

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

LYNNE KELLER FORBES

When the Executive Director position became available at the South Eastern Council of Governments (SECOG), Lynne was well-positioned to apply. She had completed law school, had worked with Councils of Government at her previous position with the State of South Dakota, and she was ready for a new challenge. Lynne was hired in 2001 and started learning more about the organization which, at the time, was a “traditional planning district.” At the time SECOG had seven employees, “wasn’t in a great place financially,” and hadn’t raised membership dues for ten years. Lynne spent the first year stabilizing the organization’s finances, updating policy documents, and establishing support to raise member dues. The first several years were also marked by efforts to build back the organization’s reputation, with a strategy that “when you’re a ‘doer’ people come to you” for assistance.

In 2002, after Lynne worked with SECOG’s Board to demonstrate the role the organization could play, the South Eastern Development Foundation was created as a separate 501c3 to manage the Revolving Loan fund (RLF). The RLF started with one million and now totals twenty-four million, which has benefited small businesses in the region. After identifying a need to simplify the lending process for US Small Business Administration (SBA) loans, “SBA opened up the ability for us to apply to become a certified development company. So, we created Dakota Business Finance, with a separate Board of Directors and a professional services agreement with SECOG.” In Federal Fiscal Year 2021, Dakota Business Finance made 95 loans in South Dakota, totaling 65 million, including seven to veteran-owned businesses, sixteen loans to rural businesses and 880 jobs were supported. Finally, in 2013 SECOG was encouraged by a member county, the city of Sioux Falls, and the state to become more involved in housing. They began a partnership with the [Governor’s House Program](#) and the moving/”recycling” and renovation of housing. The organization has since developed and sold almost 90 homes.

These programs, among others that SECOG manages, have built momentum, and allowed the organization to grow



*South Eastern Council of
Governments*

Executive Director, 2001 - present

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Identify voids to fill, and position your organization to fill them
- Know what you can do and do well without overextending
- “You are only as good as your staff makes you look”
- If you build it, you have to be able to maintain it
- Being an Executive Director can be lonely- invest in your peer network
- Always want the best for your employees

significantly. SECOG now has 27 staff members, including a nine-member construction team. Lynne credits her Board with “enabling her to take on more and do more,” and thus expanding the capabilities and programming SECOG provides. Her relationship with her Board has been key to her and SECOG’s success and ability to grow. This is the result of years of ensuring that “everything brought to the Board is well vetted and the numbers run. When I want to do something now, it’s easier because the Board trusts me,” she said.

SECOG has and continues to face many challenges. Like other Regional Development Organizations (RDOs) throughout the country, staffing remains a challenge. Lynne speaks highly of her staff and prides herself on maintaining good relationships with them. She “wants the best for them” and knows that “you are only as good as your staff makes you look.” Workforce challenges existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has only exacerbated the problems. “COVID was good in that financially there were a lot of resources,” but “you have all this money, and you still need someone who can do the work for you.” SECOG worked hard to maintain expectations for staff, but burnout was a real concern. Lynne willingly stepped in to assist her staff on a variety of issues and takes seriously the impact she can have on them and their futures.

South Dakota does not have a formal state association of RDOs, but Lynne describes the relationship between the six RDOs in South Dakota as collaborative rather than competitive. These relationships have helped to “identify voids [SECOG] can fill” and not spend resources “doing something others are [already] doing.” SECOG was not a member of NADO when Lynne joined the organization. Now, she questions how “we can afford not to be a member. It can be pretty lonely as an Executive Director.” Lynne gave credit to the friendships and peer-to-peer connections she had developed through engagement with this nationwide network.

Lynne is very proud of the work SECOG has accomplished, though she acknowledges SECOG is a “best-kept secret.” As work continues, she and her staff don’t always take the time to reflect on the difference and impact they make, although this is a main motivator behind their work. In the meantime, Lynne is content with the work SECOG is doing and the impact the organization is making.

Lynne plans to retire and leave the organization in a few years, which she has shared with her Board. She hopes that SECOG will find the right future leader and allow them to “make their own mark. There is value in people knowing when enough is enough and letting the next generation take over.” The impacts she and SECOG have made on others’ lives are “the kinds of things I will remember when I walk out the door for the final time.”



Serves Clay, Lincoln, McCook, Minnehaha, Turner, and Union Counties

KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE

- Pre-Disaster Mitigation Planning
- Project Development & Grant Management
- Land Use Planning & Zoning Services for Member Communities
- Revolving Loan Fund (RLF)
- Dakota Business Finance, a SBA Certified Development Company
- Governors Housing Program
- Sioux Falls Metropolitan Planning Organization

Founded in 1972
21 member board of directors

Sioux Falls, SD

605.367.5390
lynne@secog.org



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