

**Southwest Regional
Development Commission**

**Five Year
Performance
Assessment
2006-2011**

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INTRODUCTION

The Southwest Regional Development Commission (SRDC) is a nine county regional development commission made up of representatives from local units of government and public interest groups in Cottonwood, Jackson, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood and Rock Counties. The purpose of the SRDC is to “work with and on behalf of local units of government to develop plans or implement programs to address economic, social, physical, and governmental concerns”.

The Minnesota Regional Development Act (Minn. Stat.462.393) requires the SRDC every five years to “review its activities and issue a report assessing its performance in fulfilling the purposes of the Regional Development Act. The Report shall address whether the existence of the commission is in the public welfare and interest.”

In accordance with this requirement, the SRDC utilized an assessment tool: *Regional Council Self-Assessment and Resource Toolkit, National Association of Development Organizations, August 2009*, developed by the National Association of Development Organizations, of which the SRDC is a member, in conjunction with the Missouri Association of Councils of Government and the SouthEast Regional Directors Institute, (SERDI).

This report consists of information gathered using a modification of the self-assessment toolkit distributed to members of the Southwest Regional Development Commission at the SRDC’s Annual Meeting in July of 2011. Commission members were asked a series of questions regarding the performance of the Commission over the last five years and asked to rate the Commission on a scale from 1-5:

<i>Not so much</i>		<i>Totally!</i>		
1	2	3	4	5

The following pages are the assessment results for the organization tabulated and averaged for all respondents.

RELEVANCE	Average
Our regional Commission is a key resource for moving our region forward in the 21st century.	4.13
Our policy board members are engaged in setting the agenda and priorities for the organization.	3.93
Our policy board members can relay and explain to others the work, goals and accomplishments of our regional Commission.	3.80
The mission and focus of our regional Commission is clearly defined, updated to today's environment and relevant to our region's challenges and opportunities.	3.93
Our phone rings! Our state officials are eager for our organization to take a leadership role and to be a primary player in regional development issues.	3.93
Our phone rings! Our local officials are eager for our organization to take a leadership role and to be a primary player in regional development issues.	4.07
We are asked to participate in regional and local initiatives with non-governmental partners and leaders, including private, nonprofit and philanthropic groups.	3.87
Our organization often serves as the primary convener or forum for public officials to work together on problems and solutions for the region	3.87
Our organization often serves as the primary convener or forum for public officials to work together with private sector and community leaders on problems and solutions for the region.	3.80
The Executive Director of the organization is engaged with the following key sectors within the region:	4.33
▪ Local governments , including county and municipal elected officials as well as city/county managers, program managers and other career officials.	4.13
▪ Private sector business and industry, including chambers, EDCs, growth councils and business councils.	3.93
▪ Education sector , including K-12, community colleges and four year institutions, as well as workforce training providers and nonprofit agencies.	3.60
▪ Nonprofit organizations , including aging, business development finance and technical assistance, community and economic development, housing, human services, transportation, workforce training and other related fields.	4.00
CONVENER OF THE REGION	Average
The executive director is proactive in providing leadership and a vision for the region.	4.13
As a regional Commission, our organization is focused on providing the leadership and vision necessary for the region to remain competitive.	4.20
Our organization provides a forum for regional and local leaders to develop and implement a blueprint for the region's future community and economic competitiveness.	4.13
Our organization fosters regional collaboration between local officials within the region.	4.07
Our organization fosters regional collaboration between local officials and private, philanthropic and nonprofit sector leaders within our region.	3.93
Our organization is aggressive in tapping into any available resource to advance the region, including public, private and philanthropic resources.	3.93
Our organization develops and offers sound proposals and plans for our local officials and other regional leaders to support and take ownership of or assume as their own, ideas and vision.	4.00
Our organization has earned a reputation as a leader and consensus builder within the region, offering a team of policy board members, professional staff and external champions that can advance a proactive regional agenda.	4.13

OWNERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	Average
It is essential to have a clear understanding of who owns your regional Commission. How would you rate the level of ownership and control held by each of the following over your organization:	
▪ Local elected officials	4.13
▪ Federal agency funders	3.53
▪ State agency funders	3.29
▪ Federal lawmakers	3.47
▪ State legislators	3.33
▪ Governor	3.00
▪ Business sector leaders	3.07
▪ Executive director of regional Commission	4.07
▪ General public	3.13
Our organization has modernized and modified our governance and leadership structure over the years to accommodate new goals, programs and services.	3.87
Our organization has formed new nonprofits and other affiliates to accommodate new programs and services, while still maintaining appropriate control and oversight by the regional Commission policy board.	3.73
Our organization has placed a heavy emphasis on implementing checks and balances to maintain proper oversight, accountability and governance of affiliated nonprofits, programs and committees.	3.87
Our organization has limited itself to the same programs and services as our founding charter and focus areas.	3.07
Our regional Commission policy board is structured to attract the “movers-and-shakers” of the region, including representation from private sector	3.73
Our organizational bylaws are very prescriptive on the allocation of board slots, especially with specific representation by county and municipal officials.	4.47
Our bylaws have evolved to give us some flexibility to identify and select thoughtful leaders and decision makers.	3.93
Our policy board meetings are “must attend” events within the region.	3.60
Our policy board struggles to obtain a quorum at our regular meetings.	2.27
Our policy board is open to exploring new techniques and formats to make sure board meetings are productive and informative.	3.80
Our organization evaluates and monitors the benefits and value that local elected officials and policy board members receive from attending board meetings, committee meetings and participating in our organization.	3.60
Our organization has designed our policy board meetings and other activities to shape aggressive and progressive strategies to advance the region and our individual local communities.	3.93
Our policy board members attend our meetings to:	
a. Network with other board members	4.07
b. Advance personal agendas	2.40
c. Protect interests of locality	3.43
d. Listen to staff reports	3.87
e. Engage in informative policy and program discussions and problem solving for the region	4.07
f. Learn about new and existing federal and state funding resources	3.93
g. Learn about new and existing federal and state regulations and rules	4.00
h. Gain regional Commission support and assistance with local project	4.07

