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Business Retention and Expansion Summary Report

April 2004

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Business Retention and Expansion Summary Report

April 2004

Written by

James Kielkopf and Michael Darger
for the Business Retention and Expansion Strategies Program
University of Minnesota Extension Service

with assistance from
Curt Larson of the City of Blaine

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Blaine Business Retention and Expansion Program

Even growing cities such as Blaine need to pay attention to their existing businesses. The Blaine Business Retention and Expansion Survey (or BR&E) is a key element of staying in touch with local businesses and developing strong local economic development efforts. While the attraction of new businesses and the encouragement of new business start-ups are important parts of an overall economic development strategy, many communities now recognize the need to do a lot more to assist existing businesses survive and grow.

As a city, it is useful to think of Blaine as a provider of input services to firms located here -- similar to other vendors that firms use. Just as businesses gain competitive advantage by continuously aligning their operations to provide better service to their better customers, Blaine must be looking for ways to provide a better environment for their premium paying customers – local employers.

The BR&E survey conducted by the Blaine BR&E Task Force is a way to get to know the needs and aspirations of Blaine's businesses. The survey results are used to develop strategies that help businesses to expand in Blaine and remain in Blaine.

Objectives

1. To demonstrate to existing firms that the community appreciates their contribution to the local economy
2. To help businesses solve their problems and challenges
3. To assist local businesses in gaining awareness of available resources
4. To develop collaborative relationships for participating in comprehensive long-range retention and expansion activities

5. To build the community capacity and cooperation to sustain growth and development activities
6. To contribute to the assessment of Blaine's capacity to accommodate growth of visitor services and hospitality industry

Sponsorship

This program is sponsored locally by these organizations: City of Blaine, Connexus Energy, Centerpoint Energy/Minnegasco, and Xcel Energy. Technical and research assistance was provided by the University of Minnesota's Department of Applied Economics and the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

Blaine BR&E History

The Blaine BR&E Program got underway in March, 2003 when a leadership team was formed and began planning the Blaine BR&E program. A Task Force of 42 people from a variety of sectors was recruited. Task Force orientation occurred in May and visitor training followed. Interviews began in late May, and firm visits continued through July.

Firm Visits

Prior to the research visits, which were held from May to July, 2003, the Leadership Team sent copies of the survey to each firm. Visitors worked in teams of two and took responsibility for arranging and conducting interviews. Fifty interviews were held during a hectic summer season.

Red Flag Review

Two Red Flag Review sessions were conducted in July. During these sessions, surveys were reviewed by Task Force members for any "Red Flags" or issues that merited urgent follow-up. A number of items were discovered in the review. The Red Flags were delegated for follow-up by Curt Larson or other parties as appropriate to the individual situation.

Research Report Development

The survey results were tabulated and analyzed by University of Minnesota staff. A summary was presented by Michael Darger at a state research review meeting, held August 13, 2003. The meeting consisted of University faculty, government analysts, and Task Force members. The survey results were reviewed and projects were suggested to respond to the needs of the survey respondents.

Task Force Retreat

Based on the ideas generated at the Research Review Meeting, a research report was presented at a four-hour Task Force Retreat, held on October 27. At this retreat, the Task Force established priorities on which major projects they wished to undertake. A committee was set up on each of the three priority projects shown in this report. If you have ideas, time, or other talents to contribute to these projects, then please contact one of the people listed.

People in the Blaine BR&E Program

Leadership Team

Overall Coordinator – Don Kveton, Village Bank

Media Coordinator – Paul Rignell, Sun Focus Newspaper

Visitation Coordinator – Duane Arens, Connexus Energy

Business Resources Coordinator – John Commers, Commers Conditioned Water Company

Milestone Meeting Coordinator – Hollis Cavner, 3M Championship

City Staff Representative – Curt Larson, City of Blaine

Blaine BR&E Task Force

Many community leaders participated as Task Force Members and Volunteer Visitors. This group visited with firms and set priorities for action and implementation of selected projects.

