

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*

*Serves the counties of Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Jackson, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, Wakulla and their municipalities.*

*31 member board of directors*

*Tallahassee, FL*

## **KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:**

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

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