Our board meetings are designed to:	
▪ Promote board member networking	4.00
▪ Provide a forum for the pursuit of regional activities and initiatives	4.00
▪ Allow staff to give program reports	4.47
▪ Chase federal and state grant money	3.87
▪ Attract high-level thought leaders, mover-and-shakers and decision-makers from the region	3.73
Our organization measures the outcomes of our board meetings and board involvement.	3.73
We set specific goals and objectives for our board and staff to pursue each year.	3.93
RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS	Average
County elected officials within our region are actively engaged in our regional Commission.	4.27
Municipal elected officials within our region are actively engaged in our regional Commission.	3.87
County elected officials tend to designate others to participate in our organization rather than participate themselves.	2.13
Municipal elected officials tend to designate others to participate in our organization rather than attend and engage themselves.	2.20
Our organization limits itself to the specific roles and responsibilities outlined in the original state enabling legislation or executive order that authorized the creation of our regional Commission.	3.21
Our organization has worked to evolve our programs and services to meet the shifting needs and opportunities within the region.	3.87
The executive director dedicates significant time each week to meet or talk with chief elected officials within our region, both county and municipal levels, as well as policy board members vs. non-board members.	3.67
The executive director dedicates significant time each week to network, meet and talk with city and county managers and senior-level local government administrators within the region.	3.60
Local governments within our region turn to our regional Commission for assistance, advice and leadership as the first option, before asking consultants, universities or other groups for assistance, especially with planning, strategy development or program design.	3.60
Our organization tries hard to interact, network and partner with local economic development corporations.	3.93
The executive director actively attends and participates in statewide and sub-state regional associations of county and municipal officials.	4.67
Representatives of our organization serve on committees, task forces and working groups related to our programs and interest areas for our state associations of counties and municipalities.	4.13
Our regional Commission provides specialized training, networking opportunities and forums for local government leaders and staff. This include forums to discuss regional issues, explore new ideas and problem solving solutions, examine regional trends and plans, and explore opportunities for new or expanded regional collaboration	3.67
It is clear who owns our regional organization:	3.60
Local organizations besides local government turn to our organization for resources, leadership, technical assistance, partnerships and strategic assistance.	3.60
Our organization involves local citizens, issue experts and retirees with specific skills in our activities and organization.	3.67

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FEDERAL AND STATE OFFICIALS	Average
Governor and key gubernatorial staff	3.73
State legislators and key legislative staff	4.13
State agency directors and senior program staff	4.00
Members of Congress and their staff in Washington and in the region	3.93
Federal agency leaders, both political and career staff at HQ and field offices	3.87
While much of our organization’s operations and program budget comes from federal and state sources, our organization does not feel it is important to engage in federal and state advocacy efforts	2.53
Our organization relies on our local policy officials to serve as our voice with federal and state policy makers, rather than staff.	3.20
Our organization collaborates with our federal and state officials to develop a strategic vision and action plan for the region, including regular participation in our board meetings and committee activities.	3.80
The executive director serves as the “closer” for our organization in securing contracts and projects with our federal and state funding partners.	3.93
Our organization has a clear strategy for building credibility, trust and awareness with our federal and state agencies and partners	4.00
Our federal and state policymakers (including staff) rely on our organization to learn about and keep track of key regional and local issues and projects.	3.80
Our organization participates in national and state trade and membership associations to advance and keep track of important policy, programmatic and funding issues.	4.07
As executive director, I spend considerable time reading reports and literature, participating in legislative and policy conference calls, attending Washington policy conferences and serving on policy committees and working groups of national and state trade associations.	4.23
Our federal and state elected leaders from the region know and respect our organization and call on us for feedback on policy issues, background on projects and assistance with priority issues	3.92
Our regional commission: --Invites federal and state elected officials to attend and participate in our regular board meetings, special events and program rollouts.	3.93
▪ Meets with federal elected officials at least once each year in Washington, DC and with our state officials at least a couple times each legislative session.	4.47
▪ Conducts on-site tours with our federal and state elected officials as a follow-up to ribbon-cutting ceremonies to show policymakers the long-term impact of their support.	3.47
▪ Implements a clearly defined and updated strategy for expressing our appreciation and support for federal and state legislators and other key federal and state leaders.	3.87

