The Economic Gardener: An interview with Chris Gibbons

by: Dell Gines

June 03, 2021

Recently I interviewed Chris Gibbons, one of the individuals most instrumental in my economic development career. In 1987, Chris founded Economic Gardening®, an entrepreneurship-led economic development strategy. Economic Gardening focuses on growth-oriented local, entrepreneurial companies, which produce the most net new jobs for communities. His national center has certified more than 500 developers in the model, affecting thousands of economic developers and communities across the nation. Among organizations that have recognized Chris for his work are the International Economic Development Council and the National League of Cities. Here are some excerpts from the interview, some summarized for clarity and concision.

Wakita, Oklahoma, the origins of an economic developer

I graduated high school in 1966 and the town I lived in, Wakita, Oklahoma, was dying at the time. It hurt to see what was happening and I couldn't understand what was going on. It was always a deep interest of mine to understand what makes a town thrive or die. It's not just little farm towns, but why was Akron dying, why was Toledo dying? At the age of 16, I was clipping economic development articles, trying to understand that, leading me to a career in economic development.

Berlin Wall, the USSR and Littleton, Colorado

Around the late 1980s, the Berlin Wall was coming down, and the USSR was collapsing. With those events came a national belief that all this money that was being spent on the military would now be spent on other things. Except in Littleton, Colorado, where Lockheed Martin had a big munitions plant just outside town and was a major employer. At their peak they had around 15,000 people at the missile-building facility. They laid off about half of those, a little over 7,000, over maybe an 18-month period. I was hired by the City of Littleton when all this was going on. They had fired the previous economic development director and had cut the budget. They were dealing with all the layoffs and the city had about a 30% vacancy rate in retail, industrial and office space.

The Littleton local mandate

The city council that hired me gave me gave me a simple directive. They said, as good a corporate citizen as Lockheed Martin had been, they were based in Bethesda, Maryland. They were good for the town, but they were influencing our economy from 1,500 miles away. In 1987, the council gave us staff the directive to work with local companies to create good jobs.

Local job creation is something I had been thinking about for quite a while. Prior to taking the job at Littleton, I had been a consultant working in Leadville, Colorado. I had met two guys that had worked in a mine there. They had invented a resin bolt that holds mats up in the mine so you don't get rocks tumbling from above. I went back to the chairman of the economic development committee in Leadville to talk about them. I told him they had a really good product and asked if there was any thought about helping them a bit. There was a worldwide demand for the product, and I said we could help them get a company started. I also suggested that we try to grow companies from Leadville, as opposed to try to bring them into Leadville. I didn't get very far. It wasn't a well-developed idea to start with and I was young and didn't carry a lot of weight with anybody.

The experience in Leadville was always in the back of my mind, however, when I went to Littleton. I was lucky to have my boss (Jim Woods) who eventually became the city manager, and his boss (Susan Thornton) who was the mayor, all supportive of the idea to focus on local companies. Once that council gave us the direction to focus on local companies, both of them flew political cover for me and got me the resources I needed.

From economic hunting to economic gardening

Many of the ideas that formed Economic Gardening came from multiple sources. Phil Burgess from the Center of the New West coined the term, economic gardening. I heard him give a speech where he was discussing how economic development agencies spend all their time trying to bring big companies into town. These agencies were out there hunting for the big win. Phil said what they really should do is stay home and work with their local growth companies. These businesses need to be watered and fertilized. Instead of going out there and doing economic hunting, he said stay home and do economic gardening.

When I look at all the stuff that makes economic gardening different, I think much of it came from Garth Johnston. He ran a futurist organization called Colorado Issues Network. He introduced us to all these ideas around complex adaptive systems, systems thinking, temperament and network theory. It was all brand new to us. But when we got into it, I'd come back and say it's just exactly what we were seeing when we started working with growth companies.

The point is that economic gardening wasn't shrink wrapped. It was us stumbling into all these things. Garth Johnston telling us about complexity, others, like local economics Nobel Prize winner Paul Romer, telling us where wealth is created and introducing us to David Birch. David Birch had done all that research showing that small businesses were creating most of the jobs. Then from there showing it was a small group, the Stage Two companies, about 15% of the companies, creating 40% of the jobs. (Stage Two companies are defined as those with 10-100 employees and $1 million to $50 million in sales.) We were hoping

all these ideas would stick and reinforce each other. It took us the better part of 20 years of doing all that stuff, because we tried a lot of things that didn't work, to make the model efficient.