Table 1: Task Force Membership

Elizabeth and Al Abraham	Top Tool Company
Duane Arens	Connexus Energy
Daniel Berdass	Bermo, Inc.
Hollis Cavner	3M Championship
Dr. John Christiansen	Centennial School District 12
John Commers	Commers Conditioned Water Company
John Crudo	Green Lights Recycling
Steve DeMotts	Arrow Cryogenics
Paul Erickson	National Sports Center
Bob Eriksson	Aveda Corporation
Sandy Froiland	Minnesota Workforce Center/Anoka County
Roger Giroux	Anoka-Hennepin School District 11
George Halverson	Excel Dental Studios
Dr. Don Helmstetter	Spring Lake Park School District 16
Arne Hendrickson	CenterPoint Energy/Minnegasco
Nancy Hendrickson	Minnesota Workforce Center/Anoka County
Jerry and Dianne Hiniker	Blaine Velo Sports
Pat Johns	Anoka-Ramsey Community College
Scott Kinkead	Turfco
Gregg Kroll	Print Central
Don Kveton	Village Bank/D&M Management
Barb Lehan	Dacon Manufacturing Company, Inc.
Diane Leverentz	Wells Fargo
Gary Levine	Anoka Technical College
Jim Lindberg	21st Century Bank
Nancy Litwin	Northtown Mall/Glimcher Properties
Larry Mills	Artistic Screening

	Company, Inc.
Debra McEnelley	Blaine Resident
Cathy Montain	Anoka Technical College
Rosie Mortenson	Anoka-Ramsey Community College
Connie Nelson	CMDC
John Peterson	Oakwood Land Development
John Ryden	CB Richard Ellis
Renee Sande	Southern Anoka County Chamber of Commerce
Tom Snell	Metro North Chamber of Commerce
Ken Stabler	Xcel Energy
Irene Stecher	Blaine Resident
Rick Steer	Dayton Rogers Manufacturing, Inc.
Linda Swanson	Blaine State Bank
Ted Verlee	Boundary Waters Community Bank
Jerry Vitzthum	Minnesota Workforce Center/Anoka County
Bill Ward	Subway
Lisa Watson	Range Precision, Inc.
Kathy Weinbeck	Blaine Resident
Gale Westerlund	Gale's Autobody
Scott Winters	All Test & Inspection

Haluptzok	
JoAnn Heen	Minnesota Workforce Center/Anoka County
Arne Hendrickson	CenterPoint Energy/Minnegasco
Nancy Hendrickson	Minnesota Workforce Center/Anoka County
Jennifer Hines	3M Championship
Mike Honsa	3M Championship
Sheila Judd	Anoka-Ramsey Community College
Gregg Kroll	Print Central
Don Kveton	Village Bank
Diane Leverentz	Wells Fargo
Gary Levine	Anoka Technical College
Jim Lindberg	21 st Century Bank
Nancy Litwin	Northtown Mall/Glimcher Properties
Jim McCormick	Anoka-Ramsey Community College
Andy McNerney	3M Championship
Larry Mills	Artistic Screening Company
Cathy Montain	Anoka Technical College
Barbara Nellessen	Village Bank
Connie Nelson	CMDC
Matt Oelschlager	CB Richard Ellis
John Peterson	Oakwood Land Development
Larry Peterson	Connexus Energy
John Ryden	CB Richard Ellis
Donna Schmidt	Green Lights Recycling
Larry Schminski	Village Bank
Sam Schullo	Artistic Screening Company, Inc.
Jim Smith	Village Bank
Tom Snell	Metro North Chamber of Commerce
Ken Stabler	Xcel Energy
Irene Stecher	Blaine Resident
Curt Strum	MN Workforce Center/Anoka County
Robert Swanson	Blaine State Bank
Ted Verlee	Boundary Waters Community Bank
Jerry Vitzthum	Minnesota Workforce Center/Anoka County
Barbara Wells	Village Bank
Peggy Westerlund	Gale's Autobody
Troy Westerlund	Gale's Autobody
Ann Weyandt	Anoka Technical College
Scott Winters	All Test & Inspection
Darin Zielsdorf	Wells Fargo
Tim Zimmerman	Xcel Energy