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND IMAGE	Average
As a public official, the executive director, places a high priority on building a solid public relations image and appearance. This includes our Web site, annual report, grant applications, newsletters, regional plans and other electronic and print materials.	4.33
Our organization has the internal capacity to develop first-class publications, reports and Web sites, including graphic and Web designers.	3.87
Our organization invests/contracts with professional marketing and design specialists to help us create and portray a professional, quality image for our organization.	3.67
Since regional Commissions are in the business of building regional consensus, using data and analysis to influence effective plans, strategies and investments, and disseminating policy and funding information, we agree that our regional Commission should place an emphasis on developing more effective communication tools. This includes a professional Web site, increased use of new social networking tools (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc) and other new technology tools.	4.20
Our organization studies and evaluates the public perceptions that key stakeholders may have towards our organization.	3.73
Our organization is taking steps to:	
▪ Make a successful first impression , including through a professionally-designed Web site, CEDS report, transportation plan, etc.	3.87
▪ Present a professional image in newsletters, grant applications, annual reports and other print and online materials.	3.93
▪ Participate in statewide, regional and local coalitions, alliances and organizations , including public, private and nonprofit organizations.	4.00
▪ Exhibit willingness to staff and support special initiatives or incubate new organizations and programs.	4.00
▪ Establish a culture of innovation , entrepreneurship and calculated risk-management with new ideas, programs and services.	3.93
Our regional Commission has a specific strategy and action plan for building the reputation, capacity, willingness, leadership and culture of being a regional leader. This includes working towards being a:	
▪ Respected and valued forum for local officials and leaders to address area-wide issues through regional strategies, partnerships and solutions.	4.00
▪ Place to bring together public, private and nonprofit leaders to strengthen regional collaboration across jurisdictional and sector boundaries.	4.07
▪ “Go to” resource for understanding, tapping into and securing federal and/or state community and economic development resources.	3.93
▪ Reliable program administrator of federal and state funds.	4.07
▪ Valued technical assistance provider to meet current regional and community goals and needs.	4.13

Regional Commission Policy Board:	
Evaluating Basic Roles and Functions	Average
Our Policy Board:	
Focuses on meeting the overall needs of our region, not just their own individual communities.	4.50
Sets the policies and strategic direction that guide our regional Commission to run effectively, legally and ethically.	4.36
Advocates the use of our regional Commission to serve as a primary convener, regional planning expert and technical assistance resources to address regional goals and issues.	4.21
Has developed the policy and governance framework that is needed to allow management and staff to implement the vision and priorities of the board.	3.86
Sets overall policies and guidelines that govern the authority, responsibility, accountability and performance evaluation of the executive director.	4.36
Provides the support necessary for the executive director and staff to succeed in advancing the goals and priorities of the board	4.36
Allows the executive director to manage the day-to-day operations of the regional Commission, without micromanaging staffing and programmatic decisions.	4.71
Remembers that our regional Commission is NOT always under the same rules and restrictions as local government	4.29
Shares a common vision, sense of mission and clearly identified goals at the board level.	4.29
Takes the long-term view with incremental performance measures to evaluate progress of the regional Commission	4.29
Places an emphasis on developing a regional development roadmap with performance benchmarks and measurements compared with other similar regions in the nation.	4.00
Focuses on putting difficult decisions into the larger regional context and perspective, rather than just interests of individual communities.	4.21
Remembers that organizational risk taking is essential for progress and innovation.	4.29
Conducts regular outreach and feedback sessions with rank-and-file members of the regional Commission membership.	4.07
Limits input and feedback only from members of the board.	2.36
Conducts regular and thorough strategic planning retreats and visioning sessions to establish long-term goals and objectives, as well as short-range tasks and action plans.	3.93
Assesses our organizational opportunities, threats, weaknesses and strengths on a regular basis.	3.86
Places a major emphasis on the implementation of our organization's strategic plan, including personal involvement in outreach and advocacy for the organization at federal, state and local levels.	4.00
Makes sure board members have a firm grasp on the financial conditions, integrity and operations of the organization. This includes monitoring annual budget vs. expenditures, conducting an annual audit by independent CPA firm and maintaining a finance committee.	4.36
Delegates the day-to-day financial management to the executive director, yet maintains appropriate internal controls.	4.43
Monitors financial outcomes and performance, including financial reports at every board meeting and review of annual audit findings.	4.43
Maintains appropriate controls and oversight of nonprofit affiliates of the regional Commission	4.29
Thinks long-term and big-picture about building the organization's financial foundation, not only annual profit and loss statements.	4.36

Our individual policy board members:	
Commit the time necessary to serve as a board member or designate senior-level alternates who are committed.	4.36
Keep local politics in perspective to regional needs and priorities	4.36
Review agenda materials prior to the meeting and are prepared to ask informed questions and provide good input.	4.57
Conduct their homework on the organization's activities, plans and programs, along with understanding the regional and local politics.	4.43
Keep the board working on a policy level, rather than micromanaging staff level decisions.	4.43
Address serious management issues that require board action or attention.	4.29
Are open to involving committees, advisory working groups and staff in the organization.	4.36
Take special assignments willingly and enthusiastically when asked	4.21
Serve as goodwill ambassadors for the organization at the national, state, regional and local levels	4.36
Actively participate in membership retention and outreach	4.14
Support the organization's public policy, programmatic and project agenda through advocacy.	4.21
Attend events and activities, including the annual conference, board meetings, educational seminars and planning meetings.	4.21
Speak for the board or the organization only when authorized and appropriate.	4.21
Maintain confidentiality of issues discussed in executive decision-making sessions.	4.46
Serve the whole organization, rather than any special interest group or constituency.	4.57
Avoid even the appearance of conflict of interest, especially on funding and personnel decisions.	4.50
Disclose any possible conflicts in a timely and open fashion.	4.43
Know the goals, mission and programs/services of the organization.	4.29
Have defined roles and responsibilities as a board member, as outlined in a board member job description.	4.21
Provide constructive and timely feedback.	4.36
Respect and value diversity of thought and opinion of board members, executive director, staff and stakeholders.	4.36
Develop trust and fight fair with other board members, management and staff.	4.29
Pitch in to help advance the mission of the organization	4.29
Know how to solve problems and work toward solving problems and issues.	4.36
Focus on achieving positive results for the region and the regional Commission	4.36

