

# Seminar explains basics of economic development

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*Photo By Times-Gazette photo/Tom E. Puskar*

Michelle Comerford, senior location consultant for Austin Consulting, speaks at the Economic Development 101 seminar Tuesday at Ashland University's Myers Convocation Center.

By GINGER CHRIST

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After 11 years, Ashland High School graduate Michelle (Marquett) Comerford returned to Ashland on Tuesday.

But she wasn't in town for an emotional visit.

Comerford, a senior location consultant for Austin Consulting, was one of several speakers at Economic Development 101 -- an event designed to provide insight into economic development and generate conversation.

Ashland Area Council for Economic Development and Ashland Area Chamber of Commerce hosted the event at Ashland University's Myers Convocation Center.

"Overall, I think Ashland is in a good position to attract business," Comerford said. "Ashland is not going to be able to compete for everything out there, but certainly there are some industry groups that northeast Ohio is attracting that Ashland could certainly compete for."

Austin Consulting is a site selection consulting firm that works in North America and Europe. Companies hire Austin to help them determine where to locate new facilities.

Groups such as Team NEO have been formed to help direct consulting firms such as Austin to the region. Team NEO is one of three partners in the Cleveland Plus Marketing Alliance and works to market the northeast Ohio region.

"Ashland is a very strong community, which is embedded in a very robust regional economy," Team NEO director of attraction and expansion Shilpa Kedar said.

Kedar said it's important for communities to incorporate regional economic tools into the local sales pitch. She said communities need to identify their assets, build around those assets and target their marketing efforts.

At any time, Team NEO has 15 active leads to funnel into the 16-county region and 35 to 40 preliminary leads, according to Kedar.

Comerford said location selection for a company is a process of elimination.

"It is your job to keep your community in the game," Comerford said.

She identified three areas in which communities have an opportunity to impress: Strategy and getting on the radar screen; demonstrating during site visits that the community is the right place for the business; and, once a community makes it on the short list, to deliver on the promises it made to the company.

All community assets need to be inventoried and then developed to attract new companies, according to Norwalk Economic Development director Bethany Dentler.

"If you have a low crime rate in your community, that's a huge factor you can advertise," Dentler said.

Comerford said successful communities have an inventory of sites and buildings, modern utility infrastructure, a ready labor force, community support for industry and a professional presentation.

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