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Inside the War Room

How public-private collaboration saved the Defense Finance and Accounting Services operation.

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Saving 1,000 jobs and landing hundreds of new ones takes a lot of hard work by people hidden away in tiny offices crunching numbers and conducting research. These people and their efforts don't attract much fanfare, but you need to know their story because ultimately it is their ability to effectively work as a team that helps Northeast Ohio triumph on the economic development playing field.

In the case of saving Cleveland's Defense Finance and Accounting Services (DFAS) 1,000-employee operation, a team of dedicated individuals representing several interests worked together for months in a nondescript Terminal Tower office — now known as the "War Room." Under tight deadlines, this group pulled together the research and stockpiled the ammunition necessary to defeat the Pentagon's plan to shut down DFAS here.

Their collaborative performance set the standard for determination and excellence that we'll need to match in the future as we set our sights on winning a host of economic development opportunities for Northeast Ohio.

The DFAS War Room began taking shape nearly two years ago after the Base Realignment and Closing (BRAC) Commission announced it would consider closing DFAS facilities. The Greater Cleveland Partnership (GCP), along with Edward Howard & Co., began plotting a strategy to save the downtown Cleveland center.

At that time, a regional approach to economic development was still relatively new and Team NEO was just taking shape. GCP staff that worked on the initial DFAS team would later become Team NEO employees and invaluable principals in the War Room.

This past May, efforts were stepped up when the Cleveland DFAS facility was formally put on the chopping block. A team of executives from Allegro Realty, GCP, Spectrum Group and Team NEO set up the War Room inside GCP's office and started to closely analyze the details of the DFAS realignment recommendations. They were in constant contact with the region's political and business leaders — united as the Defense Industry Alliance — who would make the case to save DFAS in Cleveland.

Team NEO Director of Research Jim Robey developed a sophisticated computer model to analyze the data that the Pentagon used to justify shuttering Cleveland. The War Room research demonstrated that the Cleveland operation efficiently provided high-quality services to the men and women of the armed services who count on DFAS to get their paychecks. And it creatively showed the economic damage that would be done if the center closed. Working in collaboration with the region's Congressional delegation, the team found serious flaws in the Pentagon's data regarding all 26 DFAS offices.

Armed with hard facts, not emotional rhetoric, the Defense Industry Alliance team headed to meetings in Washington, D.C., and Buffalo, N.Y., to present the region's case to the BRAC Commission. The War Room effort paid off.

A complete review of the DFAS consolidation program ultimately resulted in the stunning Aug. 25 vote to move Cleveland off the closure list and expand the operation by a minimum of 400 jobs, and possibly more.

The vote didn't surprise those who labored away for hours in the War Room. They knew the facts were in our favor. But they were elated because they know that in the economic development game, facts don't always carry the day.

For example, Northeast Ohio put together an innovative regional economic development incentive package to encourage OfficeMax to consolidate its headquarters here. I'm confident our package — on a dollar-and-cents level — exceeded the competition. But other factors contributed to OfficeMax's decision to stay in Illinois.

The important lesson from both DFAS and OfficeMax is that when the region's interests unite behind a common cause, Northeast Ohio can do great work.

And that great work ultimately means more jobs and economic growth for the region.

Team NEO is proud to have been able to support these efforts and we look forward to helping staff many more war rooms in the future.

Bob Farley is president of Team NEO, a private-sector-led regional economic development organization founded in November 2003 by the Greater Akron Chamber, the Stark Development Board, the Lorain County Chamber of Commerce, the Youngstown-Warren Regional Chamber, Cleveland Tomorrow, the Greater Cleveland Partnership, and FirstEnergy Corp.