

Dear County Councilors,

Here are suggested strategic priorities for the County Council for 2025/2026. These recommendations directly address the five key challenges facing local businesses, identified in the six public forums held since November 2024 by the Los Alamos Local Business Coalition.

These are presented as options for the County to consider when setting its upcoming strategic priorities, especially as it seeks to balance investment in local businesses alongside other priorities.

This document is intended as input for the County's October strategic planning session—a framework of ideas ranging from low-hanging fruit and near-term actions to medium- and long-term initiatives. By considering these recommendations, the County has the opportunity to strengthen local business vitality and improve the local business environment..

Overarching Strategic Priorities for the County Council

Two suggested strategic priorities address overarching issues concerning focus, accountability, and culture.

1. **Prioritize Robust Implementation of Economic Development Plans:** Move beyond merely developing plans to actively ensuring their effective execution, updating as needed, and following through. There is a significant gap between existing plans and their implementation across all five local business challenges.
 - **Actionable Steps:**
 - **Enhance Transparency and Accountability:** Develop, utilize, and publish meaningful metrics for community development to track progress and impact, rather than just listing activities. Tie staff performance reviews to the achievement of measurable metrics.
 - **Embrace Independent Feedback:** Actively engage with and implement recommendations from Cities Work.
 - **Prioritize a "Get-to-Yes" Mindset:** Stop trying to "avoid every foreseeable risk" and prioritize a "How can we make this work" approach when interpreting codes and regulations
2. **Foster a Pro-Business Culture and Collaborative Governance:** Address the prevailing "why it can't be done" mentality by actively rebuilding trust and fostering genuine collaboration with the business community.
 - **Actionable Steps:**
 - **Prioritize "saying yes to opportunity" over "saying no correctly".**
 - **Build Trust and Encourage Open Communication:** Take actions that earn trust from business owners. Actively address the expressed fear of speaking up about issues.

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- **Systematically Consider Local Business Impact in All Important County Projects and Decisions:** Ensure that planning and decision-making processes consistently account for both the potential negative impacts on and opportunities for local businesses.
 - **Mitigate Business Disruptions from County Projects: For county projects, such as road construction,** mediate between businesses and contractors, provide clear timelines, and consider compensation for prolonged disruptions to local businesses.
 - **Explore System Renewal:** Investigate alternative governance structures, such as a mayor-council system, where an elected executive is directly accountable to voters and sets clear priorities, to overcome the perceived concentration of control and diluted accountability in the current system.
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Strategic Priorities Addressing the Five Key Challenges

Challenge 1: Affordable Commercial Space & Vacancies

- **Strategic Priority:** Implement targeted initiatives to increase the availability of affordable commercial spaces and reduce vacancies..
 - **Actionable Steps:**
 - **Storefront Recapture Initiative:** Establish an initiative to convert storefront office tenancies on Central Avenue into viable retail, dining, and treat businesses. This could involve contracting the Los Alamos Commerce & Development Corporation (LACDC) to actively lease spaces, provide funding for tenant improvements, and offer lease rate markdowns in exchange for hours of operation and employment commitments.
 - **Facilitate Owner-Occupied Space:** Offer incentives and assistance to help businesses purchase their own commercial space, enabling them to manage monthly costs, build equity, and enhance property value. This could include making it easier for landlords to condo buildings, offering tax relief assistance, and improving access to financing opportunities (e.g., through TIF funds, tax abatement, or partnerships with loan agents).
 - **Low hanging fruit:**
 - Commit to a pilot storefront recapture project and convene a public-private discussion to consider the details
 - Make it policy that no public money will be used to aid development projects that do not include commensurate owner-occupied space available for sale for commercial occupancy.
 - Similarly, include MRA funding and resources in this policy.

Challenge 2: Complex and Opaque Regulations with little or no accountability.

