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The Secrets to Job Growth in Salt Lake City

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Mayor Ralph Becker talks about what keeps his city strong despite high unemployment across the country

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Since taking office in January 2008, Salt Lake City's Democratic Mayor Ralph Becker has been a busy man. While championing public transit, LGBT rights, and government transparency, he has also been working to help his city weather an economic crisis that has pushed [unemployment rates](#) to well over 10 percent in many American cities. The city has proven resilient; its unemployment rate is among the lowest in the nation, and it is No. 2 in the *U.S. News* ranking of the best cities for job-seekers. Becker recently talked to *U.S. News* about what makes Salt Lake City's one of the healthiest municipal [economies](#) in the country. [See a slide show of the 10 Best Cities to Find a Job in 2011.] Excerpts:

Why do you think Salt Lake City's job situation has remained strong?

We benefit from the coalescing of institutions here and the nature of Salt Lake City as the center of a large region. I'm really referring to two primary factors that are different from many other communities.

One is the University of Utah, which is a very large player within Salt Lake City, the state, region, et cetera. Its health sciences efforts are becoming increasingly nationally renowned. [It is also] tied at No. 1 in businesses that spin out of the University, right with MIT.

And a big institutional piece revolves around the airport. If you put your finger down in the middle of the western U.S., you end up in Salt Lake City. We really are a transportation crossroads, and that's reflected in that [our airport is] a hub of Delta [Airlines], so we've got a lot of air traffic moving through. We are really a central point for a lot of activities.

It's also a healthy place for business, and that means that even in this downturn we're seeing a lot of businesses moving or expanding here. Some of them are centered around our quality of life, like in the outdoor recreational community--[outdoor gear manufacturer] Black Diamond, for example, located here around 15 years ago, and they are expanding like gangbusters. [Goldman Sachs](#) located its second-largest office in the country here, and they are growing by leaps and bounds.

What initiatives has your administration introduced to strengthen the local economy?

We have particularly focused attention on helping our local and small businesses. For example, we took a pretty stagnant revolving-loan program and have reworked it to focus on the needs of small businesses in general, but particularly during an economic downturn like this, to help them with their expansion needs or desires. We've relied very extensively on [those] businesses to shape that program.

And while we focus attention on landing a company like [Goldman Sachs](#) here--I don't want to underestimate the value of that--it's really our small businesses that both tend to reinvest more in the community and also provide the character of the community. So while we've participated in some larger economic development initiatives, we've certainly spent an equal amount of time focusing on our own local businesses.

Is it difficult to strike a balance between promoting small and big businesses?

It really isn't. Certainly we only have so much time and resources, but larger businesses and that effort are just one piece of what we try to do. We try to be pretty targeted and strategic. It's not like I'm making cold calls to folks around the country to relocate and expand [their] business in Salt Lake. We try to keep our ears to the ground pretty well and look at what's a good fit.

Do you think the stimulus package had any effect on job-creation in Salt Lake City?

Without a doubt, the stimulus package has played a very important role for us, in creating jobs [and] allowing us to do things that have been in our plans and may have been sort of limping along.

I'll give you an example: energy. By changing out our streetlights and traffic signals [to replace them with more energy-efficient LED lights], we have been saving tens of thousands, probably when you put the whole package together hundreds of thousands of dollars in our operational costs in the city. We were moving along at a slow pace at making that changeover, but with the stimulus package we were able to infuse a bunch of money that obviously employed people making those changes and saved us money in terms of city operating costs. That amount of money has allowed us to do other things, to keep more of our city employees employed, and not have to cut services. Whether it's providing us funding to allow us to make sure we keep cops on the street or making improvements in our city, [the stimulus] has been a lifesaver for us.

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