

# Do Job Fairs Help Economic Development?

2900 words

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## Do Job Fairs Help Economic Development?

### Executive Summary

I visited the Job Fair in Daphne, hosted by myriad Chambers of Commerce with the goal of observing how employers and employees interacted, looking for opportunities. Job Fairs present an interesting dynamic for employees: “putting person above paper, instant employment, industry exposure, networking and gaining confidence.<sup>1</sup>” The employers need talent to help make their businesses more profitable. This is not the goal of government, making job fairs a questionable investment for taxpayer dollars.

### Definition of Terms

**Job Fair:** A one-day conference of job seekers and potential employers, allowing both sides to interact in person.<sup>2</sup>

**Economic Development:** “Efforts that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community by creating and/or retaining jobs and supporting or growing incomes and the tax base.<sup>3</sup>”

### Introduction

Job Fairs can have a carnival atmosphere, staged in large halls with separate booths to allow easy access, giving job seekers a chance to roam around, interacting with prospective employers, giving employers a chance to assess possible leads. According to Pong the successful applicant is prepared to pitch their skills to employers in a 30-second commercial. “Craft a brief-but-powerful verbal sales pitch that summarizes the value and abilities you can offer an employer,<sup>4</sup>” dressed conservatively, ensuring to follow up is essential to a successful job search.

The applicant is looking for a job, hopeful and optimistic, wondering what the future holds, wanting to be accepted. In essence this is so important for a person’s self respect to have a job, combining jobs with job seekers in a positive atmosphere would seem like the goal of employment events.

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<sup>1</sup> LinkedIn.com, *Job Fair & Training Expo*, Accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/importance-attending-job-fair-training-expo-rais-iqbal-2>

<sup>2</sup> Pongo, *How to Succeed at a Job Fair*, Accessed February 27, 2017, <https://www.pongoresume.com/articles/418/how-to-succeed-at-a-job-fair.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Salmon Valley Business and Innovation Center, *What is Economic Development*, Accessed February 27, 2017, <http://www.svbic.com/node/24>

<sup>4</sup> Pongo, *How to Succeed at a Job Fair*, Accessed February 27, 2017, <https://www.pongoresume.com/articles/418/how-to-succeed-at-a-job-fair.cfm>

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The spirit of the job-fair's culture should be open, friendly, inviting, letting people relax, enabling job seekers who are already nervous to present their best smiles and personalities to the prospective employers. This balance is what I will be looking for throughout my visit to a local job fair.

The Baldwin County Economic Development Alliance is the largest player in this space, having had good results in Baldwin County, organizing job fairs. "We have held this event at numerous locations in the county and found that Daphne draws the largest crowd of job seekers. We have 55 spaces for exhibitors and I fill that up every year. We typically have 700 – 1000 job seekers attend."<sup>5</sup> Their event is co-hosted with several organizations: Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, Coastal Alabama Business Chamber, Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce, North Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, South Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, sharing costs and rewards.

Orange Beach's Chamber of Commerce participates in several job fairs per the following quote from Ed Rodriguez, Chairman of the Chamber:<sup>6</sup>

**"The first one was a more traditional job fair held in the late winter. It was done at PBR in Orange Beach**

I was able to locate the signup sheet showing **40** businesses, which was quite good. I believe there were about 150 to 175 attendees... but this was scattered throughout a period from 8 am to 3 pm. I did notice that Tacky Jacks is shown twice and so is The Hangout.... not sure why this was. It may have thus been only 38 actual businesses, still a pretty good number. This was actually the very first Advantage Coastal Alabama project we ever completed, even before we had Megan on board.

Overall... we had great reviews from a survey we did. While 35% weren't sure how many people they might be able to hire from the event (survey was done the following day)... over 80% said they would do it again and over 90% said this was a good thing for the chamber to do. This led me to believe that another shot at a DIFFERENT time of year would product better results.