Table 2: Visitation Volunteers

Al Abraham	Top Tool Company
Paul Albinson	CenterPoint Energy/Minnegasco
Kris Bjerkness	National Sports Center
Dave Carstensen	Blaine State Bank
John Christiansen	Centennial School District 11
John Commers	Commers Conditioned Water Company
Connie Connor	Northtown Mall/Glimcher Properties
John Crudo	Green Lights Recycling
Ryan Dillon	3M Championship
Bud Dropps	Cypress Development
Ed Dropps, Jr.	Village Bank
Bob Eriksson	Aveda Corporation
Mike Flaherty	All Test & Inspection
Sarah Greene	Village Bank
Darrell Grove	Minnesota Workforce Center/Anoka County
Shannon Hagen	Village Bank
Harry and Linda	John's Auto Parts

Firms Visited

Fifty firms were visited. The community greatly appreciates their willingness to help the community understand their needs. Their survey responses are confidential yet it is important to credit their participation by listing their names here in Table 3.

Engineered Finishing Corporation	Turco Manufacturing, Inc.
Excel Dental Studios	Twin City Gear Co.
General Pattern	Visual Impact Sign, Inc.
Gopher Machine, Inc.	Wheeler Racing Engines

Table 3: Businesses Interviewed

A&C Metals/Sawing, Inc.	Green Lights Recycling
APA Optics, Inc.	ITW BGK
Action Plastic Sales	JA&M Studios, Inc.
Aggressive Engineering, Inc.	Larson Systems, Inc.
Air King Fastening Systems, Inc.	Mark's Welding & Fabricating
Artistic Screening Co., Inc.	Morell Machining, Inc.
Arkad Corporation	National Automatic Sprinkler
Aveda Corporation	North Central Stampings Mfg. Inc.
Bermo, Inc.	Oakcraft
Best Coat, Inc.	OTW
Blake Drilling Company, Inc.	Parker Hannifin Corporation
Bob Sorenson Enterprises, Inc.	Pioneer Welding Co.
Ceilings and Floors	Poly-Cam, Inc.
Commers Conditioned Water Company	Protofab Engineering
Contract Design, Inc.	Range Precision, Inc.
Creative Wood Products	Reliance Data Corporation
Custom Machining, Inc.	Security Products Company/SPC Construction Services
Dacon Manufacturing Co., Inc.	SI Industries
Davie's Northern Water Works	Simplex Construction Supplies, Inc.
Detail Metal Craft	Sunrise Packaging, Inc.
Diesel Cast Welding, Inc.	Top Tool Company

BREI Certified Consultant

Michael Darger served as the BR&E Certified Master Consultant to the project. This includes coaching and advising the local Leadership Team; conducting training sessions with the Leadership Team, Task Force, and volunteer visitors; and facilitating quarterly implementation meetings when the Task Force moves into implementation.

State Research Review Panel

The panel reviewed the tabulated survey results and suggested potential actions that might be taken by Blaine leaders in response to local firm concerns. The participants were:

Blaine BR&E Task Force:

- Duane Arens, Connexus Energy
- John Commers, Commers Conditioned Water Company
- Don Kveton, Village Bank
- Curt Larson, City of Blaine

University of Minnesota:

- Michael Darger, BR&E Strategies Program
- Robert Hanson, Carlson School of Management
- Laura Kalambokidis, Department of Applied Economics
- Bill Lazarus, Department of Applied Economics
- Lee Munich, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
- Ed Schuh, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs

Minnesota and Federal Agencies:

- Sandy Froiland, Minnesota Workforce Center
- Diane Knutson, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development
- Kyle Uphoff, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

Blaine's Economic Profile

An economic profile of Blaine was prepared for use by the Task Force at its October 27 retreat. This profile gave an overview of population, income, and employment trends in Blaine, comparing it with other communities. The profile is included in the Blaine BR&E Research Report, which is available for review at Blaine City Administration or from a Task Force member.

