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## Home Field Advantage

**Tue., Jul 18 - BusinessWest** Ann Burke called it “a new way of looking at business retention.” She then paused for a second and declared that she didn’t really like that word retention, or at least she didn’t think it worked properly in this context.

“It sounds too static, like we’re just preserving the status quo — and it’s much more than that,” she said, referring to a new program created by the Economic Development Council of Western Mass. (EDC) called HomeField Advantage. Describing it, Burke, vice president of the EDC, said it’s all about effective portfolio management — meaning the region’s portfolio of businesses.

HomeField, based on a model used in Louisville, Ky. and other cities, was created to help retain those businesses, Burke explained, noting that keeping existing companies in the 413 area code is an important part of the EDC’s broad mission. But it will also assist individual business owners with efforts to change, grow, and become more competitive.

How? By essentially enabling area economic development leaders and supporting agencies to become much more proactive in their approach to business-retention efforts.

“In the old days, you’d wait for business owners to come to you and say, ‘I’m getting ready to move out of town,’ or ‘my lease is up, and someone from North Carolina is recruiting me,’ or ‘I have to move because I can’t find a workforce,’” she explained. “What we’re hoping to do is be more proactive and develop relationships with these companies so we can help them for the long term.”

HomeField is a team approach, she said, meaning that affiliates of the EDC, including the Regional Technology Council, Affiliated Chambers of Commerce, and the Greater Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau, other agencies, such as the Regional Employment Board, and legislative leaders are brought together to solve problems and create opportunities.

The field of focus is broad, she continued, and includes everything from workforce training to lean manufacturing processes; site and location analysis to internship opportunities with area colleges and universities.

Some of these issues are among those that a HomeField team is currently addressing with one of its first ‘clients,’ East Longmeadow-based Lenox America Saw.

The manufacturer of saw blades and hand tools has no intention of leaving the region, said its president, Bill Burke, but to remain in this area it must take action — and it will need some help as it does so.

Some of the costs of doing business are simply beyond the company's control, he said, listing the skyrocketing price of steel as one example. But there are other expenses, everything from energy to workforce training to property taxes that can be controlled (or reduced) through proactive steps.

"The companies that find themselves in trouble are the ones that are not proactive," he told BusinessWest. "They wake up one morning and realize they have major issues that they can't overcome overnight. I'm trying to stay ahead of the game and make sure that doesn't happen to us."

Ann Burke said HomeField, which had what she called a 'soft startup' six months ago, is being used to assist not only individual companies of all sizes, but also entire business clusters, including the region's precision machining sector. For that group, officials helped secure a \$150,000 grant to hire a cluster manager to help identify concerns — in this case, the overriding issue is securing an adequate supply of machinists for the future — and shape strategies for addressing them.

Overall, HomeField was created to bring a stronger sense of organization to business-retention and competitiveness issues, said Burke, "We're not doing anything that we didn't do before," she explained. "We're just taking a more comprehensive, team-oriented approach to the process.

"We want to make sure that nothing falls through the cracks," she continued, using a phrase she would employ early and often as she described HomeField and its many potential benefits for the region.

### **The Game Plan**

The marketing materials being developed for HomeField Advantage are still a work in progress, with some final design elements and fonts to be determined.

But the emerging image is that of interlocked paper clips, and Burke believes it will effectively convey just what this venture is designed to do: make connections.

Specifically, these are connections to resources, she said, which come in a number of shapes and sizes, from individuals to local, state, and federal agencies. A team comprised of several such resources then takes a three-pronged approach to specific cases: assessment of needs and challenges; professional advice on those issues; and linkage to strategic business information that may help in the development of strategic initiatives.

Here's how it works: It starts with some initial contact, said Burke, noting that sometimes, businesses find HomeField, and other times, it's the reverse. And there are several points of entry, including referrals from EDC affiliates, a link on the EDC Web site ([www.westernmassedc.com](http://www.westernmassedc.com)), and a phone number — (413) 781-1591, ext. 19. The goal is to make things easier for business owners who may or may not know where and with whom to start with regard to their basic issues or problems.

Once contact is made and the concerns, goals, and challenges to meeting them are outlined, a team is assembled to take on that specific case and develop "customized solutions."