The response was overwhelmingly positive, but the number of actual jobs filled varied. For some businesses, it was more successful than others. For others who tend to hire mostly seasonal, there was as consensus that it was too early in the season to really nail down a whole lot of seasonal workers. This was our first shot at a Job Fair, being led by Perdido Beach Resort, actually suggested the timing.

When we did a post-mortem on it, we discovered two things: Doing it just after Spring Break would probably be better and we are looking at that for this year. The second thing we discovered is that while our HUNCH told us to do it on the island (thinking it would be more convenient to job-seekers), we probably should have done it away from the island where the job seekers actually ARE.

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<sup>5</sup> Baldwin County Economic Development Alliance, *Email from Karen Glover Operations Director*, Accessed March 1, 2017

<sup>6</sup> Ed Rodriguez, *Job Fairs*, Email Accessed March 6, 2017

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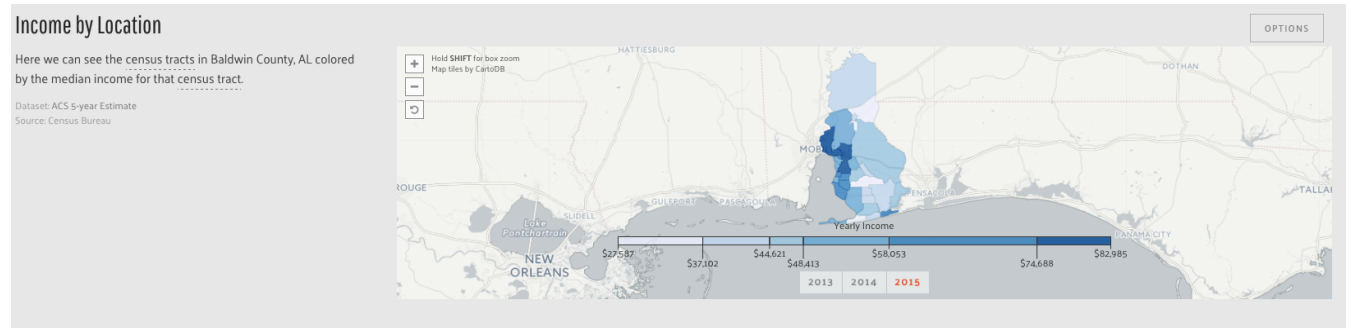
**The second was a specialized Part Time Job Fair** for folks who **HAVE** part-time who might want an *additional* part-time. Megan organized this in response to needs from our ACA Workforce Development Task Force that there were many part-time jobs going unfilled at the height of summer season. I believe she worked with Orange Beach on this. I think this one was not as well-attended (probably because of the already-existing labor shortage in June... but we did try a couple of interesting concepts....

-- It had long hours (to accommodate for people who are already working)

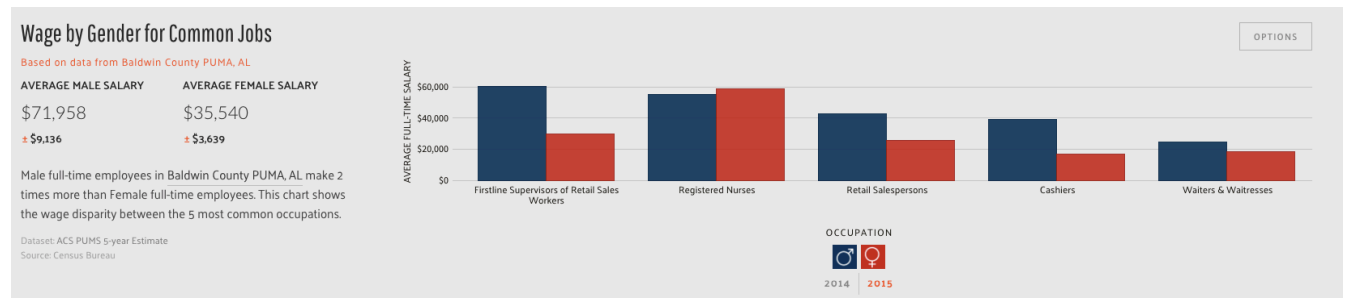
-- It was available for companies who could not be there in attendance but who still wanted to participate. (Again, an accommodation made for being at height of season.)