Briefly, Blaine is a growing, middle income community. As a part of Anoka County, it's per capita personal income (PCPI) is almost exactly the US average, but it trails both Minnesota and the Twin Cities MSA in per capita income. However, the county's PCPI growth leads both the state and the Twin Cities MSA. Manufacturing is still a major employer and growing employer in both Blaine and Anoka County, although growth in this sector has been slower than in most other sectors (compared to overall contraction of manufacturing statewide from 1998-2001). Management, Recreation, and Finance and Insurance were the fastest growing employment sectors in Anoka County from 1998-2001. Within Anoka County, Blaine's industries employ over half of the county's Finance, Insurance and IT workers, and Blaine accounts for almost one-fourth of Anoka's manufacturing workforce.

Blaine BR&E Survey Results

Following are the results of the survey of 50 firms by Blaine community leaders during

May through July, 2003. The firm characteristics are summarized first and followed by priority projects selected by the Task Force. Survey results related to those projects are included in this summary. Additional survey results including five strategic themes are in the Research Report. Priority projects were selected from two of the five themes.

Characteristics of Firms Visited

The Blaine Business Survey Leadership Team determined the following rationale and procedures for selecting the businesses to be interviewed:

1. Target only manufacturers. Manufacturing is an important segment of Blaine's economy, and manufacturers are a greater flight risk compared to other businesses – they can locate anywhere that is convenient to their business.
2. Visit all manufacturers that are known to employ 50 or more people.
3. Randomly select and visit 30 to 50 other manufacturers.
4. Mail survey to any manufacturer not selected for an interview.

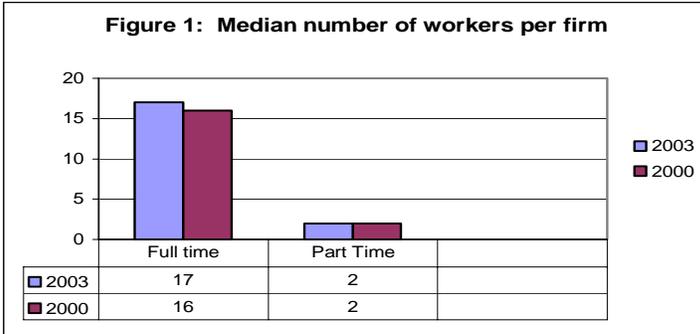
The respondent firms employ 1838 full time and 109 part-time employees. Of the respondents, 72 percent identified themselves as being primarily engaged in manufacturing, with 6 percent self-identifying as construction, 6 percent as wholesale trade, and 16 percent as other. (All firms were identified in third party databases as manufacturers.) See Table 4 for employment by sector.

Table 4: Respondent firms by main line of business.

Category	Respondents	FT Employment
construction	6%	143
manufacturing	72%	1517
wholesale trade	6%	57.5
other	16%	120

Source: Blaine Business Retention and Expansion Survey, question 4.

The median number of employees per firm increased only slightly in the three years preceding the survey (see Figure 1).



Source: Blaine Business Retention and Expansion Survey, question 28.

Overview of Business Strategies for Blaine

Profits are the key to the retention and expansion of firms. While the owners of a firm might be attracted to an area because it is a nice place to live or to raise a family, a firm can only survive if it makes a profit. The owners may be loyal to the community due to emotional ties, but if there are impediments to profitability they will close or move their business to a community.

In a market economy, making a profit is the responsibility of firm management and its employees, not community groups, or governments. However, the actions of these groups can sometimes help firms become more profitable, and those actions can thus provide a competitive advantage to the communities that employ them. In this sense it can be useful to view the City of Blaine as a vendor of input services to firms, just as those firms use other vendors for supplies, space, and other inputs to their business processes. The city provides a secure and convenient environment in which to do business for the price of the taxes paid to it. The community must weigh its provision of business environments against the amount of revenue, amenities, or other

benefits those businesses provide to the residents of the community.

The priority projects outlined below are aimed at helping firms become more profitable and thus be able to survive and grow in the community.

1. Establish a Business Liaison Officer for the City.
2. Establish a Blaine Website Team.
3. Connect Blaine Firms with Resources for their Training and Recruiting Needs

Priority for Highway 65 Improvements

Highway 65 was identified by the surveyed businesses as an important issue that should be addressed. Therefore, the Blaine BR&E Task Force selected Highway 65 as a priority issue. However, because Highway 65 improvement plans are being reviewed by MnDOT, Anoka County, Metro North Chamber of Commerce, Blaine businesses, and the city of Blaine it was decided not to form another task force. Rather, the BR&E Task Force supports existing efforts to bring improvements to Highway 65 to move customers and products on this congested transportation corridor.

