *Competitive Assessment* – the first in a series of four documents. This *Summary* begins by establishing the **Methodology** used to gather community input, including details of the interview and survey processes. The subsequent sections on **Focus Groups & Interviews** and **Online Survey** provide information on input received throughout this process from various individuals and stakeholder groups. Information from this *Summary* will be integrated into future documents.

The four stages of the project are outlined below:

- I. **Competitive Assessment.** *Market Street* assessed the changes in Caldwell County's demographic characteristics, economic performance and quality of life. The County was compared to three benchmark counties; Henry Co., Virginia (Martinsville), Lee Co., Mississippi (Tupelo), and McCracken County, Kentucky (Paducah). This report helped develop a shared understanding of the County's challenges and opportunities.
- II. **Target Business Analysis.** *Market Street* research suggested four business target sectors for Caldwell County to develop and pursue. They are advanced manufacturing, healthcare, logistics, and corporate, professional and data services. Special opportunities like green business and retiree attraction were also identified.
- III. **Community Development Strategy.** The strategy outlines a set of goals and objectives to define Caldwell County's development strategy over the next five years. Specific policy objectives and action steps will also be recommended.
- IV. **Implementation Plan.** Effective implementation is critical to the success of Caldwell County's *Consensus Community Strategy*. Best practices, benchmarks, and performance measures will be identified. The Steering Committee and *Market Street* will work together to designate lead organizations, provide program assessments, determine funding reallocations, establish timetables, and recommend marketing and communication approaches.

METHODOLOGY

The *Consensus Community Strategy* for Caldwell County will only succeed by incorporating a diverse range of County stakeholders in the *Strategy* process and ensuring that their ideas and issues are addressed. *Market Street* employed multiple strategies to include numerous community members in the community input process. The following methods were used to solicit community input.

- *Market Street* conducted **30 individual interviews** with community and business leaders. Those interviewed included people involved in private businesses, regional organizations, the public school system, higher education, government officials, community organizations, and other entities.
- *Market Street* facilitated **6 focus group meetings with 90 participants**, where many individuals from similar backgrounds were invited to participate in open discussions regarding the future of the Caldwell County and key issues that need to be addressed.
- *Market Street* developed an **online survey** that was open to the public for participation. The survey was accessed through the Caldwell 20/20 project website and attracted **over 500 responses**.

The following sections describe the input collected from multiple community stakeholders.

FOCUS GROUPS & INTERVIEWS

Market Street conducted 30 individual interviews and held 6 focus group meetings with community stakeholders. Highlights of these conversations are listed below:

- Many interviewees and focus group participants feel that Caldwell County's primary challenges are lack of community pride and a shared vision.
- Caldwell County has an ample supply of available semi-skilled and unskilled workers. However, many of these workers require retraining, computer skills training, and reinforcement of basic math and reading skills.
- Most participants indicated that the community has a good quality of life and indicated that retirees called "half-backs" are coming to Caldwell County.
- Many discussed the quality of Caldwell County's public schools based on resources available; however, it was indicated that more work needs to be done to improve graduation rates and overall student performance.
- The availability of higher education in Caldwell County is viewed as an asset.
- The feeling among young professionals is that Caldwell County has few activities and opportunities for young adults.
- Most want to see more revitalization efforts including entertainment, retail and diverse restaurants in downtowns.
- Many in the development community feel that a lack of land available for economic development is hindering business and job growth in the County.
- Entrepreneurs and small businesses have positive attitudes towards the Caldwell County economy. They feel that Caldwell County has a relatively open business culture; however, some newcomers do not feel supported at times.

Summary of "Top Issues" Given by Interview and Focus Group Participants

- Lack of community pride.
- Lack of community vision; "who are we and where are we going?"
- Lack of quality jobs for unskilled, skilled and professional workers.
- Educating and training the unemployed for future job opportunities.
- The County is losing young adults and needs to do more to provide opportunities for them to stay.
- More public awareness of the importance of education is needed.
- K-12 education is good but needs improved facilities, programming, professional development, and technology, especially in low performing schools.
- Downtowns are improving but need greater emphasis and support from the entire community.
- Greater communication is needed to inform residents of local amenities, events, and County progress.

ONLINE SURVEY

An online survey was posted on the **Caldwell 20/20** project website (www.lenoircaldwellstrategy.com). This survey was posted for about four weeks (March 1, 2008 to April 4, 2008) and was open for the general public to participate. The survey yielded over 500 respondents with over 85% completing the entire survey.

Highlights from the survey's major topics and selected comments are listed below.