**The third was the one with the BCEDA** (which is being repeated in Daphne). We enjoyed a **HUGE** turnout of both businesses **AND** job seekers. I believe the Eastern Shore location helps to draw people from Mobile, and the fact that it was done in conjunction with four other chambers helped a lot. I do not have statistics on number of exhibitors from this but I can get them for you.”

Several job-fair opportunities are staged in Baldwin County, including the largest in Daphne on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, hosted by the Baldwin County Economic Development Alliance, suggesting wages are higher in the Daphne area, illustrated by the graph below.<sup>7</sup>



Given that wages are higher on the Eastern Shore, considering the differences between male and female wages in Baldwin County is obvious, given the graph below.<sup>8</sup>

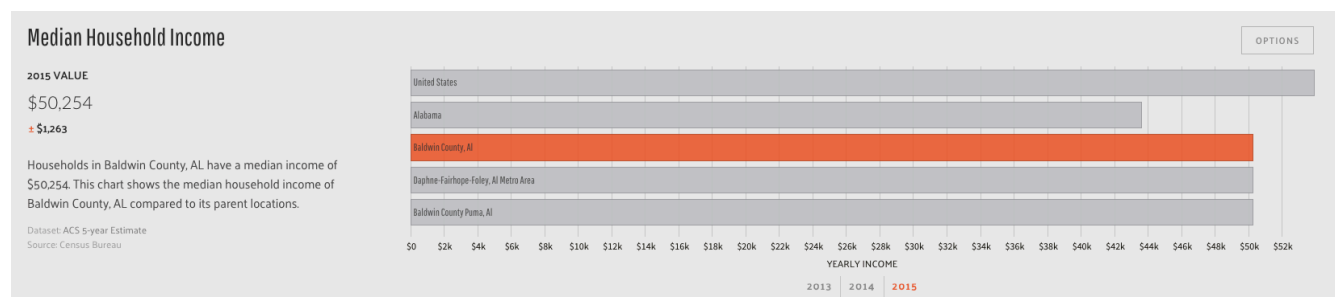


<sup>7</sup> Data-USA, *Baldwin County*, Accessed March 1, 2017, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/baldwin-county-al/>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

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The State of Alabama shows a lower average median income than Baldwin County, illustrating the national average is much higher than Baldwin County in the graph below.<sup>9</sup>



This article seeks to show that job-fair exhibits do or do not have value for a city recruiting valuable people, meaning municipalities and businesses have different goals in hiring talent.

### Overview

Job Fairs rose out of the necessity of matching employers with people needing work in our area. As Baldwin County is as big as the State of Rhode Island, making it sometime difficult to secure good matches, requiring some people to drive for an hour or more to find employment. A job fair creates the possibility for employees to find possible matches closer to home.

The number of available employees is dwindling as Baldwin County grows, creating an employee void, increased with the addition of the Amusement Park OWA, reportedly creating 3500 jobs. The largest employer in the county is the Baldwin County Board of Education with 3400 employees,<sup>10</sup> bringing the problem into focus.

