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City's quality of life will lure business, says new director

New economic development director will serve as liaison to businesses

By [Philip Riley](#)

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Improving the local economy has been a top goal of the city in recent years, as a decreased tax base and other factors have contributed to a dire budget situation. But now, the city has hired a manager to focus full time on attracting businesses and ensuring that Petaluma's business climate is strong.

Ingrid Alverde came on board as the city's economic development director on May 23. Hired from among 168 other applicants, she brings experience in economic and redevelopment positions in Poway, a city of about 47,800 just north of San Diego. In an interview with the Argus-Courier last week, Alverde said she is looking forward to showing businesses what Petaluma has to offer.

"I think the attractive thing for Petaluma is it has a high quality of life," she said. Companies often make a decision on where to locate based on where their employees can find good schools, affordable housing, recreation and infrastructure — things that Petaluma has and should highlight, she said.

Poway had many of the same "retail leakage" problems as Petaluma, with residents often having to drive to other towns to shop, said Alverde. In her time in Poway, she helped attract Home Depot, Costco, Kohls, and other businesses to the city.

In Petaluma, "two of the big ones are already coming or trying to come," she said, referring to retail opportunities at two new planned shopping centers anchored by Target and Lowe's. Both retail projects should address much of the shopping leakage if and when they are built, she said.

While retail opportunities will be a part of her job, Alverde says she expects to focus on office vacancies by attracting company headquarters, industrial businesses and employers that provide head-of-household type wages. Petaluma's office vacancy rate stood at 34 percent at the end of April, down from more than 40 percent a year earlier.

Petaluma must cultivate and publicize an "open for business" message to fill its many specific business needs, she said. Businesses "want certainty," she added, and "they are going to go where the demand is."

Alverde's job will span a variety of roles. She will help put together "relocation packages" for businesses, highlighting reasons that Petaluma would be a good fit for a business and its employees. While many organizations in town help market to town to visitors, she will serve as a liaison specifically to businesses. For example, she may

look at zoning codes and other regulations to find possible business-friendly changes to bring to the City Council for a vote.

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When a business expresses interest in coming to Petaluma, she may work with commercial brokerage firms to find a suitable location, bring information to the developers, and be a point of contact throughout the process for the business.

She will also work with existing businesses to “make sure things are going well and they have what they need,” she said.

The framework for much of her work will be the city's economic development plan, a \$140,000 study completed last November.

“It will be the beginning of my work plan,” she said about the study. “My goal is to dig beyond the strategy and see what is the barrier (to businesses),” she said.

The study found tourism/lodging, retail, technology and other industries vital to Petaluma's long-term growth, and gave rough guidelines for how to work with the industries to ensure their strength.

In particular, the study said that that Petaluma's high impact fees may be pushing businesses away, and also identified opportunity areas like an extension of the lease at the Sonoma-Marin Fairgrounds, an emerging eco-tourism industry and more.

Alverde has spent the last few weeks meeting with city leaders and getting to know the city, and she is currently looking at moving her family to Petaluma from Poway.

“I'm more impressed with the city every day,” she said. “I look forward to presenting what Petaluma has to offer.”

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