Economic and Community Climate

Most respondents felt that the strength of Caldwell County's economy is below average (45 percent) or poor (30 percent). Generally, respondents felt that the County's wages are below average (45 percent), availability of quality jobs is poor (43 percent) and only average opportunities exist for entrepreneurs (34 percent). Most respondents (53 percent) felt there was a good to excellent chance that they would raise a family, remain (63 percent) and retire (54 percent) in Caldwell. However, 50 percent felt that there was a below average to poor chance that their children would want to live in the County. Some selected comments from participants are:

- *“By allowing Google to operate in Caldwell County the county government has shown dedication and promise for the future of this area. Diversify higher employment opportunities is a suggestion. The attitude of the entire structure of the area needs to become more accepting of new ideas (residents as well as government agencies).”*
- *“Our children are grown and currently live in Caldwell County. Of three sons, two work outside the county and the other is a police officer in Lenoir. Their spouses also work outside the county. The job market is not so good, but the county is a BEAUTIFUL place to reside. Jobs are coming...but our sons are college-educated professionals and those jobs are not so available. My husband is also a professional and works in Catawba County.”*

Education, Workforce, Skills

Most respondents expressed confidence in the availability and quality of job training (52 percent), community colleges (81 percent), four-year universities (76 percent), and elementary and secondary schools (57) by rating them good or excellent. Many comments cited the challenges of transitioning the furniture manufacturing workforce to meet the skill demands of today's employers. Some selected comments from participants are:

- *“Older adults are reluctant to pursue more education to enable them to find employment. Many do not have a GED and their pride will not allow them to try for fear of failure.”*
- *“There needs to be more of an effort made to not only attract outside people with skills, but also and most importantly to encourage young people who ‘shine’ in CCS and go ‘off’ to school to return to Caldwell County and be a part of a growing economy... (One) that can*

and will employ them and offer them similar opportunities that exist in other places that young people are attracted to.”

Infrastructure

Overall, respondents felt the infrastructure in Caldwell County was average, with the exception of availability of public transit, which was rated poor (52 percent). The quality of government services, which includes police, parks, fire, etc. was rated by most as good (40 percent). Over 56 percent of respondents did not know about the quality of the Lenoir-Morganton Airport (Foothills Regional). Some selected comments from participants are:

- *“The local government is attempting to make improvements in its appearance and planning/patterns for future and existing residents, which is a costly endeavor not enthusiastically supported by a large portion of the community who cannot see the long-term benefits to themselves.”*
- *“Caldwell County Sheriffs Dept. is way under budget. It is a shame that the employees there who risks their lives everyday to protect the lives and property of the citizens of Caldwell Co. and have to buy their own equipment and some uniforms and bullets to go practice with because there is no money to buy these things in the budget and drive ragged out cars with 150,000 miles on them and then try to live on the small salaries there. If you don't believe that is true ask some of the deputies.”*

Business Costs and Overall Business Environment

Respondents largely expressed neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction with the local business environment. Most categories were perceived as average. However, the respondents did rate the availability of industrial/warehouse space as good (31 percent), primarily due to vacant industrial space from factory closures. Most were unaware of the components and structure of the County's business environment, with most stating that they did not know. Some selected comments from participants are:

- *“The cost of commercial office and industrial space is unreasonably high. Surrounding counties are luring businesses because of reasonable cost in these areas. It seems that we are attempting to keep business out of Caldwell County with unreasonable prices.”*
- *“I am not familiar with the programs and incentives offered for small business owners however the proof is in the pudding. If there were any attractive programs out there I would imagine we'd have more business uptown and not have business closing and or moving to Blowing Rock. If they've been offered before to the smaller businesses uptown...offer them again. Offer whatever is reasonable and practical to get business owners to stay. I don't know what the magic formula is however there must be something because other cities and towns are successful at their revitalization efforts. Look at Morganton. What is happening there that is not happening here?”*

One of the final survey questions asked participants to rate the overall economy and business environment in Caldwell County. Of the responses 57.1 percent believed that the overall economy and business environment was below average to poor and 31.1 percent stated that it was average.