To facilitate that process, the EDC has acquired a state-of-the-art business-retention software program called the Synchronist Business Information System, which, according to its makers,

provides economic development professionals with a “360-degree view of their economic development portfolio.”

The program, which Burke described as one tool to be used by HomeField Advantage teams, enables users to organize, analyze, and report company information. By doing so, they can more easily identify companies with the best growth potential, predict businesses at risk, and create a valuable proprietary database.

Building that database has been one of the primary initiatives of the HomeField program, she said, adding that Synchronist is now being used in dozens of cities and regions and has helped script several success stories.

“It’s being used all over the country to help regions better understand the businesses they have,” she explained, “and to be able to analyze them and work with them to develop solutions.”

Burke said HomeField has already assisted several companies with specific concerns and questions, and expects the volume to increase once more business owners become aware of the program’s existence.

Lenox American Saw represents the best ongoing example of how the program works and why it was created, she said, adding that work to assist the company with a wide range of issues was initiated in the early spring. That list includes workforce training, the possible creation of an Economic Target Area, or ETA, a designation needed to qualify for tax-increment financing, or a TIF, and discussions with officials at Northeast Utilities about strategies to make the company more energy efficient.

The securing of state workforce training grants is at the top of the list, said Bill Burke.

“We’ve hired more people in the past six months than we did in the previous 10 years — we’re running the factory 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” he explained. “In doing so we noticed a significant strain on our existing employees and our need to focus on training and providing additional tools like Six Sigma training to ensure that the quality is second to none.”

Other priorities for the company include reducing energy costs — they have risen nearly 40% over the past year — as well as securing ETA status — East Longmeadow currently does not have that designation, and help from town officials and legislative leaders is needed to get it.

“For us, it’s about what’s happening to our business in terms of costs we can’t control like soaring utility costs and raw material costs — things that are just killing us from a competitiveness standpoint,” he said. “So we have to look for other areas to offset that.

“We’re doing well and we’re growing ... my objective is to sustain that, and to be able to compete globally we need to have the best cost,” he continued, adding that, overall, he sees real potential in HomeField as an effective way to address business retention issues in the region. “We’re trying to do a lot as a region to recruit new companies, but it’s the businesses that are already here that are often neglected until they have to make a decision that they can no longer stay.”

The HomeField program may improve American Saw’s efforts to meet its goals, said Ann Burke, by better organizing assistance efforts and effectively fast-tracking them. Elaborating, she said that any company facing similar issues would eventually have to meet with such groups as the

REB and the Affiliated Chambers. What HomeField does is put them all in the same room at the same time.

“We had one large meeting at the start,” she said, referring to Lenox American Saw. “Their team, which included HR people, the plant manager, and others, met our team, and we were able to make some assignments on specific issues. Our team meets on a regular basis and we communicate as a group back to their team to make sure nothing falls through the cracks.

“This is a way for us to provide assistance to a particular company, and it could be one issue or myriad issues,” she continued. “They have a central point of contact and access to a team of professionals.”

And while many of the HomeField initiatives will be on behalf of individual companies, work will also be focused on industry clusters, she said, returning to the region’s precision machining sector and proactive steps to help it.

Using Synchronist, and working in conjunction with the Regional Competitiveness Council, the EDC interviewed about 50 companies large and small to identify common issues, challenges, and opportunities. The information gleaned was eventually included in a summary given to Gov. Romney on the state of precision manufacturing in the Pioneer Valley, and also incorporated into the application that eventually landed the \$150,000 grant from the Mass. Technology Council to hire the cluster manager.

That’s an effective example of how HomeField works, she said, noting that the broad mission is to make full use of information and effective communication to drive measures that will yield both short- and long-term results.

And hopefully there will be many similar examples in the years ahead.

### **Box Score**

Returning to the more common usage of the phrase ‘portfolio management,’ Burke said that individuals and institutions obviously want to see their investments grow, not remain static, and that’s why they need to be managed.

The same holds true of the region’s portfolio of businesses, she said, adding that simple retention is the baseline goal. Retention and growth are desired, she told BusinessWest, and HomeField provides an effective vehicle for meeting those broad goals.

“This portfolio needs to be managed,” she explained. “And this gives us the tools we need to do that more effectively.”

**Synchronist Business Information System®**  
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