

Review of 2025 Cuyahoga Co. 5-Year Economic Development Plan

By James M. Trutko

Executive Summary

Cuyahoga County's Economic Development Plan has a four-pillar strategy that focuses on aligning the regional economic ecosystem, boosting the development capacity of fifty-nine municipalities, and driving business growth through targeted retention and expansion. It further aims to strengthen the workforce by removing quality-of-life barriers, such as housing and childcare, while utilizing a unified scorecard to track progress across these key areas.

Cuyahoga County's Economic Development Plan should take advantage of the area's economic advantages and minimize or negate the area's disadvantages for businesses with specific, well-defined programs or initiatives to create permanent well-paying jobs. Unfortunately, recent versions of the economic development plan have not been successful in creating jobs or economic growth. Long-standing educational reform efforts and workforce development programs have had limited success in improving workforce quality.

The plan does not clearly identify several key assets and advantages of the area and fails to provide very many specific proposals to take advantage of assets or to remedy disadvantages. The document does not provide clear measures to track progress, to assess success or failures. The document focuses excessively on processes, has vague coordination activities, and promotes many unrealistic social and ideological goals not widely shared by most of the public.

Cuyahoga Co. Private Employment Change (2001-25)				
	Cuya Priv Empl	Cuya Priv Empl Chg	Cuya Priv Empl %Chg	Other 87 OH Cos Priv Empl %Chg
2001	692,800			
2010	587,950	(104,850)	-15.1%	-10.3%
2019	638,125	50,175	8.5%	13.7%
2025E	606,517	(31,608)	-5.0%	2.6%
2010-25	18,567			
2010-25 %Chg	3.2%			
Source: BLS, QCEW. 2025 is estimate				

Summary of Cuyahoga County's Economic Development Plan

Cuyahoga County's five-year plan focuses on aligning the region's economic development system, strengthening municipal capacity, supporting business growth, and improving workforce outcomes. The plan is organized around four pillars:

1. **Ecosystem Alignment & Business Growth** Build a unified regional strategy, share priorities and metrics, and prepare for major trends like AI.
2. **Support for 59 Municipalities** Help cities and villages strengthen their economic development capacity through tools, coordination, and tailored support.
3. **Business Retention, Expansion & Attraction** Improve long-term planning, invest in real estate, and key sectors, and enhance business support systems.
4. **Workforce Development** Improve career visibility, address quality-of-life barriers (childcare, housing, transportation), and promote equitable access to jobs.

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The plan also includes a **scorecard** to track job growth, income, equity, business attraction, and workforce system performance, plus an **annual refresh process** to adjust strategies each year.

Summary Cuyahoga County's Disadvantages

These disadvantages highlight some of the ongoing challenges Cuyahoga County faces in attracting and sustaining business development. Addressing these issues will be critical for the region's future economic growth. Many of the most significant problems are in the City of Cleveland, but the problems impact how businesses the whole county.

1. **Poor population growth-** The county's population decreased from 1,280,100 in 2010 to 1,240,600 in 2024, a loss of about 40,000 (-3%).
2. **Aging Road & Bridge & Other Infrastructure-** Cleveland's infrastructure is outdated, which can lead to logistical inefficiencies and increased costs for businesses requiring modern facilities.
3. **Workforce Quality-** Several local school districts have very low proficiency and graduation percentages.
4. **Brownfield Sites-** Many parts of the city are impacted by former industrial sites that require cleanup before new development can occur. This adds time and financial burden to potential developments.
5. **High Competition for Resources-** There is a competitive environment for available funding and resources aimed at revitalizing brownfields. This can stall or limit the scope of improvements.
6. **Economic Challenges-** Increasing construction costs and interest rates pose significant barriers to new developments, making it harder for businesses to manage budgets effectively.
7. **Perception Issues-** Cleveland's historical narrative of economic decline can persist in influencing the decisions of businesses considering relocation or investments.
8. **Lack of Political Understanding of Business-** The county executive and council members have backgrounds as career politicians, government workers, trade unions, and nonprofit organizations. As a result, they do not understand business operations, incentives, or problems.
9. **High Property, Sales, and Income Taxes-** Cuyahoga County has the highest effective property tax rate in the state, the second highest sales tax and among the highest income tax rates.
10. **Over-Aggressive Government Regulation-** County council often passes legislation that has a negative impact on business costs and bureaucrats aggressively enforce regulations impacting business.

Summary of Cuyahoga County's Advantages

Cuyahoga County possesses a blend of natural, institutional, and strategic assets that create a positive environment for business investment and growth. Based on regional economic development strategies and local assets, here are some primary advantages:

1. Strategic Location and Logistics for Future Manufacturing Growth

- **Defense Industrial Base:** With an expending need for the US defense industry to rebuild its domestic supply chain, the Cleveland and Cuyahoga County are uniquely positioned to spearhead Ohio's evolution into a premier defense manufacturing center. By leveraging the research power of NASA Glenn, the massive industrial capacity of the I-X Center, and a dense network of specialized suppliers, the region is set to dominate high-value sectors including propulsion, power systems, advanced materials, and extreme-environment testing. The current potential for Cuyahoga County is great because there is significant support at the federal level because of projected major funding to rebuild the nation's defense

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manufacturing base. The state level potential is also significant because of very strong, complementary facilities in Dayton, state supportive legislation, and support from JobsOhio.