Priority Project #1: Establish a Business Liaison Officer for the City.

A number of participants in the research review meeting noted that Blaine could do a better job of marketing itself to its community. In the private sector, significant resources are devoted by businesses to maintaining contact and facilitating good communications with their major clients. Major accounts are delegated to account representatives who maintain personal relationships with client executives to better

understand their needs and sell products and services. In addition to providing high-value products and services, businesses like to remind their clients how valuable their products and services really are. Businesses also like to know what their clients think of their work so that they can proactively make changes to meet their client's needs.

A city such as Blaine is in the business of providing industrial and commercial environments for the price of fees and property taxes, so its businesses can be viewed as its premium customers. Maintaining good communications with those customers should result in more satisfied business residents in Blaine as well as a feeling of improved level of service that businesses receive from the city.

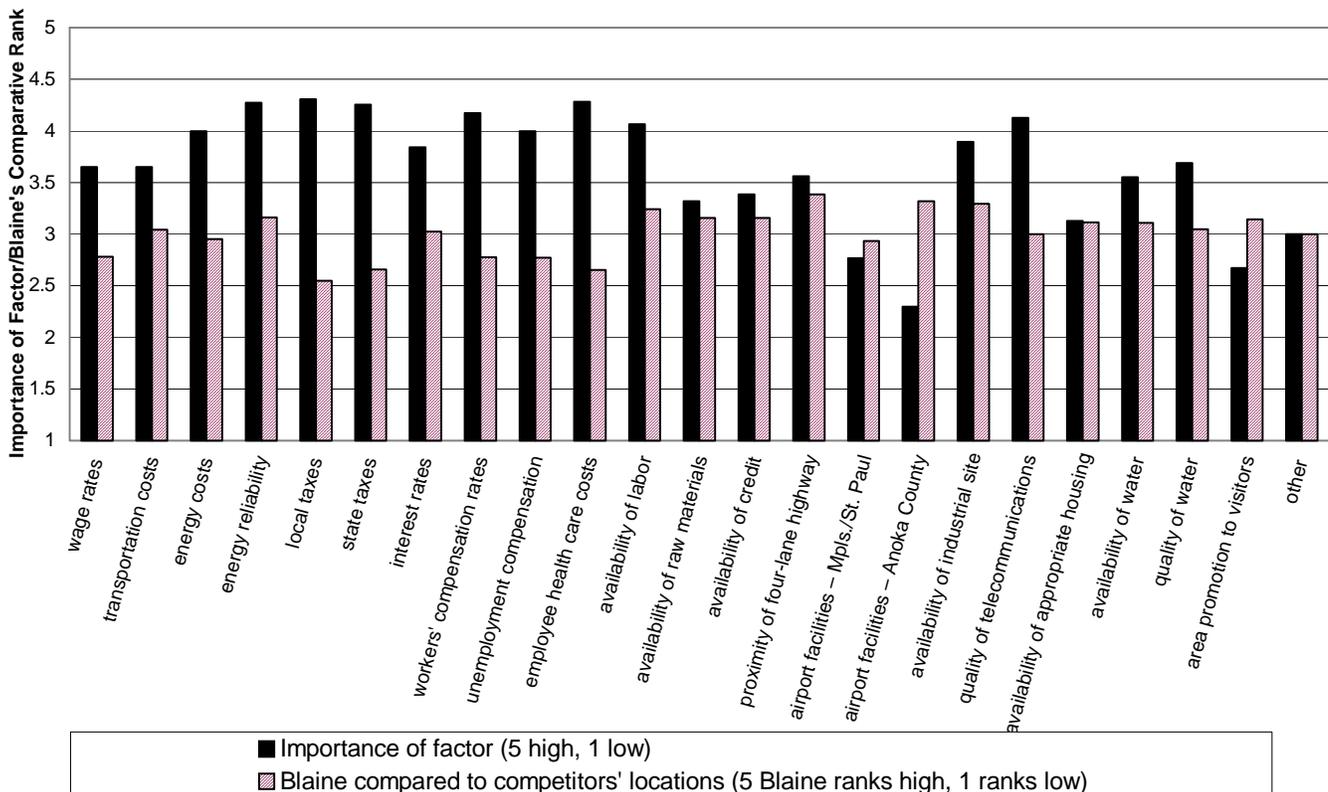
Related Survey Results

Questions 51 through 53 deal with business

location decision factors. Figure 2 shows what businesses say is most important to them in a location decision, and it also ranks Blaine compared to where their competitors are located. The chart displays some troubling information. The top five business factors for location decisions are: local taxes, energy reliability, state taxes, employee health care costs, and telecommunications, in that order. Unfortunately, only in energy reliability do Blaine businesses rank the location above-average (3.16).

The good news is that Blaine businesses rank the services provided by the city quite high. Question 54 asked respondents to rate Blaine's provision of city services. All of the services are ranked above average, according to the fifty survey respondents. (See Figure 3.) Question 61 asks the overall opinion of Blaine as a place to do business, and 72 percent rate Blaine as a good or

Figure 2: How does Blaine compare to other sites?



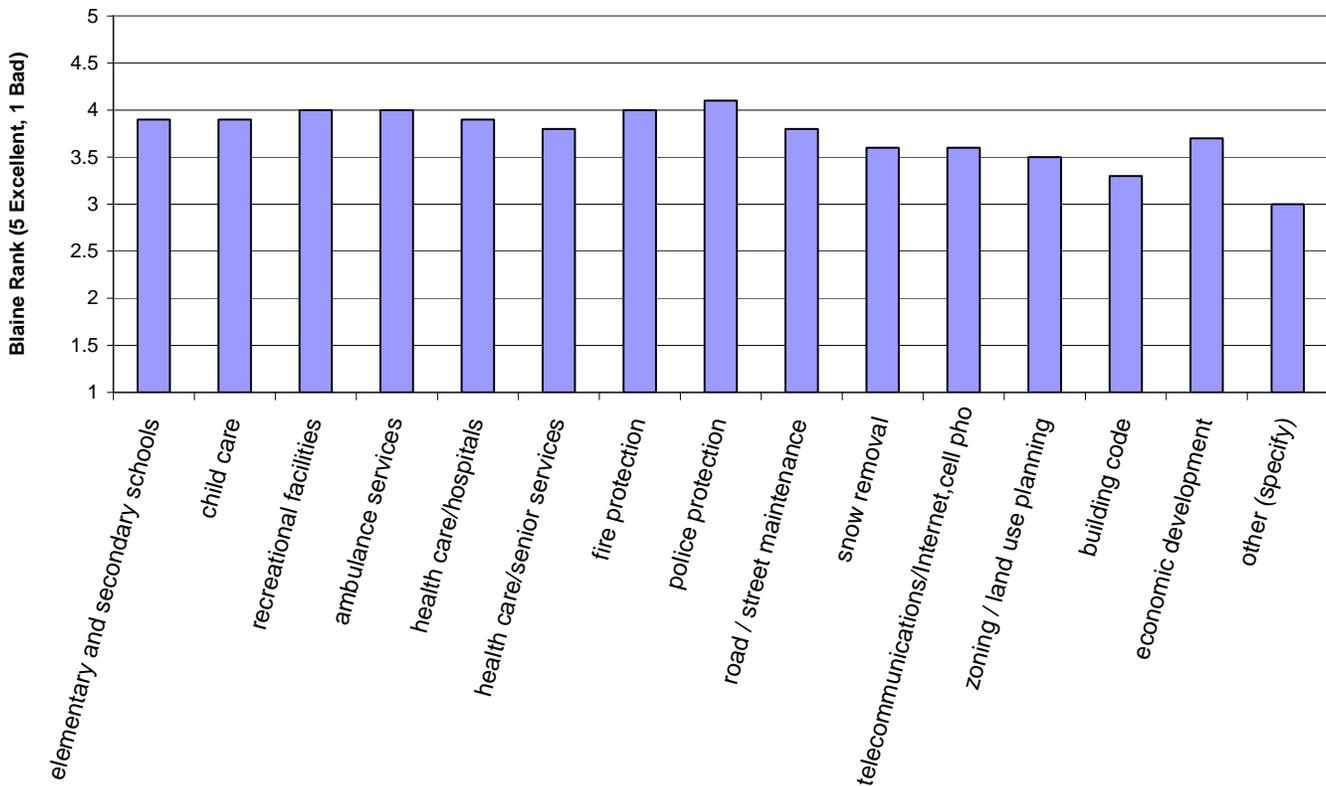
excellent business location. Sixty percent responded that they would choose Blaine as their business location if they could make the decision again, in Question 63b.

