

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

MONIQUE BOULET

The Acadiana Regional Development District (ARDD) lost its Economic Development District (EDD) status in 2013, after misappropriation of funding. With oversight of the US EDA Austin Regional Office, ARDD went bankrupt to resolve the challenges caused by the previous Executive Director's misuse of funds and the EDA planning funds were given to the South Central Planning & Development Commission EDD, headed by Kevin Belanger, to help get the District reestablished. Monique Boulet was brought on to work with Kevin, and her salary was paid with EDA Planning grant funds to reestablish the District, which is now known as the Acadiana Planning Commission (APC).

When reestablishing the district, there were a lot of critical discussions and meetings held to build connections with communities, and to determine what regionalism in the APC would and could look like. A needs assessment was conducted with support from the Delta Regional Authority. Parishes (the equivalent of county governments in Louisiana) worked with Monique and Kevin and together built a Board from 2014-2015. Minimal dues had been negotiated, amounting to 15 cents per capita, and in 2015, local councils passed a joint resolution to join APC. Monique expressed that "there were challenges creating the partnership and connections, and ensuring that rural areas had a voice, which was crucial for the success of the District."

Many meetings were held, hosted in space provided by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and trust was built over time with local stakeholders and councils. The local Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) became part of APC in 2015, which allowed for more collaboration and great integration of their work with the Commission. Monique spoke of the challenges of integrating staff from another organization and the need to value their experiences, while also encouraging growth and development. For example, Monique worked with the MPO staff planners to broaden their scope of work to include rural areas of the region.

Monique spoke highly of the EDA Austin region and staff, who assisted her by asking questions like "how can we help staff you; how can we help develop you out," and emphasized how



Acadiana Planning Commission

*Chief Executive Officer, 2016 -
present
Acadiana Regional Administrator,
SCPDC, 2014-2016*

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Focus on deliverables and community impact to stay relevant
- Take the time to build connections and visit member communities
- Don't 'meet to meet' - ensure meetings provide value
- A District can prepare and facilitate meetings but shouldn't make decisions before everyone comes to the table
- Use your local university as a partner and asset
- Understand your District's accounting and HR systems

crucial relationships with Director Jorge Ayala and Economic Development Representative (EDR) Vicki Hendersot were. Monique also participated in the EDA Southwest Region Training Program for Emerging Leaders (TPEL) in 2015, which “was a huge help, and allowed me to have conversations with others in the same shoes.” APC took three years to ‘get back on solid ground’ and required a tremendous amount of work and dedication. “I don’t know how much I worked... a lot! During the week running things and on the weekend putting the admin piece in place.” Kevin served as interim CEO for six months, and Monique was made CEO of APC in January 2016.

The District was redesignated as an Economic Development District in 2017, and the occasion was marked by a large celebration. Today APC does a huge variety of work in the region and continues to grow. APC has a staff of 18 and is doing economic development work that the organization wasn’t before, which “has been transformational for some of our communities.” Monique knows that APC has to work to become and stay relevant. “We have to be relevant; we have to be in the space working and active for people to engage with us the way we want them to engage with us.”

Monique was asked to share advice or lessons learned from her experience rebuilding the APC. She stated the importance of APC “always being the safe space. We are where everyone can come together and trust that they will be included in decision making. APC is prepared and facilitates but doesn’t make decisions before everyone comes to the table.” She stressed the importance of not “meeting to meet” but rather allowing meetings to help inform decisions and outcomes. “When you have meetings and you have problems getting quorum, its because you aren’t bringing value to their daily work. People have a lot to do... they need to learn something of value to bring back to what they do.” Noting the benefits of their affiliation with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, she recommended that if you have a university, “make them a partner, an asset.”

Monique and APC are continuing to work to bring resources to their region, including a recently obtaining a 30-million-dollar grant for broadband infrastructure from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration and managing Region 5 of the Louisiana Regional Watershed Initiative.



