



## They Might Be Giants: A Look at Successful Female Economic Development Leaders in Iowa, California & Connecticut

### EDA Discusses Economic Development Challenges, Opportunities & Best Practices with:

- **Kim Didier**, Executive Director, Iowa Innovation Gateway, Iowa Association of Business & Industry
- **Julie Meier Wright**, President and Chief Executive Officer of the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation
- **Kelly Murphy**, Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, City of New Haven

Across the country, women in economic development are making contributions to advance their regional economies and build stronger communities. From urban regions to rural regions and the towns and suburbs that fall in between, many community leaders, planners and economic development practitioners are women.

So what do the regions around Newton, Iowa; San Diego, California; and New Haven, Connecticut; all have in common? Three successful economic development leaders: Kim Didier, Julie Meier Wright and Kelly Murphy.

All three economic development professionals say that they feel the economic realities around having more to accomplish and less resources to meet the needs of their communities.

In the region in and around Newton, Iowa, a rural community, which just a few years ago lost primary employer Maytag Corporation, those diminishing resources include a small population that serves as both its biggest asset and biggest challenge.

In San Diego, the realities that businesses are not expanding combined with the financial stability of state and local government budgets have impacted their core focus – EAR or Expansion, Attraction and Retention.

And, in New Haven, Conn., one of the only (and largest) urban areas in the state, this city and the suburbs around it are feeling the pinch as property taxes continue to be the primary means for revenue and the gap between the “haves and the have nots” is widening.

### **With Every Challenge Comes an Opportunity**

But, as economic development professional knows, with each challenge there is great opportunity. Opportunity to drive revenue, employ more workers, embark on a new community vision or embrace partnerships and regional planning in a whole new light.

The city of New Haven, benefiting from close partnerships with Yale University and emphasizing core regional strengths in life sciences, infotech, sustainable business and architecture, have managed to secure and begin construction on several new multi-purpose buildings that will generate significant tax revenue for the city. Additionally, through well-established construction training programs, the city has managed to ensure that 25 percent of all construction work is given to residents, 25 percent to minorities and 7 percent to women-owned businesses. New Haven’s successful contracting programs have resulted in over \$20 million being awarded to small, minority-owned businesses alone.

In Iowa, the challenge to build a pipeline of skilled workers and bring in business to the region was a direct result of Maytag’s leaving, yet regional leaders were quick to capitalize on the experience of workers in the region with strong manufacturing, six sigma and lean manufacturing expertise. Since the exodus of Maytag, three new major companies have located or relocated to the region. Kim Didier, Executive Director of the Iowa Association of Business and Industry, emphasizes that not only are these companies key partners in the community, but they are continually hiring and growing even in the challenging economy.

In San Diego, the changing economic times hasn’t deterred the leadership team from their vision of executing an economic development initiative that expands to bordering counties but also across what is known as the mega-region. The need to transcend boundaries to build economic prosperity is a core focus with San Diego leadership. Mega-regions often include contiguous counties spanning 100 miles, such as California’s Imperial County.

Wright also recognizes the need to integrate policy and business into every decision. “The place is the product and if the product is flawed you are going to give up market share,” said Wright. “We all need to invest in infrastructure both human and physical. The world really is flat – and we are all competing on a global stage.”

### **The Value of Partnerships**

Regardless of location and demographics, it is clear that successful economic development involves bringing decision makers from all facets of a community to the table. In Connecticut, strong partnerships with various education institutions are at the core of economic development issues. They work in tandem with universities toward a common set of goals and where they can share resources and successes.

In Iowa, creating data-driven partnerships among business, education, workforce development and economic development to build infrastructure and support the talent pipelines is an essential element to their long term regional strategic plan.

“You have limited resources, and you have to figure out how you can leverage those best and achieve greater things,” said Didier. “Also, be open to new ideas and inviting people to bring their resources together. It has led to success and a lot of companies recognized that and they recognized that willingness.”

In San Diego, Wright employs a “red-team” approach. “Red teams have a lot of energy... It is essential to get the right decision makers around a table to solve a problem or write a proposal. Ensuring that the private sector is at the table and engaging them in collaborative ways and not just company-to-company has been crucial. Businesses bring a valuable perspective and are generous with their resources.”

### **Best Practices**

So what are the best practices and lessons learned from these economic development leaders?

“Being dogged and persevering through the challenges that arise and always keep an eye on the creative solution,” said Murphy.

“Benchmark – it takes the ideology out of the discussion,” said Wright. “It’s so much better to lead with irrefutable data and I know in my heart and from my experience that it works.”

And for Didier, "It's all about the network. Understanding what other people are working on and how you can support them and how you find opportunities to collaborate and leverage resources."

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