Economic Gardening and entrepreneurship ecosystem building

When we were first putting this together, we started talking about if we're going to grow economies locally there's a bunch of factors that are local. It's not just about the company alone, it's about the supporting things. We had this list of things we said constitutes a good environment for entrepreneurs. Back then it was silicon everything. It was Silicon Mountain, Silicon Prairie. Everybody kind of went down the road that they were going to duplicate Silicon Valley. But early on we said that's not realistic. That's a unique situation.

You know, trying to make a community supportive for entrepreneurs in all its aspects is really, really hard. We were saying, what are the things that we control? Early on we decided the public sector was good at information, networking and infrastructure, all critical to the entrepreneurial ecosystem. And you also need a community that entrepreneurs want to live in. Entrepreneurs are going to make a bunch of money and they're going to want to have a nice community. That got us over into the educational system. That got us over into the public amenities side. We knew we needed parks, we needed trails, we needed historic museums. We got light rail into town. We put in daycare centers that the city sponsored. We had a great library. We understood that economic development and community development were just two sides of the same coin, and that you needed to be doing all of those kinds of things. But also, it was a realization that it's a lifetime commitment rather than an annual project.

The garden gone wild and the garden tamed

There's a period where economic gardening went wild on us. A lot of people started programs. I don't know how they heard about it to tell you the truth, but we had 800-some communities that either came to see us, called us, or I went there. I was traveling all over the country for about 20 years talking about what we were doing.

During that period, the concept went through what I call a fad stage. Everybody thought it was so cool. They started doing all this stuff and calling it economic gardening, even though it wasn't. There were like 1,520 different variations, but they weren't getting any results out of it because they weren't doing what we were doing. But they were calling it economic gardening. I finally trademarked the term. I was able to kind of pull it back in.

If somebody said they were doing economic gardening, I'd contact him and say it's a trademarked term. I would tell them it's my term but having said that, we're happy to help you. We would offer to explain to them what it was about and if they wanted to participate, they could get certified and run the program.

I always called these other versions the lowercase, wild versions of economic gardening, versus our formal process, the uppercase version. I started enforcing uppercase telling individuals if they want to run the program that we ran in Littleton, that's a trademarked term. It's tied back to very specific principles, practices and tools that we use.

I set up the National Center with several objectives in mind. One was so people could get certified. Some 500 professionals have been through the certification process. Also, we run a national team. If a community wants to run a pilot project we'll come in and do one for them and show them what it's like. You can listen in on the phone calls, you can see the research that we do, you can see the principles that we're using, and then we'll sit down and talk about it. We ask them if they want to do it themselves, or if they want us to continue doing it. Most of them have had us continue doing it because it is fairly complex.

Exporting innovation is the root of community wealth

You asked, where do we go from here? I would argue that the first step is educating communities about how their local economy works. In particular, it's understanding these two facts: First, commoditization is the root of poverty. Communities caught in commodity traps (where lowest price wins) are in a race to the bottom, where you have to lower the standard of living to stay competitive. Second, exporting innovation is the root of community wealth. It is the whole reason why Economic Gardening is about supporting local, Stage Two companies that sell innovation to the outside world. That's the guiding star in all of this—*export innovation.*

Beyond that, you start building the elements of a nurturing environment for entrepreneurs—an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Some of it is direct assistance to growth companies like the strategic research we do in Economic Gardening. Some is infrastructure—like broadband and college courses and community amenities. Some is facilitating networking like CEO roundtables and funding pitches. Some is working with professional services like banks, attorneys and CPAs to bring attention to the scaling growth companies. And some is working with the local media and social media to keep entrepreneurial issues in front of the community.

To learn more about Gibbons and Economic Gardening

To learn more about Gibbons, economic gardening and his influence on the field of economic development, and hundreds of communities around the nation, visit – National Center for Economic Gardening | An Entrepreneurial Approach to Economic Development

To download his free eBook on Economic Gardening visit - Economic Gardening book | National Center for Economic Gardening

Media

The Economic Gardener: An interview with Chris Gibbons
https://www.kansascityfed.org/community/community-connections/the-economic-gardener-an-interview-with-chris-gibbons/