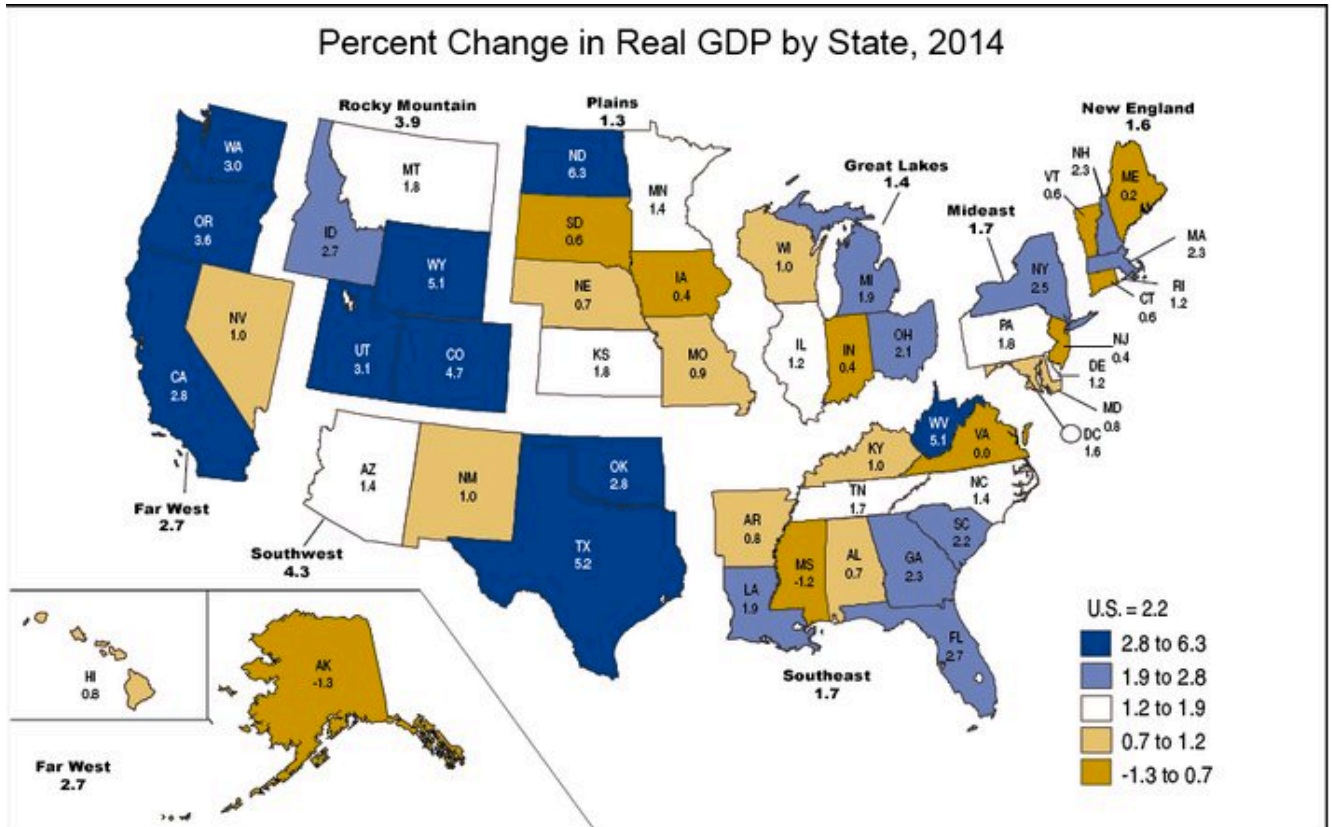
This perspective helps, knowing Alabama is one of the slowest growing states (by GDP) in the nation<sup>11</sup>, seeking to do better.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia, *Baldwin County Board of Education*, Accessed March 6, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baldwin\\_County\\_Board\\_of\\_Education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baldwin_County_Board_of_Education)

<sup>11</sup> Yellow Hammer, *Alabama's Growth Grew at One-Third the Rest of the Nation in 2014*, Accessed March 3, 2017, <http://yellowhammernews.com/business-2/alabamas-economy-grew-at-one-third-the-rate-of-the-rest-of-the-nation-in-2014/>