Quality of Life

Respondents are, overall, satisfied with the quality of life Caldwell County has to offer, ranking most survey indicators as average or good. They feel that the sense of personal and property safety (43 percent), availability of for sale housing (40 percent), and accessibility to greenways and hiking trails (36 percent) are good. However, many respondents felt the availability/quality of shopping and dining opportunities were below average (36 percent) or poor (37 percent). Some selected comments from participants are:

- *“The Greenway is great...so many people enjoy it and seem to be taking advantage of it...one of the best things our county has done in years to give back to its citizens.”*
- *“I do feel as a new resident, some of the recreational activities are not marketed as well as they should be. It seems that I always hear about events that I would have liked to participate in after they are over.”*
- *“We have a number of civic groups that do good in the community and could be highlighted to show outsiders the quality of the people of this area. I would like to see the Hospital grow as much as it can. Bringing in top-notch doctors should be another focus of this community asset. More options for dining and a nice, shiny movie theater would keep lots of retail dollars from going to Hickory/Morganton or Boone/Blowing Rock.”*

Another question at the end of the survey asked participants to rate the overall quality of life in Caldwell County. Of the respondents, 43.4 percent thought that overall quality of life in Caldwell County was good to excellent while only 19.9 percent saw it as below average to poor.

Greatest Strengths

The most frequently mentioned strength of Caldwell County was its location. Many respondents stated that the quality of life and the people were among Caldwell County's greatest strengths. Some selected comments from participants are:

- *“The city's prime location within the state and its potential to become a model city in transitioning from a manufacturing job market to high-tech job market, if emphasis is placed on the right kind of education and planning.”*
- *“The community--people here do care for their community and work to better it. The church and business community are very supportive of schools and area non-profits and service agencies. I actually feel like I live in a community here, not just a city.”*

Greatest Challenges

Lack of community pride and current levels or attainment of education/training of the workforce was perceived to be Caldwell County's greatest challenges. Also, the access and availability of quality jobs for unskilled, skilled and professional labor was viewed as another daunting challenge. Some selected comments from participants are:

- *"The transition period from a manufacturing community to retirement community with new specialty industry (IT, pharmaceuticals, etc.). Educating workforce, ridding the community of the 'doom and gloom' attitude."*
- *"Its willingness to change and let new people become a part of the process. Improve the schools. Make facilities equal in the county. It appears that certain areas get a greater advantage while others are left with very little."*

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments. The following comments are a few examples of what they wrote:

- *"Caldwell County is a geographically beautiful place to live, but it will take time and effort to bring the general population to an even average educational level. The low level of education is the thing in my opinion that hurts this county so much."*
- *"We need forward thinkers, people who can look ahead 50 years. We need to go forward with what will bring tourist dollars here, not necessarily large numbers of permanent residents that will be pricing out the locals. We need to support the small businessperson with financial incentives and we have to work very hard to create a new sense of importance to our downtown areas. Educating people needs to be a priority and getting people to doctors and dentists is a must. Homeless shelters should be looked at."*
- *"Nothing stays the same - everything changes. Furniture was good, but now it's gone. Thank God we had it as long as we did, but rather than sit around and have a pity parties - let's move forward and see what else is out there for us."*
- *"I have lived here basically all my life and up until recently hadn't really thought of living anywhere else. The area is beautiful and there are great people here, but a person has to look out for themselves, so moving to another part of the state or country has crossed my mind. They say home is where your heart is, but eating and having clothes on your back take precedence."*
- *"... Our greatest strength may well be that we can determine from this point what we'll be in the future."*

CONCLUSION

Through the course of this input process for Caldwell County, *Market Street* heard from a variety of stakeholders via interviews, focus groups, and an online survey. Comments shared during this process are valuable for informing subsequent deliverables and for getting a sense of the key issues from residents and stakeholders.

Input collected through the community input identified several common themes. Caldwell County's location, people, quality of life, and higher education networks are its greatest assets that need to be leveraged and strengthened.

Stakeholders identified challenges and issues that need to be addressed in order for the county to move forward. The key issues highlighted by participants were:

1. Community pride and vision for the County is lacking.
2. Despite the availability of workers, employers have challenges finding qualified and skilled workers for available positions.
3. More improvement in Pre-K-12 education quality and increasing graduation rates is needed.
4. Further downtown development and diversification of the local economy that will provide greater opportunities for all residents.
5. Opportunities for young adults to have a career locally are poor.
6. Communication on the resources available for small businesses, entrepreneurs, as well as communicating community amenities and programs needs to be improved.

These and other issues identified throughout the strategic process will be utilized in the development of the *Consensus Community Strategy*. Many of these issues are supported by findings in the *Competitive Realities* report. These issues require long-term commitment and investment. Critical questions going forward include deciding what challenges are the highest priorities and what Caldwell County needs to do to address these challenges.

The strategic planning process moves next to the *Consensus Community Strategy*, which builds upon the work in the *Competitive Realities*, *Target Business Analysis*, and *Community Input Summary*.