Re-established in 2017

Serves the Parishes of Acadia, Evangeline, Iberia, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, and Vermilion

10 member board of directors; represent local governments, chamber of commerce, the university and the 2 community colleges in the region

Lafayette, LA

KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Watershed planning
- Broadband
- Transportation
- Brownfield Redevelopment
- Opportunity Zones
- CEDS

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MARK FARLEY

When Mark Farley joined the Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD) in 2012, the District was undergoing a federal investigation which had sent his predecessor to prison. Mark noted that “his predecessor had done some good work, but had lost sight of the mission of the organization.” \$1.5 million dollars had been misused, but Mark was quick to note, “there were still \$2 million in reserves so the organization was fiscally still very strong.” Mark was working at a neighboring county before becoming Executive Director and had spent time reviewing the organization’s finances before joining. He was grateful that during the investigation of the organization “no rock was left unturned” and thus he was provided all the necessary documentation to fully understand the situation.

When Mark joined UCDD, staff were fractured, and some still supported the previous director. Mark had to “take the time to form my own opinions and not believe ‘either side’”. It took time for him to address the internal culture at the organization and build a team with the staff who remained after the leadership transition. Once Mark had the right “people in place, they set the tone” at the District and Mark was able to bring on additional qualified staff to further the capabilities of the District. Despite the challenges he faced at the beginning, Mark found that “others generally want you to succeed and will help you get the organization back on track”. Two other Executive Directors in Tennessee were Mark’s “guardian angels” and really helped him succeed in the role from day one. He now plays this role today, when helping Executive Directors in nearby Districts.

It took about three years to move from fixing problems to building the strength of the organization. One critical effort was to build back the District’s reputation. Employees were embarrassed to be in vehicles with UCDD identification and Mark knew that addressing the District’s reputation was critical. Mark made the decision to partner UCDD with the respected local university, Tennessee Tech, and helped the university become an EDA University Center. Although some employees are still worried about the reputation of the organization, Mark is confident that they are “doing good work and getting the [District’s] name out in a positive way”.



***Upper Cumberland
Development District***

Executive Director, 2012- present

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Take the time to fully understand your District’s finances
- Most people want you to succeed and will help you
- It takes time to rebuild an organization
- Seek out partnerships with other local organizations, including universities
- Understand your organization’s mission and how projects and programs align with it
- Open communication with your Board is key
- All new Executive Directors have to chart their own path; they are not the previous Director, for better or worse

When Mark joined UCDD, a state legislator formed a committee to review the District's bylaws, charter and legislation with Mark and the District's Board. This effort "helped me to see why we were created, and also allowed the Board to see what we could possibly be. Mayors on the Board were given the opportunity to identify areas that they really wanted us to work in," and it was easy to identify projects that aligned with District's mission. Mark found that "your bosses will tell you what they want you to do, you just have to listen." He loves the flexibility of EDDs, and their ability to adapt to new issues- what they are working on now may be different from just a few years from now!

Mark noted that "we're not the only organization in town, and when the Board will bring up things that really need to be done... there have been times when I've said 'well you've already got an organization over here and that's their job and their role'. From time to time we have to say no to things." Transparent communication with the Board, and alignment with the District's mission are essential to its success. "All new Executive Directors have to chart their own path; they are not the previous Director, for better or worse. You get a longer honeymoon period when you inherit a mess" but will still be expected to get up to speed quickly and get the organization back on track. Mark advised that "if the Board picks you, take it and run with it." Be confident in their decision!



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KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Area Agency on Aging
- Housing
- Economic Development
- Small Business Development Center

Founded in 1969
31 member board of directors

Cookeville, TN

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PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

CHRIS RIETOW

Chris joined the Apalachee Regional Planning Council (ARPC) as an intern in 1999, while enrolled in a master's program for Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University. After graduating he joined the organization as a full-time planner and worked his way up through the organization. The previous executive director (ED) led the ARPC for 30 years and retired in 2013 during a tumultuous time for the Council. Chris was serving as Senior Planner when he stepped into the ED role. He knew things "weren't great" at ARPC, especially fiscally. For example, Florida's governor was annually vetoing the historical legislative appropriation to Regional Planning Councils (RPCs) in 2010, which had accounted for one-third of the organization's budget. While other RPCs began adjusting and looking for new funding, ARPC wasn't able to adapt and had to reduce staff hours. Chris had two months of overlap with the outgoing ED, but no meetings or trainings were held. However, Chris was cautiously optimistic during the transition, considering "that the budget showed plenty in reserves and everything looked fine."

