

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

TOM KENNEDY

Tom Kennedy's passion for community development has been a guiding force through his entire career. After college, he served in the Peace Corps in southern Africa and continued working internationally as a contractor with USAID. Upon returning to the United States, he completed a master's in international agriculture before moving to Connecticut to work at a regional planning commission as a Transportation Planner. He left Connecticut in 1989 to become a planner at Mount Ascutney Regional Commission (MARC). A short 17 months later he was named acting director and was hired on full time after 1.5 years.

During a recent breakfast conversation with Tom, he shared a bit about his 33 years with MARC and how his transition from Executive Director to Director of Community Development evolved.

When he joined MARC, the organization had a staff of three and a budget of \$74,000. "My work was guided by the questions 'what do the communities we serve need' and 'what does the organization need to succeed'", reflected Tom during a recent conversation.

Tom aggressively pursued grant funding based on the region's needs. The organization became particularly skilled at brownfields development and soon had the largest program in Vermont. MARC maintains a Brownfields Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) and also contracts with local towns to assist with their CDBG grants, including writing the grants for free, and managing grants for a small fee if they are successful. Tom fondly shared that the first grant he wrote for a local parent child workshop paid him with four boxes of Girl Scout cookies.

MARC continued to grow and have an impact on the communities it serves under Tom's leadership, evolving from an organization largely concentrated on traditional planning, to responding to Hurricane Irene, developing a strategic plan, and eight years ago, beginning working with local solid waste districts.

As Tom began thinking about retirement, he realized that while he was ready to scale back on the responsibilities of an executive director, he was not ready to leave the work he began



Mount Ascutney Regional Commission

Director of Community Development, 2022 - present
Executive Director, 1990 - 2022
Planner, 1989 - 1990

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Guide your work with 'what do the communities we serve need' and 'what does the organization need to succeed'
- Experienced executive directors should reach out and offer advice to their newer counterparts in their state and region
- Network with your peers, including on the subject of retirement and succession planning; the transition process and retirement are different for everyone- find what works for you

at MARC. With full support of the board, he stepped down from the Executive Director position and became the Director of Community Development beginning in January 2022. In his new role he is working specifically on Build Back Better, ARPA funds, government affairs, solid waste, and brownfields.

“My contract is for three years, and if I decide to continue working once its complete, I hope to reduce my time in the office to 20 hours a week and focus exclusively on MARC’s solid waste program”, said Tom. His successor was an internal applicant, so the organization arranged both individuals to overlap as executive director for three months assuring continuity in programs and a smooth transition.

When speaking about his last few years as MARC’s executive director, Tom would have benefited from the opportunity to attend in person events that were cancelled due to COVID-19 to hear from his peers in person about strategies for the transition/retirement process. “It would have been beneficial to share ideas, suggestions, tips for succession when working with both in house and external candidates,” he said. He also encouraged experienced executive directors to reach out and offer advice to new counterparts in their state and region. Tom feels that the transition process and retirement is different for everyone, saying “it may be difficult to know when the time is right to retire and to have an answer to ‘and then what?’”.

Tom’s decision allows him to move out of the executive director role and continue doing meaningful work at MARC, while helping the organization make the leadership transition with experienced staff.



Founded in late 1960s

Serves a region containing 10 municipalities in southeastern Vermont.

26 member board of commissioners

Ascutney, VT

KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Brownfields assessments and clean up
- Community development including the CEDS process
- Emergency management: preparedness planning, securing funding for towns to respond to emergencies, and helping towns meet state goals for resiliency
- Energy planning assistance to towns
- GIS mapping and land use planning
- Transportation planning

802.674.9201
tkennedy@marcvt.org



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