

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

GERI GAMBER

Geri Gamber was working for the State of Utah in the Department of Workforce Services when she left to join the Southeastern Utah Association of Local Governments (SEUALG)/Southeastern Utah Economic Development District (SEUEDD) in 2014 as Community Services Manager. Geri joined an organization that “was siloed and facing internal division”. Geri believed the organization was both averse to diversifying and confronting many challenges.

During her first two years with SEUALG/SEUEDD Geri finished her MBA and became the Executive Director. At that point, she “had to convince counties to remain” members of the organization and was actively engaged in rebuilding community trust. Geri knew that she “had to understand the purpose of the EDD” if she was going to be able to convince others of its role and importance.

It ultimately took about two years to rebuild the organization, getting it to a place where it could continue to grow. Geri was purposeful in her tactics and spent significant time building relationships with key stakeholders, such as elected officials, community partners and state and federal partners. She focused on two critical areas: internal restructuring and outreach. Internally, the organization was suffering from the lack of a team environment and Geri worked to “both foster trust with colleagues and empower them”. Finding talent was difficult, but became easier as the organization grew and became known throughout the community.

Geri and her team now sit on a number of boards, locally and at the state level. The community now sees the work that SEUALG/SEUEDD does to convene other across the region, which results in relationships expanding or building naturally. As the organization and its influence grew, elected officials became interested in SEUEDD. Geri stated that “solutions started to appear” as these partnerships developed and momentum has been building ever since, including a potential relationship with a private foundation to help meet match requirements.

SEUALG doesn't exist in a vacuum and Geri and her staff have cultivated relationships with various state offices and



***Southeastern Utah Association of
Local Governments/Southeastern
Utah Economic Development
District***

*Executive Director, 2016 - present
Community Service Manager, 2014
- 2016*

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Build and foster trust in your region
- “Your community will see you doing the work and bring others to the table”
- Don't be afraid to ask and reach out for help and advice, especially from your peers
- You attract more bees with honey- relationships are key
- Understand why your EDD exists and what is its vision for the community
- Find a peer willing to mentor you

agencies, allowing the organization to respond to broader trends facing the state and region. Utah's Governor Spencer Cox has been initiating dialogue on better ways to engage with Native Americans and other marginalized communities, which Geri says reflects thoughtful discussions she has been having in her region.

SEUALG also partnered with the Utah Office of Energy Development on a Build Back Better Regional Challenge project, which "showed the state how to look at an EDA grant". The project aimed to diversify Utah's rural South, Southeast, East and Central regional economy away from deep dependency on coal mining and coal-powered energy to an interstate regional producer of diverse, reliable, low-carbon power and energy technologies. SEUEDD/SEUALG proposed to lead the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Center, support the needs of displaced workers and diversification of the regional economic base through entrepreneurship and small business development and, together with the lead applicant UAMMI, manage the San Rafael Manufacturing Incubator to commercialize energy-related products and technologies.

Geri started attending NADO events soon after she became Executive Director. She recommends that others "embrace NADO, their Governor's Office and peer network." Fellow NADO member Laura Lewis Marchino, Executive Director of Region 9 EDD in Durango, Colorado, has served as a mentor for Geri over the years. One result of this relationship has taught Geri about the benefits of nurturing relationships between SEUEDD and state agencies.

Challenges continue, of course. Geri's region is "very rural and has a small population", which makes securing matching funds for federal grants, as well as project implementation, difficult. The region has also been historically a major producer of coal and is still working to diversify its economy. However, thanks to Geri's and SEUALG's tireless efforts, there is a newfound momentum. "I no longer have to introduce the organization," she said; its positive reputation now precedes her. The State of Utah has also embarked on a statewide CEDS, which is engaging EDDs throughout the state and providing them additional resources for staffing.

Looking ahead at the 5-year vision for the region and the next CEDS cycle, Geri is excited to engage with the community and is proud that it is "difficult to name who isn't at the table." As we finished our conversation, Geri reflected that others "shouldn't be afraid to ask and reach out" for help from EDDs or others in the region. "Even if you're feeling imposter syndrome, don't believe it! If you truly understand your area and represent it, don't be intimidated". You are the advocate your region needs!



Serves Carbon, Emery, Grand and San Juan Counties.

KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Aging Services
- Revolving Loan Fund (RLF)
- Strategic planning and technical assistance for local communities, including the CEDS
- Serves as Regional Transportation Coordinating Office for Utah Department of Transportation

Founded in 1969

8 member board of directors

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