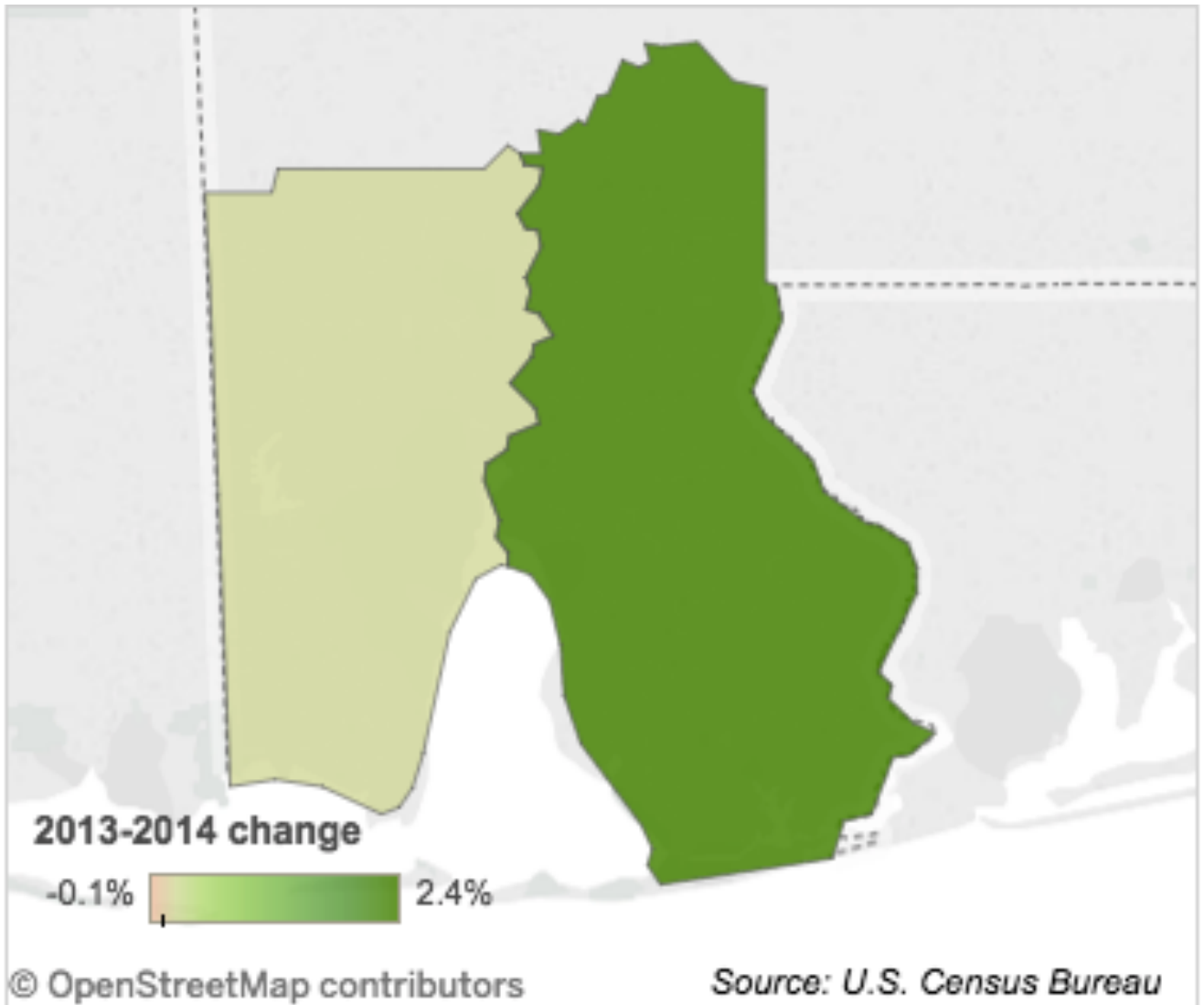
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Whereas Baldwin is the fastest growing county by population in the State of Alabama, pulling families into the area. For example let's look at a: "Tale of two counties on the east side of Mobile Bay, Baldwin County was the 12th-fastest-growing metro area in the country between mid-2013 and mid-2014. On the west side, Mobile County essentially stood still."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Al.com, *Baldwin Passes 200,000 Residents; Census Data Offers Evidence on Eve of School Tax Vote*, Accessed March 3, 2017, [http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2015/03/baldwin\\_passes\\_200000\\_resident.html](http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2015/03/baldwin_passes_200000_resident.html)

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The county's growth is multi-fold, creating revenue, bolstering jobs, helping the state's general fund, making demands on employment. Orange Beach gives a significant portion of its revenue to the county and to the state, making it an important component to the overall economic-development success of the region. This caveat hinges on the fact that businesses wanting to locate in Baldwin County must be able to find suitable employees.

