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AREA urges proactive approach to site readiness at Economic Forum event



Image: Albuquerque Business First

Danielle Casey, president/CEO, AREA

LIZ LOPEZ PHOTOGRAPHY

Drew Goretzka, Economic Development Reporter

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Representatives for [the Albuquerque Regional Economic Alliance \(AREA\)](#) on Wednesday urged local business leaders at an Economic Forum of Albuquerque event to take site selection and preparation more seriously, pitching the approach as a way for the Albuquerque metro to better compete for high-paying jobs against other markets across the country.

[Danielle Casey](#), president of AREA, said some of the most commonly talked about areas of economic development, especially financial incentives for private

industry, are not at the top of the list of concerns for those eyeing an expansion into another state or the U.S. more broadly.

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Instead, she said, factors like workforce labor and availability, utilities and infrastructure and ready development sites are much more front of mind.

“We need to really continue to break down barriers to regional competitiveness,” Casey said. “We can have all the best incentives, all the best tools, all the best educational programs, but it doesn’t matter if we can’t put them in a facility, in a location, in a timeframe and in a competitive rate that works for them.”

Site selection is not a new topic for AREA or Casey. For years, the organization has urged public entities in particular to prepare more sites for potential companies interested in moving to Albuquerque and has brought national site consultants to the city to explain why it's so important.

On Wednesday, Casey and AREA Senior Vice President Chad Matheson made the case once again. Matheson said it's important to not begin developing sites when a customer — referring to potential companies — has already been identified, but instead expedite the timeline by having developed land available before they've even expressed interest in coming to Albuquerque.

“Right now, there’s kind of an environment where we begin developing when the end user has been identified,” Matheson said. “The philosophy behind site readiness programs nationwide is that you actually want to prep those sites two years in advance of a qualified entity.”

Taking such a proactive approach, Matheson said, allows time-consuming hurdles like environmental reports to be completed by the time a company comes knocking, cutting potentially years off a construction timeline for a new facility.

Infrastructure was the chief point made by Matheson and Casey when talking about what sites need to be prepared for development. This primarily refers to bringing utility lines, like gas and power, up to property boundaries, making it easier for companies to attach and save time at a later date.

Matheson advocated for a stronger publicly funded site readiness program in New Mexico, in the same form seen in states like Arizona, Ohio and those under the Tennessee Valley Authority, a public corporation tasked with shepherding development in parts of multiple Southern states.

Such a program, he said, has the potential for significant return on investment for the state, with those returns coming from companies choosing New Mexico for their next expansion and bringing hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs with them.

“It’s all about a return on the investment for both the region, for the community,” Matheson said. “That changes the conversation from a cost-savings perspective to an investment-minded perspective. We are investing into our community by way of infrastructure.”

AREA is advocating for at least \$5 million in state dollars to be put toward site readiness in next fiscal year’s budget and, over time, setting up a fund of \$500 million to \$1 billion to put toward infrastructure and other private development needs, like improving public universities.

The key to making that happen, according to Casey, is pulling leaders from all sectors together to have conversations surrounding site readiness.

“Without site readiness, without investment in these things, we are going to be out of properties or we’re going to be waiting for the next couple of years to get something moving,” Casey said. “We’re going to continue to trail and not be as competitive as we absolutely can be and should be because we are amazing.”

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