

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

RANDY KELLEY

If you know Randy Kelley, you know he is quite a storyteller. At NADO's 2022 Annual Training Conference in Pittsburgh, he was kind enough to share his own story about how he and his team have grown the Three Rivers Planning & Development District (TRPDD) since he joined the organization in 1976.

Randy joined TRPDD as Assistant Director in July 1976 and was on the job one month when the Executive Director was fired. Randy was one of 68 applicants for the position and "felt like that was an omen since #68 was my number in football". Randy's relationship with the TRPDD Board began when he campaigned for the position, and he was appointed Executive Director shortly after. Randy says he "was a little 26-year-old punk" when he got the job, but he certainly has grown with the organization over the almost five decades since he joined TRPDD.

Randy joined an organization with six employees, a budget of \$105,000, and a debt of \$150,000 to the federal government. Today, TRPDD is a private non-profit, has a budget of \$263 million, operates 10 companies, has 96 full-time employees and 70 temp career coaches. Key to this impressive growth was building TRPDD's reputation and stepping in to help the community whenever needed. "Right off regional partners understood that TRPDD was here to help them. That sounds so minor, but you have to turn around the scenario", and that "started by TRPDD showing up". Randy knows that the key to his organization's success is knowing how to get people to come to you. "If local government doesn't have you at the table, you're not relevant," Randy advised. TRPDD sees issues and can step in to solve them, because of the partnerships it has built but above all, because of its reputation for fiscal accountability.

TRPDD manages many significant programs, including solid waste, a loan program, and the largest workforce program in Mississippi. At TRPDD, "each division is like dominos... they are all important." Many stories and current programs speak to Randy's emphasis on partnerships, and innovative thinking.

Randy and his team realized the region was dependent on the furniture industry and recognized a need to diversify the local economy. They initiated conversations with the three counties and a local economic developer to create the Pontotoc, Union,



Three Rivers Planning & Development District

Executive Director, 1976 - present
Assistant Director 1976-1976

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Your organization needs to be relevant and at the table with local governments
- An informed Board is the best asset you can have
- Partnerships, relevancy and fiscal accountability are critical
- "When you stop wanting to make a difference in people lives, it's time to go home"
- "You're not going to learn just sitting in your office"
- Your staff is a team

Lee (PUL) Alliance and to determine the feasibility of recruiting Toyota to the region. Randy reiterated that “partnerships are what makes success,” and many others, including the Governor’s office and others, ended up joining the effort. Today Toyota has 2,000 onsite employees and 1,500 others employed in the region by suppliers associated with the plant. While there are a number of prominent employers in the region, Randy acknowledges that Toyota’s presence “shows the world the power of our labor force.”

Under Randy’s leadership, TRPDD launched a Tuition Assistance Program for counties (and their partners) in the District. The Partnership provides graduating high school seniors with tuition assistance for four regular semesters at a Community College. TRPDD contributed \$2 million and administers the fund at no charge. Each county receives a maximum \$25,000 grant per year and must commit to matching it 4:1. Every high school graduate in the region is guaranteed tuition as long as they maintain good academic standing through this program which started in 2011.

When work was beginning on the Tanglefoot Trail, a 43-mile recreational asset designed as a National Recreation Trail in 2015, TRPDD was approached by an organizer and asked to be the fiscal accountable agent. Although the project may not bring direct financial benefits to TRPDD, Randy believed it was important to support the project which would be a tremendous asset to the region.

Understanding the enormous value that the Toyota plant, Tuition Assistance Program, and Tanglefoot Trail would have on the TRPDD region while not necessarily boosting TRPDD’s bottom line are only a few examples of Randy’s vision to build the region with as much support as the organization can provide. He knows that “if you don’t develop and build your own money, you can’t start these types of programs.” This mindset has driven Randy to attend trainings and conferences and bring valuable new ideas. Since he learned at a conference about tax-free bonds available through nonprofits for public facilities, TRPDD has issued over \$70 million in bonds and administers them for free.

TRPDD is known for the contingent of Board members it brings to NADO events. “The best money you can spend is to pay for your Board to come to a NADO training conference,” which guides Randy’s assertion that “an informed Board is the best asset you can ever have”. Some of the Board members are elected officials, and Randy mentions the importance of “preparing press releases for partners and always giving credit to elected officials for the work they’ve done.” Ultimately “the less credit you try to take, the more you get.” Randy takes tremendous pride in the organization he has built up but is quick to mention that at TRPDD “we don’t have staff, we have team members”. This group knows that it needs to care about the region to do the work, and show up “arm and arm with [partners] to build a relationship.”



Founded in 1971

Serves Calhoun, Chickasaw, Itawamba, Lafayette, Lee, Monroe, Pontotoc, and Union counties

41 member board of directors

Pontotoc, Mississippi

KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Administrative arm of the Three Rivers Solid Waste Management Authority
- Tuition Assistance Program
- Seeking broadband for the region
- Largest Workforce program in Mississippi
- Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) for businesses in the manufacturing, service, and retail sectors
- Strategic planning and technical assistance for local communities, including the CEDS and EPA Brownfields grants
- Aging and Medicare Waiver programs
- Operates three software programs for local governments including feasibility management for counties, Solid Waste billing, deed of trust and property deeds



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Randy recommended that others “start with things you know you can do well,” but added that since you “can’t hit a grand slam every time, you have [continue] to try new things”. The programs and projects TRPDD has developed and learned about from others speak to Randy’s belief that you’re “not going to learn just sitting in your office.”



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