- **Strategic Priority:** Simplify confusing permit processes, ensuring consistency and direct accountability.
 - **Actionable Steps:**
 - **Professional Services Assistance:** Establish an initiative to provide professional services (e.g., architectural/engineering, legal, CPA) that are required for compliance with Los Alamos County requirements. The County could contract with LACDC or another business support organization to recruit and qualify providers, potentially including "scholarship" funding to financially assist businesses. This could be structured as a LEDA or Arts & Cultural District project.
 - **Ensure Consistent Information:** Provide clear and consistent information to new business owners, ensuring basic information is easily accessible and uniform across different county contacts and interpretations.
 - **Interpret Laws and Codes with a “Can Do” Approach:** Explicitly guide county staff to interpret laws and codes with a "can-do" mindset, considering the intent and plain language of the law, rather than an overly restrictive "minimize every risk" approach.
 - **Low-Hanging Fruit:**
 - Embrace Recommendations Provided by Cities Work

Challenge 3: Workforce Shortages & Housing Costs

- **Strategic Priority:** Prioritize and provide financial support for housing initiatives targeting workers earning \$15-20/hour.
 - **Actionable Steps/Low-Hanging Fruit:**
 - **Focus on Supporting Housing for Workers Earning \$15-20/hour:** Establish a policy that prioritizes County participation, including staff time, County expenditures, subsidies, and the use of County land, to provide housing opportunities for lower-paid workers.
 - **Consider a voucher program or other non-development mechanisms** to support employees of businesses making \$15 to \$20 per hour.

Challenge 4: Lack of Support & Access to Funding for Local Businesses

- **Strategic Priority:** Provide more direct support, grants, funding opportunities, and technical assistance to small businesses, ensuring they are not overlooked in favor of larger developers.
 - **Actionable Steps:**
 - **Grant Funding Support Initiative:** Establish a centralized grant-writing resource, either contracted by the County or funded through an organization like LACDC, to offer professional expertise in identifying grant opportunities, crafting compelling proposals, and navigating the application process, thereby increasing the success rate of local organizations in securing external funding.

- **Local Procurement Initiative:** Task LACDC with organizing a local procurement initiative to increase awareness and purchases by major community organizations (e.g., Los Alamos County, LANL, N3B, Los Alamos Medical Center) from local businesses. Utilize measurable metrics for the success of this program. This would involve publishing data on local purchasing expenditures, holding events to connect businesses with large organizations, and other initiatives to increase patronage and retention of local businesses.
- **Reform and Strengthen LEDA:** Address the "extremely weak" and overly restrictive County process for the Local Economic Development Act (LEDA) and the new "Retail LEDA" program, interpreting rules with the "literal requirements of the law" and a "get-to-yes" mentality rather than avoiding all possible risk, to better utilize this tool for public-private partnerships.
- **Advocate for Legislative Changes:** Initiate and actively support legislative efforts to amend constitutional barriers that the County considers limitations on direct financial assistance and tools for local governments to support businesses.
- **Low-hanging fruit**
 - Establish a pilot grant funding support project.
 - Establish a schedule of periodic public meetings beginning by January to assess the new Retail LEDA program's effectiveness. Invite all interested stakeholders- not just county employees.

Challenge 5: Underdeveloped Tourism Programs

- **Strategic Priority:** Strengthen communication channels between the County, local businesses, and organizations, and enhance tourism efforts to boost visibility and customer traffic for local businesses.
 - **Actionable Steps:**
 - **Local Business Billboard Collective:** Establish a regular billboard presence along highways leading to Los Alamos County (e.g., NM 502) to market local businesses and events . This could be managed by LACDC as a LEDA project, potentially funded by Lodger Tax, to reach the large number of visitors who currently bypass Los Alamos and White Rock.
 - **Include Businesses in Tourism Outreach:** Actively advocate for the inclusion of local businesses in all tourism promotional efforts.
 - **Address Lodger's Tax Board Ineffectiveness:** Take specific steps to improve the effectiveness and participation of the Lodger's Tax Board as the County Council's advisory body for implementation of the Tourism Strategic Plan..
 - **Low-Hanging Fruit:**
 - In conjunction with LTAB, establish a schedule of periodic meetings (beginning no later than January 2026) inviting local businesses to receive information about and discuss visitor & tourism promotion

programs and their effectiveness. Use these as a forum for generating actionable ideas.

- Facilitate inexpensive local business advertising on ACT and Bandelier buses and bus stops. Include advertising on Diamond Drive overpasses as part of this program. Adopt a low-cost participation framework, such as a nominal \$1 per month fee membership in the program.
- Provide more space in visitor centers for local business advertising, rack cards, displays, menus, etc.
- Create a near-term Council work session agenda item to review the status of the County's wayfinding improvement project. Invite the LTAB and local businesses to participate in a dialogue as part of the agenda item.