Some of the survey questions gave firms' assessment of attractions such as the National Sports Center, or the TPC Golf Course, and other institutions and features for which Blaine community leaders are proud. Questions 59 and 60 asked businesses to rate the impact of Blaine

leaders, but that are not very compelling to many manufacturing businesspeople in the city.

Questions 38 through 40 asked respondents about their desire for information that might help them manage their business. Of the subject areas requested, information regarding new state regulations, financial assistance, and marketing strategies were the most requested. The responses to question 38 indicate that 42 percent of businesses

Figure 3: Community Services



landmarks and entertainment features as well as their relevance in marketing the city. Interestingly, the majority of respondents indicated none of the key features listed as having a positive impact. Even fewer indicated a negative impact, but the vast majority of respondents indicated that the listed features had no impact at all on their business. Evidently, there are features which appeal to residents and community

asked for information regarding state regulations, and most did not want information. However, 70 percent of businesses asked for information regarding at least one of the subject areas.

Question 41 asked if information regarding technical production and industrial processes would be useful to businesses. There was less interest in this material than in the

management related material in Question 38: fifty-two percent of respondents did not want any information on any of the materials presented. Also, according to Question 42, most firms, 82 percent, did not use any local, state, or federal assistance programs. Of those that did, most did not want help from Blaine in using them.

Project plans from the team:

The goal is to establish a business liaison officer who would be responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with all businesses in Blaine and to understand the importance and impact of those who contribute revenue to the city in terms of taxes paid and numbers of people employed. This person would communicate critical needs and concerns of Blaine's businesses to the city as well as communicate the issues established by the city to the business community. This liaison would also understand and have knowledge of programs offered by state and local agencies that can provide information and assistance to local businesses.

The Blaine Liaison committee has designated the city's economic development specialist to be the liaison. This liaison will schedule site visits with businesses from all sectors of the economy. The liaison will personally meet with the local businesses starting with those surveyed as part of the BR&E program. Communication efforts will be established via mailings, email, meetings, etc. in an effort to provide information on various issues deemed important by the business community.

Members of this committee are Harry Haluptzok, Linda Haluptzok, Nancy Hendrickson, Shannon Meyer, Cathy Montain, and Rick Steer. For more information or to offer assistance please contact one of them.

Priority Project #2: Establish a Blaine Website Team.

Though the City of Blaine has maintained an informational website for some time, Task Force members felt that the site could be used more directly to improve communications with local employers.

Project plans from the team:

One of the Action Plans identified from the BR&E Strategies Program focused on enhancing the Blaine Website in an effort to serve the needs addressed in the Research Report. The Website Task Force was formed to improve City communication with current and prospective businesses, and to provide support to promote Blaine businesses. Initial areas of planning for the Website task force have focused on:

- Confirming the needs of Blaine's businesses
- Assessing the needs of the Web audience
- Detailing resources available to Blaine's businesses and the Web audience

The Website team has also begun to explore added links for on-line resources such as a business index, supporting organizations index, resources for starting or expanding a business, educational facilities, workforce links and job postings. Other Website content being proposed includes expanded on-line City rules and regulations, real estate availability, finance sources, utilities services and transportation availability and updates.

Website Team Members include: Duane Arens, Nancy Litwin, Irene Stecher, and Lisa Watson.

