

This is a printer friendly version of an article from www.fosters.com
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Article published Mar 19, 2007

How does Rochester stack up?

ROCHESTER — Attracting business not only pits the city against fellow Seacoast communities but places across the state and region, making it important local officials know what they're up against.

Does it take less time for a neighboring community to approve a project? Is the city properly marketing its resources — like highway access and downtown eateries?

The Rochester Economic Development Commission wants to foster commercial growth by better understanding the city's competitiveness.

To achieve this, the REDC is working with Northeastern University's Center for Urban and Regional Policy to undertake a self-assessment based on 200 questions across 10 categories.

The assessment is considered a tool to measure local strengths and weaknesses, review comparable data from other communities, receive guidance on where to focus improvement efforts, and provide a reality check of opportunities and expectations, according to Donald Zizzi, a senior research associate at the center.

It's a \$5,000 effort, of which half is expected to come from the state Department of Resources and Economic Development.

The REDC met with Zizzi for about an hour at City Hall last week to discuss the center's program, which came out of a partnership with the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties.

"A lot of this is going to focus on the permitting process and some other things that are very much in our control," said Karen Pollard, the city's economic development manager. "When we get this report, we're going to have to figure out how to make those improvements, how to implement them, whether training is involved, whether there is some customer service aspect that needs to be implemented."

Pollard said this summer her department's intern will help compile data, covering areas of quality of life, business incentives and labor market forces. The REDC expects to get a final report from the center in September or October.

She said it's important local performance and potential be compared with other communities like Laconia and some in northern Massachusetts, because "we directly compete" there every day.

REDC members discussed bringing department heads together when the report is complete.

Commissioner David Tinkham stressed the need for "continuous improvement" training. He said it's not happening enough. Instead, "we get tangled up in the process and see how much more money we can add to the process, and that's wrong," he said.

Though city officials know what their government can offer, not knowing what competing municipalities can provide creates a disadvantage, Pollard said. The study will bring out the city's "competitive advantages ... or disadvantages," she said.

"If we are slower than other people to respond, or if we have a more complicated approval process, if we're too far away from a four-lane highway — those are disadvantages that we have to compensate for somewhere else," she said.

Zizzi described the program as helping municipalities surmount "deal breakers."

In New Hampshire, Merrimack, Laconia and Raymond are involved in the program. Manchester, Portsmouth and Somersworth have expressed interest and Zizzi anticipates working with 1,000 communities regionally and nationwide by the end of the year.