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

Relevance

Relevance in this context is how well the regional development commission is performing its statutory mission of working with and on behalf of local units of government to develop plans or implement programs to address economic, social, physical, and governmental concerns. Is the SRDC being looked to by our constituencies to work on these issues? While the assessment clearly indicates that the Commissioners believe that the SRDC is relevant, the most telling of the responses to the relevancy question can be found in questions 1 and 6.

Question 1 asks respondents if they think the Commission is a key resource for moving our region forward in the 21st century. The average response was 4.13, with 5 indicating *Totally!*; the Commission is thought to be relevant to the evolution of the region to meet the challenges of the future.

Question 6 asks if local officials are eager for the SRDC to take a leadership role and be a primary player in regional development issues. The result of 4.07 demonstrates that the local officials within the region want our organization to take a leadership role and be a primary player on regional development issues.

The lowest response for this section was a 3.60 for our relevance to the educational sector within the region. This has not typically been an area of concentration for the SRDC, mainly because of the availability of many other resources that serve this constituency. Clearly, this is an area where we could improve if the Board of Directors decides it is a priority area for development.

Convener of the Region

“One of the core principles of a regional council is to provide a neutral forum for local leaders to work together to address and solve area wide issues on a regional basis. While regional councils are public entities governed and associated with local government, the complexity and scope of today’s regional planning and development issues have become so intense and far reaching, that we have found that most high performing regional councils have broadened their governance structure, programs and services, and partnerships to include business, education, nonprofit and philanthropic sector leaders.” (*Regional Council Self-Assessment and Resource Toolkit, National Association of Development Organizations, August 2009.*)

Commissioners clearly believe that the SRDC is doing a good job as a convener with the average responses falling in a fairly narrow range of 3.93 to 4.20, once again with 5 indicating *Totally!* As available resources continue to shrink, the role of convener will gain in importance as local units of government, business and the non-profit sector work together to provide opportunities for the region.

Highlights of this role over the last five years include a number of public/private sector partnerships developed through the SRDC's role in regional economic development and as the administrator of an Economic Development Administration (EDA) Revolving Loan Fund.

Ownership and Governance

Regional development commissions are unique entities in public administration since they are governed primarily by local government officials, yet they also lack traditional local government powers such as bonding authority, zoning and ordinance controls, and planning and code enforcement. While regional development commissions are governed and supported by local governments, most also rely heavily on federal and state resources for program and operational support. These dynamics and realities often result in a constant tug-of-war for control between local needs and priorities with mandates and demands by federal and state funding partners. Adequate governance and oversight can help the commission to reflect local priorities while still acting as a conduit for federal and state programs.

Local units of government often think of the regional development commission as a 'them' when in reality they *are* the regional development commission. Strong leadership at the Board level results in the feeling of ownership that is essential to the effective governance of the commission. The SRDC stresses the importance of this Board leadership role in the region through a biennial Board Retreat where board members and senior staff work together on such issues as strategic planning, the decision making process and other board development issues. Additionally, the SRDC conducts a Newly Elected Official Orientation following each election year, that brings together new elected officials from throughout the region with senior staff and Board members to discuss the issues facing the region and orient the officials to the services that are being provided or that can be provided by the SRDC.

The assessment clearly indicates that the Commissioners rate both local elected officials and the Executive Director as having high ownership in the organization. The assessment also points out some of the weaknesses inherent in the structure mandated by our governing legislation. Please note that on the quorum question, a lower value indicates that achieving a quorum has not been an issue. On a national level there has been a move towards having more business and private sector inclusion on regional councils. Engaging this sector in governance and ownership issues remains a challenge as membership in the Commission is clearly defined by statute. The SRDC has sought to increase its inclusiveness through the use of committees, particularly the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Committee, which strives to bring a business perspective to the Commission. This is an area that has been identified as a possible area for growth for the SRDC.

Relationships with Local Governments

This section of the assessment is a logical extension of the previous section. If the organization has strong buy in and ownership by the local elected officials that are on the Commission, does this awareness translate to relationships with local units of government as a whole? Nationally, with the many and varied organizational structures that exist; many local governments are not as aware of their local regional council as they could be.

Our assessments results indicate that that is not as much of an issue in the SRDC's region. County elected officials were rated as 4.37 out of 5 as being actively engaged in our regional commission. The numbers were somewhat lower for municipal elected officials, although given that there are eighty-one municipalities in the nine-county SRDC region a score of 3.87 is still very respectable. The SRDC strives to stay connected with its local units of government and will continue to place a priority emphasis on maintaining these relationships.