### Planning

The point at issue is whether or not job fairs are beneficial to job seeker, employers or both. Let's look at a few quotes.

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- “The only time I’ve found job fairs not to be a total waste of time was the one time I applied at Six Flags Great America to be a ride operator when I was 16.”<sup>13</sup>
- “Career fairs must have been created during the industrial age, where businesses hired workers based on their ability to work at an assembly line. Today, we have the internet to find employment opportunities in our back yard, or across the country.”<sup>14</sup>
- “Job fairs can be good if you absolutely need a job RIGHT NOW – but for many of the people reading this, you should wait so that you can get the right job.”<sup>15</sup>

If the customer base for job fairs gives such poor reviews, why are they still so popular? Job Fairs require intense post-contact work to get results, meaning aggressive follow-up, perhaps finding the HR Director’s Email, submitting an additional resume and cover letter through that channel. It seems aggressive tactics tend to yield the best job-search results according to Stan Martin, a professional career coach.<sup>16</sup>

An array of businesses exhibited at the job fairs according to the Chamber of Commerce, showing business interests still run high, trying to recruit good people through job fairs:<sup>17</sup>

Business Name	Your Contact Name
Alabama Army National Guard	Michelle Kizer
Alabama Coastal Properties	Tesa Morgan
All Southern Insurance	Jacki Muhle
American Protection Services, Inc	Debra Dupont and/or Fred Clayton
Burger King	Jimmy Still
Caribe Realty/Caribe Marina/Cayman Grill	Angie Wyckoff
Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott Orange Beach	Kerri Padilla
Fisher's at Orange Beach Marina	Brian Kohls
Fort Morgan Historic Site AHC	Wendy Hyatt
Goin' Coastal LLC	Angie Lowell
GSVR	Deborah Hunnemeyer
Gulf Coast LLC, Tidbits, Beach Bits	Joe McAleer
Innisfree Hotels	Nicole Duncan
Kaiser by Wyndham Vacation Rentals	Lee Ann Jones
KIVA DUNES	Mark Stillings
Lewis Critter Gitter Pest Control	Alan Lewis

<sup>13</sup> Ask A Manager, Sabrina Comment, *Have you ever gotten a job at a job fair?*, Accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.askamanager.org/2011/03/have-you-ever-gotten-a-job-from-a-job-fair.html>

<sup>14</sup> Luke Thomas, *Stop wasting your time at career fairs.*, Accessed March 6, 2016, <http://lukethomas.com/stop-wasting-your-time-at-career-fairs/>

<sup>15</sup> Kalibrr, *Why job fairs are a waste of time.*, Accessed March 6, 2017, <https://www.kalibrr.com/advice/2015/01/job-fairs-waste-time/>

<sup>16</sup> Stan Martin, *Career Coach*, Accessed March 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djsIcSs5xkw>

<sup>17</sup> Ed Rodriguez, *Job Fairs*, Email Accessed March 6, 2017

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Long's HR Services	Leslie Costigan
Lucy Buffett's LuLu's	Shemeika Brock
Luna's Eat & Drink	Bert Scott
Mandoki Hospitality	Kim Nelson
Meyer Vacation Rentals	Patricia O'Donnell
Premiere Staffing Services	Mark Smith
Repicci's Real Italian Ice & Gelato	Jacki Muhle
Snook Youth Club of Foley	Patrice Tiggs
South Baldwin Regional Medical Center	Sherri Manley
Spectrum Resorts	Peggy
Starr Textile Services	Patricia O'Donnell
Tacky Jacks Fort Morgan	Richard Crawford
Tacky Jacks Gulf Shores	Bryan Hart
Tanger Outlets	Debra Brown
The Gulf	Kimberly Cole
The Hangout	Staci Lieferman
The Hangout	Neilan Tyree
University of South Alabama Gulf Coast	Roy Maize
UTC Areospace	Brenda Kaiser
Waterville USA	Elizabeth McKee
Perdido Beach Resort	Brandi Ingram

