

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

ALENE CARR

Alene joined the Southeastern Illinois Regional Planning & Development Commission (SIRPDC) in 2004 as a Regional Planner. This one-year provisional position, which was tied to grant funding, focused on housing but built on her background in rural transportation. She was promoted to Economic Development Planner in 2007 and became the Executive Director in 2013.

The organization currently has a staff of three, down from five when she joined, in response to changes in funding sources. This includes Alene and two planners. SIRPDC also contracts out for bookkeeping services. Nonetheless, SIRPDC is able to do meaningful work in many areas including public infrastructure and housing and through its Revolving Loan Fund (RLF). Alene shared the story of a successful local restaurant, The Red Onion in Equality, IL, that was a recipient of an RLF loan from SIRPDC. Alene connected the owners who are looking to open a second restaurant in Kentucky to the local Regional Planning Commission in hopes that they can also benefit from similar funding.

Each staff planner has an area they specialize in, notably infrastructure and housing, but “they all chip in to help each other and all know what each other is working on”. Alene “hates saying ‘no’ [her] communities”, but SIRPDC, like all organizations, must prioritize the programs and funding it applies for. This includes taking on ‘fee-for-service’ projects, like a Fire Protection Plan project for the Forest Service and a Community Needs Assessment for a local hospital. SIRPDC is working on many impactful projects in the community and has partnered with many organizations and institutions. For example, a long-standing partnership with a local junior college resulted in funding from the Delta Regional Authority (DRA) for workforce development programs focused on training nurses, truck drivers, and firefighters.

Alene went to a NADO event in Point Clear, Alabama soon after becoming Executive Director, and subsequently additional training for new Directors. She is a “big supporter of NADO”, knowing that they are able to accomplish legislative priorities that smaller districts can on their own. She continues to benefit from training programs and brings back new ideas and gets inspired by work being done by EDDs throughout the U.S. The events confirm to her that “we’re not the only ones out here doing this”. SIRPDC benefits from being a member of the Illinois State



*Southeastern Illinois Regional
Planning & Development
Commission*

*Executive Director, 2013-Present
Economic Development Planner,
2007-2013*

Regional Planner, 2004-2007

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Even when you have a list of things to do, other more pressing issues and community needs will arise
- You’re not the only one out there doing this- connect with other RDOs and Executive Directors!
- It is hard to say ‘no’ to communities but you must prioritize programs and the funding you apply for
- “We are the back office for our communities”
- Make appointments to meet new board members and introduce them to your organization
- You have to roll with the changes- everything changes!

Association of Regional Councils (ILARC), where Alene currently serves as president. ILARC meets quarterly and is joined by state and federal partners, including the Illinois Department of Transportation and the Economic Development Administration.

Alene “knows her district” and “gets caught on the street all the time by community members asking ‘can we get xyz grant?’”. This relationship with her community is incredibly rewarding but also challenging. Given the small size of the organization Alene and her staff “know what each other are doing and what is going on with projects” and their work is less siloed than it might be at a larger organization. However, keeping up with five counties and member municipalities is a constant effort. There is the challenge of finding “good staff who live in the community” and the need to continually educate community and county boards about SIRPDC and the resources they can and cannot provide. Still, Alene is confident that she and SIRPDC can help communities even if she just “knows the person [they] need to contact”.

The relationship with SIRPDC’s Board is key to Alene’s success. When new board members join, Alene makes personal appointments with them to meet to explain SIRPDC’s work. Board meetings are held at a round table to encourage exchanging of ideas and open conversations. SIRPDC’s Board Members can become advocates for the organization and give SIRPDC credibility and legitimacy in local communities. Alene recalled her board president vouching for SIRPDC in a community meeting saying “they are great people, who do good work”, which helped to quickly build trust during a presentation they made to show SIRPDC’s projects and capabilities. SIRPDC’s “younger board members want to see us do more” and Alene’s relationship with them will help guide the direction of the organization.

Alene knows that as an executive director, “you never know what is going to get thrown at you on any given day”. Change is constant and inevitable, locally and at the state level, and you “got to roll with the changes.” She mentioned that she often finds that she “had a list of things I thought I would do today...” but other more pressing issues and community needs arose that needed to be addressed. Alene advised others to “be prepared that everything changes”. And finally, “don’t worry about the small things!”



Serves Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Pope and Saline counties.

KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Strategic planning and technical assistance for local communities, including the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs)
- Comprehensive and Land Use Planning services
- Revolving Loan Fund
- Micro Lending and Business and Community Development fund

Founded in 1969
20 member board of directors

Harrisburg, IL

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