

A CONVERSATION WITH Mark Sweeney of McCallum Sweeney Consulting

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A candid conversation with Mark Sweeney, Senior Principal with McCallum Sweeney Consulting (MSC), which provides site selection services and economic development consulting to companies and organizations worldwide. Recent MSC clients include Boeing, TVA, Nissan, Dollar General and Trex.

Mark Sweeney is a Senior Principal with McCallum Sweeney Consulting. With more than 15 years experience in site selection and economic development, Sweeney assists companies in identifying, evaluating and selecting the optimal location for their capital investments. Sweeney also provides consulting services to leading ED organizations across the United States in such areas as strategic planning and organizational design, site certification, adaptive reuse, target industry programs, incentive strategies and sustainable development strategies.

EXPANSION MANAGEMENT: *Your firm spearheaded the recent Boeing 7E7 project in Washington. What made that project so unique?*

MARK SWEENEY: The most unique aspect of that project was the strategic decision by the company to "go public" with the project at the onset. Most companies, for a variety of reasons, prefer to keep their location decisions confidential until after the decision is made. Once we assisted Boeing with defining the project and search criteria, they announced the project, the criteria, their consultant, and invited all interested parties to propose. We wound up with some level of interest from almost every state in the country. Interestingly, once the project was announced, it was conducted in a manner similar to other projects in that there was not a lot of additional public comment on the project from the company until the decision was complete.

EM: *You also assisted with Nissan's decision to expand in Smyrna, Tenn., in 2000. What factors were most important to the Nissan decision-makers in that project?*

MS: To clarify, in 2000 we assisted Nissan with expansion of the assembly operations, which wound up being an expansion of their plant in Smyrna, Tenn.; expansion of the engine operations, which wound up being an expansion of their plant in Decherd, Tenn; and a new plant search for auto assembly, which wound up being their new facility in Canton, Miss. All of these kicked off in May 2000, with the Smyrna decision and Decherd decision competed in July 2000, and the new plant site announced in November 2000. It was an especially intense period.

For the new assembly plant project, we really covered a wide range of factors in considerable depth. Of particular significance were site and infrastructure (auto plants require large sites with extensive infrastructure requirements, especially transportation infrastructure), labor availability and quality (with a heavy emphasis on training resources), transportation costs, and tax and financial considerations.

By the way, with regard to the short schedule, the demands placed on the ED organizations were also very intense. We needed a lot of information and considerable visitation support, all seemingly on very short notice, over the short life of these projects. The ED teams all responded extraordinarily well on an extraordinarily challenging project.

EM: *What key drivers are inherent in every site selection project?*

MS: Perhaps two of the most prevalent of "all the usual suspects" include i) site and infrastructure (all projects eventually go to a particular site or building), and ii) labor availability, quality and cost (all projects involve people). Other drivers that have grown in importance over the past couple of years, and continue to do so, are site/infrastructure readiness (very important), and quality of life issues.

EM: *What is the biggest myth economic developers have about working with a site selection consultant?*

MS: Well, that's an interesting question. The first thought is around the project deadlines. Those "unreasonable deadlines" we give for proposal submission are simply a reflection of the schedules under which our clients (and hence the consultants) are operating. Despite what some people think, we don't do it because we have a twisted sense of humor! And even with the reality of incredibly shrinking deadlines, there is still (and always will be) a lot of "hurry up and wait."

EM: *What advice would you give to economic developers about how best to prepare and present their communities to prospective businesses?*

MS: You used the most important word in the business right now - prepared. Prepared Communities Win is the name of a presentation I have been giving around the country this year, and it is all about how being prepared is critically important given the changing nature of our business. That preparation needs to be on the product side of the business (sites and infrastructure especially), the marketing side of the business (strong information management skills to support reactive, and proactive, marketing), and the organization side of the business (capable and well trained ED staff).

We have a lot of respect for the people on the other side of the table. The ED job covers almost everything about a community, and truly the work is never done. Strategic thinking; smart, capable and committed people; and diligence and determination are what win the day.