On his first day, upon receiving the organization's finances, he discovered only \$805.50 in the operating account, \$40,000 in past due bills, and a budget deficit of \$60k. Chris called an emergency Executive Committee meeting and shared with officers of the Board the dire financial situation. He "reminded the Board of their fiduciary responsibility" and showed them how the adopted budget was actually "smoke and mirrors". Chris was forced to immediately make some difficult decisions to determine how ARPC would be able to continue to pay its employees.

Chris began by proposing to keep his previous position (while absorbing the responsibilities of ED), maintaining reduced employee hours, and reassigning staff, terminating the finance officer. "At the first staff meeting, I laid it all out. We can't continue to work in silos, we need to build relationships with our member local governments, and we need to bring in funding to pay for programming." He continued to make "every cost cutting decision possible", including keeping his previous role and salary for three years. While working to turn the organization around, Chris knew that "counties didn't know who [we] are and ARPC needed to show a willingness to truly help local governments." Internally, the "crisis brought the board together"



Apalachee Regional Planning Commission

Executive Director- 2013-Present
Senior Planner/Emergency Planner-2002-2016
Economic Development Planner-2001-2002
Regional Planner-2000-2001
Associate Planner-2000
Intern- 1999

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Show a willingness to help local governments
- The duty of the board is to ask hard questions, and not blindly trust the Executive Director and other staff
- Relationships with your local governments, peer network, and staff are key to your organization's success
- Once you demonstrate that you can do a great job, member local governments and partners start recommending you and the work you can do

and Chris leaned on other RPC directors in Florida for support. He subsequently visited all local county commission meetings, “on an ‘apology tour’, to explain who we are, and what we will become.” He also lobbied for a dues increase, which hadn’t happened since 1977, using a per capita formula. Just as ARPC was beginning to lay out annual goals and document significant progress, they faced another major hurdle.

In October 2014 staff were back to full-time hours and Chris requested a ‘real audit’ for ARPC. It revealed that funds from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) had been misused or misappropriated. \$334,000 was missing and ARPC was given three years to repay EDA. The EDA planning grant and RLF fund were immediately suspended until the funds were paid back. The ARPC is now in good standing, but Chris noted that it took “three years to get the ship turned round.”

The organization has grown from a staff of five in 2016 to 19 in 2022, and importantly, a reserve of \$300k has been established. Not surprisingly, Chris has a lot of advice and thoughts about what went wrong. “The duty of the board is to ask hard questions and not blindly trust” the executive director and other staff. “The [previous] board wasn’t willing to stick its neck out and didn’t want the spotlight on them.” The organization had also used the same auditor for many years and had a finance officer that hadn’t been properly trained.

Chris spoke highly of ARPC’s staff, contributing much of the organization’s success to them. “Relationships with your local governments, peer network, and staff are key to your organization’s success. Those relationships take time, but once you demonstrate that you can do a great job, member local governments and partners start recommending you and the work you can do.”

Looking back now, had he known the challenges that awaited him, he “probably would have turned [the job] down. Now he has shared his story with many others, including at executive director training events, and doesn’t mind when others comment that ‘he had it worse than me’. Due to the success of ARPC, Chris is “being pulled in every direction” including partnering with the private sector. Years of hard work have paid off and ARPC is now building on a “great relationship with EDA” and as a strong member of the state association. The organization continues to grow and build partnerships with local stakeholders. Chris is “now excited and getting a second wind” and looks forward to continuing the great work they are doing in the Apalachee Region of Florida.



Founded in 1977

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31 member board of directors

Tallahassee, FL

KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Economic Development
- Emergency Planning
- Housing
- Transportation
- Environmental Planning
- Transportation

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