- **Multimodal Infrastructure Assets:** The region features a sophisticated logistics network, including the Port of Cleveland, major rail lines, and an interstate system that provides easy access to a sizable portion of the U.S. and Canadian markets within a day's drive. This advantage is compromised by a lack of good maintenance.
- **Waterfront Redevelopment:** Ongoing projects have potential to transform the lakefront into a hub for residential and commercial density, enhancing the "quality of place" needed to attract modern businesses if site problems and financing obstacles can be resolved.

3. Innovation and Institutional Anchors

- **Specialized Partnerships:** The presence of NASA Glenn Research Center and world-class institutions like the Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals creates a powerhouse for R&D, particularly in aerospace, healthcare, and biotech.
- **Advanced Manufacturing Legacy:** A deep-rooted history in manufacturing has evolved into a sophisticated ecosystem of Tier 1 and Tier 2 suppliers, providing a ready-made supply chain for new industrial ventures.

3. Workforce and Universities

- **Workforce-** The area has a large and diverse workforce, although many are concerned about the quality of K-12 education.
- **Universities-** The area has seven universities and colleges.

4. Natural and Utility Resources

- **Abundant Freshwater Access:** As a Great Lakes region, the county offers a massive competitive edge for water-intensive industries (such as food processing or advanced manufacturing) and is currently leveraging this through the Freshwater Institute to build a "Blue Economy."
- **Energy Resilience:** Initiatives are trying to provide high-reliability power, which is a major draw for data centers and manufacturers requiring uninterrupted energy. There is some local opposition to data centers and controversy over local electric company billing practices.

Business Assessment of County's Economic Development Plan:

The current plan is not likely to be successful in reversing the shrinking job market. It offers little practical support to business projects or priorities. Because of its slant to public transit and equity, it favors Mid-town/east side projects and offers virtually no benefits to the West Shore communities.

1. The plan **lacks a coherent theory of economic growth**. It has an insufficient focus on what private businesses want, the investment process and growth sectors,
2. The plan **fails to identify many key business assets or recently growing economic sectors**. Assets such as the NASA-IX-Defense Industrial Sector, the Burke Lakefront Closure potential, Browns Stadium relocation or specialized technology sectors receive no recognition.
3. There is an **excessive and unrealistic reliance on planning, process, and "coordinating"** with other economic development organizations and fifty-nine local cities.
4. There is **too much focus on social objectives**, like transit in an environment where less than 5% of area workers commute. Concepts like "Sustainability," "Equity," immigrant needs and climate focus are outdated & the wrong focus.

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5. Steps to take advantage of the areas **“Freshwater” advantages, and Lake Erie access are not well laid out.** The real business advantages are overstated.
6. The **plans do not deal with key weaknesses** such as county budget plans which invest little in “infrastructure or the impact of poor schools on workforce quality. This means remedial programs probably will not work.
7. Most of the proposed metrics have been available for years but are not used currently.

General Criticism of the Plan in Addressing Cuyahoga County’s Disadvantages

The plan notes some of Cuyahoga County’s historic disadvantages: fragmentation, weak municipal capacity, workforce barriers, and inequity, but offers mostly process, coordination-based solutions that are too slow, or vague to overcome the county’s structural challenges.

1. Lack of Clear Priorities and Alignment- The plan admits the region has *“few clear priorities”* and *“little alignment on a unifying regional blueprint”*—but the proposed solutions remain high-level and process-oriented rather than concrete. No specific sectors are prioritized, no clear incentive strategy is defined, and “Alignment” is mostly as meetings, coordination, and task forces.

2. Municipal Capacity Gaps Are Acknowledged but Not Solved- The plan states that *“our 59 municipalities are not fully prepared”* and are *“not equally resourced”*—but the proposed actions focus on coordination, segmentation, and communication rather than actual capacity-building investments or funding of solutions.

3. Workforce Weaknesses Are Broad, but Solutions Are Narrow- The plan identifies major workforce problems, but the proposed actions are mostly meetings and coordination, rather than corrective measures.

4. Heavy Reliance on Coordination Instead of Direct Action- Across all four pillars, the “Do Now” actions are dominated by process activities, not actions.

5. No Clear Strategy for Addressing Population Decline or Out-Migration- The plan’s focus on workforce shortages, job proximity, and quality-of-life does not deal with the core problem: people are leaving or not attracted to the county.

6. Equity Goals Are Stated but Not Operationalized- The plan claims racial inequities in wages, housing, education, and employment

7. Scorecard Metrics Are Broad but Not Tied to Accountability- The scorecard lists outcomes like job growth, income growth, and land readiness, but no baseline numbers are provided, no targets or timelines are set, and no responsible parties are named. As a result, the county cannot be held accountable for progress.

8. Annual Refresh Process May Delay Real Action- The plan proposes a yearly Q1–Q2 review cycle before making changes.