A section of the responses that is somewhat confusing is the average scores in the 2s about elected officials tending to designate others to participate in our organization rather than do it themselves. Since this is not actually the case and our county and municipal representatives are elected officials as required, this would indicate some confusion as to how the question was interpreted and will bear some follow-up to clear up any misconceptions that might exist.

Relationships with Federal and State Officials

Because of our ongoing funding relationships with federal and state agencies, regional councils must be engaged and focused on building strong professional relationships, trust and credibility with federal and state officials. This includes elected officials, legislative staff, political and career officials at federal and state agencies, and national and state associations involved in communicating the message and priorities of regional councils.

The SRDC is a member of the National Association of Development Organizations, (NADO). NADO provides advocacy, education, peer exchanges and research for the nation's regional development organizations. The association and its members promote regional strategies, partnerships and solutions to strengthen the economic competitiveness and quality of life across America's local communities.

"Regional development organization" is used generically to describe the national network of 545 multi-jurisdictional regional planning and development organizations. These public-based entities play an invaluable role in fostering intergovernmental collaboration among federal, state and local officials. They deliver and manage various federal and state programs. Most importantly, they work to solve area wide issues and to address the fundamental building blocks required for competitive and sustainable communities and economies.

Through its membership in NADO, the SRDC is active at the federal level in issues of importance to the region. To this end the SRDC has also cultivated relationships with the congressional delegation that serves the region. In the assessment, it was identified that the Executive Director spent considerable time working on maintaining these relationships as well as relationships at the state level.

At the state level, the SRDC maintains communication with representatives and senators from the region. The SRDC scored high in the assessment in relationships with state legislators and key legislative staff as well as state agency directors and senior program staff. The relationship with the Governor's office and key gubernatorial staff was not perceived to be as strong, and is an area in which the SRDC hopes to improve in the future.

Public Relations and Image

The SRDC scored high marks on the assessment from the commissioners in the area of public relations and image. Historically this area has been a difficult one for the SRDC to traverse well. As a special purpose local unit of government that often acts as a consultant/contractor, the SRDC has in the past followed the regional development organizations tradition of being "behind the scenes" players. Following the strategic planning session with the Board of Directors in 2009, it was decided to put more of an emphasis on marketing the organization and to do a better job of "blowing our own horn". In 2010 the SRDC's new website www.swrdc.org was launched, a more user friendly version of its existing website. Developing a new website has shown the SRDC some areas that need improvement in terms of our electronic foot print.

The assessment scores for this area are generally around 4.00, which is viewed by the Commission as an improvement. The SRDC will continue its efforts to improve its public relations image as well as venture into more electronic media in the coming years. A recent survey of SRDC Commissioners done to assess the willingness and ability of Commissioners to move towards more electronic communication of Board and Commission information clearly showed that there is much work to be done yet to bring the elected officials forward into this new digital age.

Regional Commission Policy Board: Evaluating Basic Roles and Functions

A major asset of regional councils is the involvement, ownership and connections of local elected officials and other key policy board members. The most effective and performance-driven regional councils tend to have an engaged, informed and proactive policy board. The SRDC currently uses a 14 member Board of Directors to assist the full commission and to provide leadership for the organization as well as to the Commission's committees. The full Commission and the Board meet concurrently six times per year (January, March, May, July, September and November) with the Board meeting independently in the in between months and there being no meeting scheduled in August.

The assessment clearly shows that the Commission believes that the policy boards are doing their jobs in terms of providing direction for the Commission. The assessment gave 4.71 out of 5 to the policy board for “allowing the executive director to manage the day to day operations of the regional commission, without micromanaging staffing and programmatic decisions.” This appears to be the highest scored question in the entire assessment.

The assessment also shows that the policy board looks out for the best interests of the region and not just their own communities, scoring a 4.5 in that area and a 4.57 in response to the question about serving the whole organization rather than any special interest group or constituency within the organization.

SRDC PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS, 2007-2011

Local Water Management Plans

- Nobles County, 2009
- Jackson County, 2008
- Murray County, 2007
- Rock County, 2007
- Cottonwood County, 2007

In 2007, Nobles County approached SRDC to revise their groundbreaking comprehensive water resources management plan to serve the County, Nobles Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD), Kanaranzi-Little Rock Watershed District and Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District to meet new Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) requirements, which had been significantly changed.

Nobles SWCD and Nobles County Environmental Services brought together a Local Water Management Task Force that included participants from cities and the County, watershed district staff and supervisors, rural water, the Farm Bureau and Farmers Union, private employers and a lake association. BWSR, MPCA, and other state agencies also offered assistance throughout the project. This group met six times over the course of about a year to consider concerns raised by local citizens, as well as local and state government. SRDC staff facilitated the task force meetings and prepared the actual planning document.

Priority concerns included; Surface Water Quality, Drainage Management and Public Water Supplies. The Task Force prioritized potential action items to address these concerns, such as education about water resources and agricultural best management practices, financial incentives for conservation practices, and flood mitigation projects. The end result of the joint planning effort is a new Nobles Local Water Management Plan 2009-2018, which preserves the hard work of the original water plan while meeting new state requirements. The plan will serve as the local water plan for BWSR funding, the comprehensive plan for the SWCD, and the watershed management plan for both watershed districts.

This project was awarded an Environmental Project award from the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) for the way that it combined necessary planning objectives for multiple jurisdictions.