Priority Project #3: Connect Blaine Firms with Resources for their Training and Recruiting Needs

Forty percent of the respondent firms noted that they have difficulty recruiting labor skilled in precision production or specialty skills. Forty-eight percent of firms indicated that they expected to need to hire more of these kinds of workers. Because labor availability is a necessary condition for business expansion, particularly among Blaine's, a strategy to address this stated shortcoming in the local business environment is well advised. This priority project is part of a strategy to help firms attract and retain the employees it needs to be successful.

Survey Results Related to Improving Labor Availability and Productivity

Firms were asked about the kinds of employees they had trouble recruiting and about the kinds of employees they expected to hire in the near future. While most of the respondent firms planned to add either general production labor, precision/specialty skilled labor, or both, forty percent of respondents noted problems recruiting precision production or specialty skilled labor (see Table 5).

Firms were also asked where their employees live. Respondents reported that sixteen percent of their employees lived in Blaine, and that 38 percent lived within ten miles, but outside Blaine. This means that firms reported that over half of their employees lived within ten miles of their workplace. Twenty-seven percent of firms report that their employees live more than ten miles away. This means that firms may not be particularly dependent upon Blaine's own resident population for their supply of labor.¹

Table 5. Does your company have problems recruiting employees in the following categories?

Category	YES	NO	UN-SURE
general labor	8%	80%	2%
general production labor	10%	76%	4%
precision production/specialty skills	40%	46%	6%
clerical	0%	84%	2%
sales	16%	58%	10%
professional/management	12%	68%	6%
information technology	8%	66%	12%
temporary/contract employees	2%	76%	8%
youth employees	4%	68%	16%
other	6%	38%	4%

Source: Question 30a of the Blaine Business Retention and Expansion Survey

Over 80 percent of respondent firms also reported that their workers' attitudes towards work were good or excellent, as was their productivity.² Finally, 32 percent of respondent employers noted that at least some of their workers would require retraining in the future due to technological changes in their industries.³

The above survey results provide us with some reason to believe that the difficulties that certain employers have in finding specific skilled workers is not due to the location of their businesses in Blaine. Rather it appears due to either the actual scarcity of workers with the kinds of skills they require or to difficulties accessing the available pool of such workers from the area's educational institutions.

Project plans from the team:

The Labor Force Subcommittee utilized the final tabulations from the 50 business interviews to identify workforce-related needs. The identified needs ranged from

¹ Blaine Business Retention and Survey, question 34a

² Blaine Business Retention and Survey, question 32

³ Blaine Business Retention and Survey, question 33.

challenges with recruiting and hiring to needing training on a variety of topics for their current workforce. As part of the survey, employers were asked if they would like their responses shared with the local colleges and the Anoka County WorkForce Center. This enabled the Blaine Business Retention and Expansion Team to direct their follow-up efforts to the appropriate community resources.

The survey results were reviewed by a team of representatives from the City of Blaine, Anoka Technical College, Anoka Ramsey Community College, and the Anoka County WorkForce Center. The team categorized the employer workforce needs as follows:

- 1) Employers requesting additional information on training
- 2) Employers needing assistance with recruitment and hiring
- 3) Employers needing information on both training and recruitment and hiring

Representatives were then assigned specific employers to contact. The goal is to assess whether or not the business would like an on-site follow-up visit by a team representative or if additional information could be mailed. The plan is to contact 34 employers during the month of April. During the on-site visit the team representatives will work directly with the employer to address their issues and answer questions.

Each of these team members are also members of the Anoka County Workforce Development Network. This Network is comprised of education providers, human service agencies, and economic development organizations. The goal of this collaborative is to improve efficiencies within and between the workforce service organizations and economic development. As each team representative meets with the Blaine business they have the capacity to link employers to a wide range of services.

The Team Members of Labor Task Force include: Patty Commers, Connie Connor, John Crudo, Sandy Froiland, Don Kveton, Gary Levine, Rosie Mortenson, and Jerry Vitzthum.



The Task Force selected the priority projects. This summary report was written by James Kielkopf and Michael Darger, from the University of Minnesota Extension Service, Community Vitality Department, with the assistance of Curt Larson of the City of Blaine. This publication is available in alternative formats upon request. Please contact Michael Darger at 612-625-6246.

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