

Washington D.C. Economic Partnership to take more active role in bringing companies downtown

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The Washington D.C. Economic Partnership is beefing up its staff as it looks to take a more active role in attracting companies to the city's business districts.

WDCEP has hired local real estate veteran [Suzanne White](#) as vice president of real estate services and [Audrey Polk](#), a former economic development official in Richmond, as vice president for corporate attraction.

In these newly created economic development roles, White and Polk will be part of a team working to entice firms to set up offices or even relocate their corporate headquarters to the District. The organization has long helped retailers pick out sites in the District and will play a similar role in selling the city to prospective office tenants at a time when many existing tenants are downsizing.

[Keith Sellars](#), president and CEO of WDCEP, a public-private nonprofit, said the aim is to build on Greater Washington's recent success in attracting such companies as [Amazon.com](#) Inc. (NASDAQ: AMZN), The Boeing Co. (NYSE: BA) and Raytheon Technologies Corp. (NYSE: RTX), all of which have established headquarters in Arlington.

"On a national level, D.C. is generating a lot of buzz and we want to funnel that to the District proper," Sellars said. "We need to tell our own story."



White is a 16-year veteran of the local commercial real estate market, serving as a broker for Newmark and CBRE. She is a former commercial real estate reporter for the Washington Business Journal. Polk was most recently a vice president of business development for the Greater Richmond Partnership.

They will use their respective networks — local brokers and national site selectors — to sell D.C. to both domestic and international prospects, touting attributes like its walkability and its diverse and often multilingual population.

"You can make an easy case for talent, because we have plenty of highly educated talent here, especially when it comes to diverse talent and women in technology roles," Polk said, adding that she and White will be working trade shows and industry events around the country.

"There's of course a lot of Class A office product here, but there's also an appeal for that neighborhood-type office space with strong walkability scores," White added. "This is a city with a huge potential for that kind of worker."

Economic development functions like these have become increasingly common for metropolitan areas. In D.C., the Greater Washington Board of Trade [created the Greater Washington Initiative](#) to market the region while the District was in receivership in the 1990s, but [wound it down in the middle](#) of last decade. In more recent times, jurisdictions banded together to market parts of the region to Amazon when it was shopping around for a second headquarters in 2017 — a process that sparked greater collaboration among [Northern Virginia counties and cities](#), followed by [suburban Maryland localities](#), in joint economic development efforts.

Sellers said this entity will be focused just on D.C., which has had far less success than both Maryland and Virginia in attracting companies and generating jobs thus far. Of 120 large headquarters that have moved to Greater Washington this century, just 16 have come to the District itself, according to research from D.C. Policy Center, and the city is [losing 2.4 jobs for every job it adds](#).

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the WDCEP in selling the city is the rise of remote work. Kastle Systems Inc. data, which tracks employee key card swipes, shows just that just under 40% of D.C. workers were in their offices the week of Sept. 12, a figure that hasn't changed much since the spring. And the status quo is costly: Fewer people downtown means [less spending at businesses and restaurants](#) and, in turn, less tax revenue. The District has begun crafting its own five-year economic development plan [to help guide it out of the pandemic](#).

D.C. has tried a smattering of incentives to bring people back, some aimed at office use and others at more residential development. A few weeks ago, it announced it was extending a partnership with WeWork that offered discounts for membership fees for people who want to use coworking or private office spaces at its District locations. In a statement, Mayor [Muriel Bowser](#) said the deal was a strategy for "adapting in real-time to workplace trends ... whether that is in the office, telework, or anything in between."