

Beacon Hill Byline

October 26, 1996

Developing the state's economy

Last month I received a message that Speaker Finneran wanted to talk to me. That is a little bit like a call from the principal's office, so I quickly complied. He was calling with an offer I could not refuse, a chance to pursue one of my favorite topics, economic development. Our legislature was sending several delegates to a national conference for development professionals he aid. Would I like to attend?

In no time at all, I cleared my calendar and took off for Cleveland and four days with the Council of Urban Economic Development, days filled with ideas from around the nation for developing the economic potential of our cities. Here are some highlights of the conference

The first order of business contained elements of pleasure, an information-gathering visit to the Rock n' Roll hall of fame. It is a showplace, a glass and steel structure on Cleveland's lakefront that has drawn a million visitors in the year since it opened. I came away with a new vision of the possibilities for Springfield's Hall of Fame, and with the knowledge that the support of the entire community will be critical for funding promotion and marketing of the asset.

As the program continued, is drew on the successes of Cleveland. At its low point 20 years ago, the Cuyahoga River caught fire and the city defaulted on bond obligations. It was an urban wasteland about which the nation joked. "Last one out turn off the lights." A self-styled comeback city, it now has new stadiums for baseball and basketball and a genuine pride among its residents. Advice was offered at session after session from the men and women who spend their lives working to improve the economy of our urban areas.

I gained a lasting impression from a session with the stodgy topic of business retention and attraction. As it opened, participants were challenged to list the three states judged by CEOs throughout the nation as the best places to locate a business. At the end of the session we were graded and only one attendee had 100 percent on the quiz. You would have won if you named North Carolina, Texas, and Georgia.

The reason I was impressed by the exercise is this: we were not dealing with objective data because perception is the deciding factor. When a company is deciding where to expand its operations, perception of government cooperation becomes reality.

North Carolina has spent at least 30 years sending out the constant message the business is welcome. It now reaps the rewards as it continues to seek new development. On a sad note, Massachusetts was ranked fourth from the bottom in spite of our efforts over the past six years to improve the business climate.

The conference validated some of the steps we have taken to simplify the lives of businesses in our state. Our simplified permitting and worker training initiatives are assets, and our changes to workers comp and unemployment insurance improve our cost basis. It also challenged us to maintain our measures so that factories, businesses and jobs will continue making it in Massachusetts.