Hazard Mitigation Plans:

- Cottonwood County (2011)
- Jackson County (2008)
- Lincoln County (2010)
- Lyon County (2010)
- Murray County (2005; update in progress)
- Nobles County (2005; update 2010)
- Pipestone County (2010)
- Redwood County (2005; update in progress)
- Rock County (2007)

Natural and man-made disasters can strike any place and at any time. Flooding or tornados, terrorism or pandemic flu, local units of government must be ready to react. In the 21st century, it has become apparent that reaction is not enough. We have to plan ahead and take action before disaster strikes. In an article published in the Minneapolis Star Tribune on December 17, 2007, the necessity for anticipating problems is highlighted. “Some business owners in southeastern Minnesota who saw their livelihood washed away in last summer’s floods are now facing delays of up to a year...The counties where the businesses were located had never prepared what are called local hazard mitigation plans, which the federal government requires before it will distribute money to buy out individual properties in flood-prone areas.”

“That’s not a coincidence,” Kristen Sailer, (former) spokeswoman for Minnesota Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) was quoted as saying. “Other regions of the state have regional development commissions that provided staffing and expertise in preparing the plans. But the regional development commission in southeastern Minnesota dissolved some time ago.”

The Southwest Regional Development Commission is working with counties and cities in our region to mitigate hazards—a process to reduce loss of life and property in the event of problems.

Out-Migration as an Economic Indicator: A Case Study of Southwest Minnesota

The majority of counties in Southwest Minnesota have experienced continuous, ongoing population loss over the last thirty years. A large component of this population loss is out-migration, which distorts traditional indicators of regional economic vitality. In 2007 the SRDC with help from bordering RDCs, took a closer look at the issue of out-migration in Southwestern Minnesota. Funded by a grant from the US Dept. of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA), SRDC staff prepared a case

for consideration at the federal level for including out-migration as a determining factor for economic distress in areas such as ours where unemployment and per capita income statistics don't give a true picture of economic distress.

Southwest Minnesota Regional Trails Plan Update

SRDC conducted a regional trails plan update that confirmed the vision of the original 2000 Plan: to establish a network of trails in Southwest Minnesota for multiple users. This Plan examines alternative non-motorized transportation modes, primarily walking and bicycling, and recommends actions to improve access and mobility for bicyclists and pedestrians; and has developed a methodology for regional prioritization of projects requesting funding in various phases of trail planning through design and construction. This plan is an element of the Regional Long Range Transportation Plan.

Developed through a grass roots process involving local officials and citizen input, this plan provides guidance for land-use decision-makers at the state, regional and local level. While primarily focusing on walking and bicycling, it is recognized that there is an established network of snowmobile trails throughout the region that should be considered when planning any other type of trail. The Plan update identified a prioritized list of eligible trail projects that will be periodically updated.

Wind Development & Roads Planning

In 2008 The SRDC and SW CERT sponsored and facilitated a workshop in Windom – Wind Development, Roads, Bridges and Land Use. The workshop was focused on broadening the awareness of wind development sharing experiences county staff experience with wind farm development – both the good and not so good. As a result of the workshop, the county engineers identified the desire to work toward a uniform approach to development and a subcommittee of County Engineers in Southern Minnesota, MnDOT District permitting staff and SRDC Staff gathered to research and identify best practices. The project was larger than first anticipated and a problem statement was submitted to the Local Road and Research Board (LRRB) to develop a guidance matrix, and tools such as a method to calculate the road life consumed on paved roads by large traffic generators, sample permits, and development agreements.

Some of the issues that were occurring included: Application of road and access permits days before equipment came to deliver. Problems arose regarding spacing of driveways to turbines, drainage, road widening, dust, bridges capable of handling the equipment, traffic control, signage, no one individual in charge of the development project if there were problems, documentation of the condition of the roads before construction to address repair needs post construction, and others.

With the finalization of the matrix and tools, we have seen more wind developers come to county staff earlier in the development process, which increases communication and planning for the project. We see this as a win-win project, the county staff will know

what to expect when a development comes to their county and the developers will be able to plan for transportation needs.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)

As an Economic Development District designated by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration, (EDA) the SRDC is required to prepare a regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy or CEDS. Beginning in early 2009 the SRDC began meeting with its CEDS Strategy Committee to review the current economic conditions of the region and develop future strategies. The CEDS Strategy Committee is made up of representatives of the private and public sectors representing a wide variety of economic interests within the region ranging from renewable energy to tourism and entrepreneurship.

The areas identified by the Committee as areas of concern for the region were:

Affordable Housing; Reliable Transportation Systems; Community Preparedness for Minority Influx; Daycare Shortages; Negative Regional Perspective/Perception; Infrastructure; Knowledge of Opportunities and; Lack of Knowledge of Training that Businesses can take Advantage of. The Committee also identified areas for opportunities within the region: Arts and Culture; ARRA Funding; Housing; Quality of Life; Educational System; Work Ethic and; Minority Culture.

The SRDC will continue to work with its regional partners throughout the coming years to address the needs and areas of opportunities identified in the CEDS. Such partners as the SW Economic Development Professionals, Agricultural Utilization Research Institute, the Rural Minnesota Energy Board and others, bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the area and will be vital to the success of the CEDS.

Cottonwood-Jackson-Redwood-Renville State Health Improvement Project (SHIP).

