

# **The Impact of West Virginia ARC Local Development Districts**

**(with emphasis on Distressed/At-Risk counties)**

## **FY06 Flex-E-Grant Final Reports**



**Region VII Planning & Development Council  
One Edmiston Way, Suite 225  
Buckhannon, WV 26201**

**FINAL PROJECT REPORT NARRATIVE**

Name of Project:	<u>The Impact of West Virginia Local Development Districts</u>	Project Number:	<u>07ARCP0374Z</u>
Grantee Name:	<u>Region VII PDC</u>	Grant Period:	<u>10/ 01/06 – 9/ 30/07</u>
Project Director:	<u>Rosemary Wagner</u>	Flex-E-Grant Amount:	<u>\$10,000</u>

**Activities:** The original project proposed an evening/next day meeting to highlight “best practices” in community and economic development practiced by Regional Planning & Development Councils (RPDCs). An opportunity emerged that allowed the West Virginia Association of Regional Planning & Development Councils Annual meeting to be held on consecutive days with the Flex-E-Grant Meeting. Combining the meetings allowed for greater participation and had the added benefit of increased networking between distressed and non-distressed counties. This Flex-E-Grant benefited only people from distressed counties or professional community and economic development professionals who serve distressed counties. Sponsorships and fees covered costs for those not eligible for Flex-E-Grant support.

The joint Flex-E-Grant / West Virginia Regional Planning & Development Councils Annual meeting was held in the Railyard development area in Elkins West Virginia. This venue is a showcase for asset/tourism development in Region VII and the State. Elkins restored its historic Train Depot and scenic train excursions now originate from the site. A Historic Hotel is being restored; however, a new Holiday Inn Express has located in the complex as well as a new (July 07) equivalent “Branson Missouri” style entertainment theater with full time professional entertainment.



Participants in the meeting enjoyed a train ride/dinner and an interactive card game on the return trip. This activity, created by Grace Harris, Region VII PDC Planning Coordinator, was designed around community and economic development problem solving, especially in distressed counties. Rules and table notes are attached. Day one included presentations from experts in the community and economic development field, as well as a greeting from the new State Director of USDA. In the evening the entire group was treated to the Heckel Family variety show at the American Mountain Theater followed by a dessert buffet hosted and sponsored by Region VII Planning & Development Council. A local baker and candy maker prepared this buffet. Day two featured best practices presentations. The meeting agenda for all days is attached along with PowerPoint’s of those presenters who used that technology.



Meaningful networking occurred at meals, on the train, at breaks, at the desert buffet, at the hotel check in and check out. Most of the participants stayed at the Holiday Inn; however, some overflow was accommodated at the Graceland Inn on the Davis & Elkins College Campus. Others were in commuting distance or made other arrangements. Not all people eligible for distressed county lodging stipends used them.

**Project Inputs:** One community and economic development meeting on the state level that combined the Annual State Association of Regional Planning and Development Councils Meeting with a Flex-E-Grant Best Practices Institute. National leaders in community and economic development attended this meeting. Rosemary Wagner, Region VII Planning & Development Council Executive Director expended approximately 120 hours on organizing and facilitating the joint meeting. Region VII Planning Coordinator, Grace Harris also expended a like number of hours of ancillary coordination with presenters, hotel, food and representatives of other activities. Shane Whitehair, Regional Development Director, and Bob Jacobus, Community Development Specialist, contributed time as needed.

Each RPDC that had distressed counties were asked to award up to 4 scholarships (or more if available) to eligible parties in their Region for a total of 28 registration/lodging stipends. Additional inputs attributable to the Flex-E-Grant were rent for the American Mountain Theatre for 1 day, table and chair rental for 1 day and underwriting miscellaneous needs as listed on the detailed budget and supported by receipts and invoices.

**Project Outcomes:** This project provided support for people living in or serving distressed West Virginia Counties. 28 scholarships were utilized and an additional 21 RPDC Directors and staff that serve distressed counties attended. It was agreed that RPDC personnel would not be eligible for Scholarships since this was a joint Flex-E-Grant/ RDPC Annual meeting. 88 people registered and attended the event including 16 presenters.

**“What a success! The annual meeting was the best ever. I was impressed with the presenters and the Flex-E-Grant portion has already produced useful exchanges.”**

**Michelle Craig, Executive Director,  
Region II Planning & Development Council**

The prescribed evaluation tool was used. Some pre-post generalizations can be made from the evaluation instrument; 1) Participants were better aware of the needs in their communities, 2) there was a greater awareness that there are more volunteers in communities 3) an appreciation that organizations regularly review for program gaps and make necessary

adjustments, 4) programs align with organization's mission and goals, 5) that organizations are more diverse and 6) community capacity is greater than expected. 100% of the respondents voted in the last election. The mean average age was 49 (n=19) and years living in their community were 30 (n=18).

**"This was not only the best Annual Meeting I ever attended, but it is the best conference."**

Norm Kirkham, former RPCD Executive Director and now with  
The Connected Technologies Corridor

Problems to solve: The project was designed to bring people from distressed counties together to share experiences that would be mutually beneficial. It also was designed to interface people from distressed and non-distressed counties so that they might form some Cinery from new relationships, new ideas and proven practices. The project accomplished its design goal.

**"I want you to know that was one of the most informative and useful conferences I have ever been to. The entertainment was splendid. I thank your organization for this most appreciated opportunity. We are a poor county and so not spend money on luxuries such as conferences and travel. The opportunity for networking with so many professionals from different area of interest was invaluable and again I thank you."**

Fran D. King, Clay County Commissioner

Unexpected Benefits: The event got very good press. Two local TV stations covered the event and a very good feature (attached) in a Regional Paper are just two examples. An interesting sidebar, the staff of the train and of the American Mountain Theatre were engaged and networking with the meeting participants as if they were attending the meeting.

**"I came away with so much valuable information. At many conferences you feel like it is a duty to be there, this one was packed full of good information...for both the private and the public sectors. I did not feel any burden of forced attendance."**

Evelyn Post, Burnsville Utility Board, Central Aging  
Services Director and former County Commissioner of a distressed county

**Problems Encountered:** This is a busy, busy world that we live in. Setting an event date was the greatest challenge. Conflicts with other important meetings were a major issue. In this "age of the meetings" will continue to cause organizers to scramble for participants.

**Program Sustainability:** This was a stand-alone project; however, there are spin-off opportunities that will be pursued by the different participants that were able to



connect with State, National and other local leaders. The project has concluded; however, it gave birth to self-sustaining relationships and new knowledge for some participants that will have a long-term life.

**Recommendations:** The best advice to others wanting to replicate this or a like event is to just jump in and do it. Not everyone you want to serve is going to be able to participate; however, everyone who does will receive personal & social benefits that last a lifetime. The new skills and outlooks that people gain may well benefit their home communities for future decades. This project was definitely worth the effort.

**Conclusions:** By combining two events this project brought together a broad spectrum of community & economic development leaders and professionals. The cross section of sectors included RPDC's, LDAs, Regional EDA's, State and Regional Initiatives Managers, Workforce Development, Federal & State Funding Agency Managers, Federal And State Legislative Managers, Industry Leaders, Chamber of Commerce Directors, Aging Services, Seniors, Utility Managers, National Development Organizations, Post Secondary Education Institutions, Faith-Based Organizations and a Community Development Corporation. This project's success is based on the fact that people from distressed counties had an unprecedented opportunity to draw information and expertise from such a wide range of resources. They were also able to see, touch, smell and taste the success of local community and economic development at the Elkin's Railyard.