I agree that job fairs allow employers and prospective employees to meet face-to-face, forgoing the job-application process, at least in the initial stages. Job fairs also allow employees to see their prospective employer face-to-face, being a casual atmosphere, surrounded by other employment booths.

The point where I disagree is where job fairs are applicable to municipalities, noting that the City of Orange Beach, the City of Gulf Shores and the City of Foley were not represented at the highly-publicized annual event in Daphne, perhaps knowing the mechanisms they have in place are sufficient to attract the caliber of talent they are looking for.

### Key Issues

We see that job fairs encourage engagement between local employers and those seeking employment, assuming the above is true; it does not necessarily translate to a viable option for a municipalities. None of the local municipalities (Orange Beach, Gulf Shores and Foley) exhibited at the job fair in Daphne, knowing municipal budgets are tight, taking time and personnel away from their duties to physically recruit talent.

Here are some images from the job fair in Daphne on 3/7/2017:



Do Job Fairs Help Economic Development?





Do Job Fairs Help Economic Development?





Do Job Fairs Help Economic Development?





Do Job Fairs Help Economic Development?



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What are our responsibilities to our neighbors? This important aspect of living peacefully in the greater community of Baldwin County says a lot about who we are at the City of Orange Beach, wanting to participate in economic development but not sacrificing fiscal sense for the greater good tips the scales. Participating in job fairs, specifically geared towards municipalities may be a better approach. As yet, no one has offered to host, sponsor or organize such an event, meaning Orange Beach will probably not participate in 2018.

What are our responsibilities for the future? The physicists say the future is liquid and in this case I agree. The economic environment could change so that Orange Beach grows so fast we need a job fair just to keep up with the demand for workers, being held to a very high level of customer service by our City Council, keeping really good people on staff is a necessity.

### Counter Argument

Going to job fairs and supporting the implementation of job fairs in all their various forms is the best way to foster economic development. These fairs help all the Chambers of Commerce in the area combine resources, promoting small business, allowing them to hire candidates in a shared environment, lowering the costs for all chamber members. This is why job fairs are seen as an engine for economic development in Baldwin County.

This is the position taken by a large portion of the online community: "Job fair events are highly popular in the eyes of both employers and potential employees. To aid the recruitment, application, and networking process, job fairs and training expos are held

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all over the world in various locations. This is an ingenious way to meet the needs of both employers and potential employees,”<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

The City of Orange Beach is a municipality, arguably having different needs than the profit-driven enterprise, arguably working towards the greater good of the community, arguably striving towards providing better services for our residents, enhancing the quality-of-life for families, children and grand children, living in our coastal town. These goals are what differentiate a municipality from the Chamber of Commerce, striving to increase business owners' profitability. Therefore, I cannot recommend allocating resources to profit-driven events like a job fair unless the event is purposely directed towards municipalities.

### Policy Recommendations

I would not recommend the City of Orange Beach participate or fund job fairs, seemingly outside the comfort zone of the city, being presented in a one-size-fits-all atmosphere, definitely labor intensive for job applicants and expensive in man-hour terms for exhibitors, unless someone promoted a cities only job fair with Orange Beach, Gulf Shores and Foley, defining municipal needs under one umbrella.

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<sup>18</sup> LinkedIn.com, *Job Fair & Training Expo*, Accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/importance-attending-job-fair-training-expo-rais-iqbal-2>



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