SRDC was asked to be part of this project to help in two ways: to review community planning policy to highlight how civic leaders can make non-motorized transportation easier, and To connect with local community members in assessment workshops looking at walking and biking projects. Over the course of the 18-month project, SRDC staff looked closely at land use and transportation plans; parks, recreation and open space; natural resources and economic development in the cities of Jackson and Redwood Falls. The resulting analysis highlighted several areas where city leaders can help make it easier for active living:

- Improve accessibility, e.g. build & maintain sidewalks
- Encourage mixed use development and support downtown
- Encourage alternatives to sprawl
- Consider Complete Streets policies
- Participate in Safe Routes to School efforts

- Conserve open space and floodplains
- Develop Active Living amenities to attract a new economy workforce
- Support local water management

JOBZ

Prior to giving primary responsibility of the program to the Department of Employment and Economic Development, the SRDC acted as the JOBZone Administrator for the Southwest Regional JOBZone. As of May 2010, the Southwest JOBZone had forty-five completed JOBZ projects in good standing in seventeen cities in twelve of the thirteen JOBZone counties. This is a decrease of 4 projects and 2 cities as the downturn in the economy has eliminated some projects from the program. These projects have retained 704 jobs and created 882 new jobs. These projects have also included over \$300 million in capital investments.

EDA Revolving Loan Fund

As part of its economic development efforts in the region, the SRDC administers an Economic Development Administration (EDA) Revolving Loan Fund (RLF). The purpose of the RLF is to directly loan funds to assist start-up or existing retail, service, manufacturing and distribution businesses with fixed asset, working capital and real estate financing. Loans may range in size from \$5,000 to \$100,000. Since its inception in 1994 the RLF has disbursed over \$6.3 million, revolving over 6 times.

In the last five years the SRDC RLF has written 34 loans totaling \$1,352,059. The total project cost for these developments is \$7,857,895 for a leverage ratio of 83%. These 34 loans created 115.50 jobs and retained 84 jobs in the region. The SRDC RLF has clearly demonstrated, even in these hard economic times, that access to capital will spur entrepreneurs to start or purchase existing businesses and create jobs. These businesses will also then generate enough revenue to repay the RLF thus allowing the money to revolve and be available for reinvestment.

Worthington Biotechnology Advancement Center

As a federally designated Economic Development District, SRDC worked with the City of Worthington and Worthington Regional Economic Development Corporation to prepare a U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) application in 2009-10. The application was for partial funding for the development of a bioscience testing and training center with a business incubator. Resources for the businesses will also be co-located at the facility, or have a visiting presence. Area businesses will be able to utilize the testing and training facility for workforce development as well as testing of their products. The hope is that businesses incubated in the facility will graduate to having a full-fledged business in the adjacent bioscience business park.

In June 2010, EDA announced the approval of the grant for approximately \$770,000. The total project cost is estimated at over \$3,000,000. The State of Minnesota also contributed to the project. SRDC staff is currently administering the project which is under construction with an estimated completion date in the Fall of 2011.

Unity House

Unity House, a residential treatment/transitional housing facility run by the Southwestern Mental Health Center, also in Worthington demonstrates how the SRDC works in collaboration with other local and regional entities to bring much needed services to the region. Funding for the Unity House was partially provided through the efforts of SRDC Chair Gary Sorenson, Executive Director Jay Trusty and Deputy Director Nan Larson in working with former Senator Norm Coleman's office to receive federal funding. Construction on Unity House began in 2009 and was completed in late 2010.

"The Unity House employs 15 to 20 specialists, from mental health rehabilitation workers to mental health practitioners, a licensed alcohol and drug counselor and registered nurse. SWMHC also contracts with a psychiatrist and certified nurse practitioner to provide medication management...

...development of a new Unity House wouldn't have been possible without community partners, and SWMHC worked with several throughout the entire process. In addition to support from each of its five member counties, partners included the Southwest Mental Health Consortium, City of Worthington, Southwest Regional Development Commission, First Farmers & Merchants Bank of Pipestone and both the Dayton House and Historic Worthington Inc." *Worthington Daily Globe, December 7, 2010.*

MIRC Broadband Initiative

Since 2010 the SRDC has been partnering with the Blandin Foundation and the other Regional Development Commissions in Minnesota on the Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities Initiative or MIRC. The MIRC coalition will bring a network of resources and support to rural Minnesota individuals and communities - especially those unemployed and seeking employment, small businesses, coalitions of government entities, and local leaders with the goal of increasing both the availability and the use of broadband in rural areas of Minnesota. Funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce, the MIRC project is a broad collaboration between government, the non-profit sector and business to provide cutting edge technology to rural areas of Minnesota that are struggling with broadband infrastructure availability.

Evaluation of the project is being conducted by the EDA University Center at the University of Minnesota Crookston. Current progress dashboard is available for review at <http://www.edacenter.org/mirc-dashboard.php> .

Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs)

Southwest CERT is staffed by the Southwest Regional Development Commission, and many who participate in the SW CERT do so through the Rural Minnesota Energy Board, (RMEB). The RMEB is a 16 county joint powers organization staffed by the SRDC that was formed to address issues surrounding the development of wind and other renewable energy development in Rural Minnesota.

Southwest CERT serves these counties:

- Brown
- Cottonwood
- Jackson
- Lincoln
- Lyon
- Martin
- Murray
- Nobles
- Pipestone
- Redwood
- Rock
- Watonwan

The Southwest Region's overall goal is to export more renewable energy than energy it imports and consumes—this includes conservation measures to reduce consumption as well as use of renewable energy generated and used locally. The result will be less dependence on foreign sources of energy, a potential for adding value to base resources available in the SW CERT region, and implementing more environmentally friendly energy technologies. This will be accomplished through focus on three objectives:

- Encouraging energy conservation measures, beginning with energy audits.
- Increasing use of biofuels.
- Encouraging the development of renewable energy projects.

Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging, Inc. (MNRAAA)

The SRDC provides aging services under contract to the Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging, Inc. MNRAAA is an outgrowth of the decision by the Minnesota Board on Aging to consolidate regional Area Agencies on Aging. The SRDC provides call center services throughout the 27 county southwest planning and service area through the Senior Linkage Line® an 800 number designed to provide information and referral to seniors in Minnesota. In the past five years, the SRDC call center has provided assistance to 54,416 unduplicated persons.

The SRDC's Aging programs have expanded in the last five years to include administration of some statewide programs as well as providing services to the residents of the 27 county MNRAAA service area. This includes the SRDC joining RSVP of Southwest Minnesota and providing leadership, finance and support services to the organization. At the time of the writing of the last assessment five years ago, the Client Service Center or CSC had just begun. The CSC provides resolution statewide on complicated Medicare Part D issues that are beyond the scope of the assistance available from the Senior Linkage Line®. Beginning in 2010, SRDC aging staff also began providing Return to Community Programming.

Return to Community is an initiative, passed in 2009 by the MN Legislature, that supports efforts to maintain the independence of older adults. The service began April 1, 2010. Return to Community focuses on the nursing home resident and their family by beginning discharge planning at nursing home admission, equipping residents with self-care skills, supporting family caregivers, lining up community resources and providing follow-up after nursing home discharge. Return to Community is targeted to nursing home residents who are early in their nursing home stay (90 days after admission), have the desire and resources to return to the community and/or supports to assist with the transition, are private pay and would otherwise become long stay residents. Return to Community is a partnership between public agencies, nursing facilities, hospitals and other health care providers. The Return to Community service is provided by Community Living Specialists, who will assist residents in person with the transition from the nursing facility to the community. Follow up assessments will be completed for a number of years with the individuals who are transitioned from the nursing home. The MNRAAA- Slayton office is handling follow-up assessments. As of June 30, 2011, the Return to Community initiative has assisted 182 people back into the community. Currently, MNRAAA- Slayton Office- staff are providing regular follow-up calls to 79 people.

Also in 2010, SRDC and MNRAAA began working on a pilot project with the Sioux Falls Veteran's Administration offices to fill in some of the gaps in services to aging veterans. There is a significant population of Vietnam era veterans that as they age will require more services. This pilot program is intended to do a better job of coordinating care for veterans between all the different service agencies with the ultimate goal of keeping them in their homes.

New in 2011, the Minnesota Legislature mandated Long Term Care Consultations for all individuals transitioning to assisted living facilities. SRDC aging staff have begun providing this service through the call center for the residents of the 27 county MNRAAA service area. Providing aging services has continued and will continue to be one of the core areas of expertise that the SRDC excels in and is the largest of the SRDC's program areas.

SRDC RETURN ON INVESTMENT

During the last five years the SRDC has brought in approximately \$7.00 for every \$1.00 of local tax money assessed. This ratio includes the General Purpose Tax as well as the Debt Service Tax related to the former Prairie Expo project. The Debt Service Tax will no longer be assessed as the final bond payment is set for February of 2012. Included in the money leveraged is that attributable to the SRDC's Revolving Loan Fund and those dollars brought in for the Unity House and the Worthington Biotechnology Advancement projects and the Ralco project in Marshall. Undoubtedly there are many other monetary benefits brought to the region by the SRDC, but we only included those local revenues that could be specifically monetized either through a funded grant or backed up by the SRDC's audited financial statements.

Not included in the financial benefit to the region are the pass through grant dollars for Aging Services such as Senior Nutrition and Legal Services which are now administered on a 27 county basis by MNRAAA but which bring much benefit to the region. Also not included is the impact of the SRDC on the creation of other entities in the region that bring in funds, such as Prairieland Economic Development Corporation which was founded by the SRDC and the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership of which the SRDC is one of the original investors and partners. The impact of these organizations on the region would greatly increase the value brought to the region by the SRDC.

CONCLUSION

As can be clearly seen, it is our belief that the performance of the Southwest Regional Development Commission during the last five years has more than fulfilled the purposes of the Regional Development Act and that "the existence of the commission is in the public welfare and interest." In a time when government resources are scarce and getting scarcer, the SRDC provides an invaluable service to the region while bringing in other public investment as well as spurring private investment within the region. The structure of the Commission makes it different from most other governmental entities in that the base funding of local taxes amounts to roughly 20% of the operating budget of the agency with the remaining 80% being funds that are earned through services provided. This makes the SRDC unique in the public sector in that it is entrepreneurial in nature, yet still provides services based on sound public policy established by local elected officials. This meeting of professional services and public policy is the true strength of the Southwest Regional Development Commission and will continue to be into the future.