PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

SCOTT WARNER

Scott joined the Mid-Shore Regional Council (MSRC) in 2005 as the Executive Director. This was his first time working with all levels of government, having previously been a business owner. The MSRC was founded in 2001 and was still a relatively new organization. The organization has always had a staff of two, Scott and an Executive Assistant, which is by design. Scott "hasn't wanted to add staff since MSRC doesn't have funding for salaries long term." Thanks to regional partnerships and a focus on collaboration, MSRC's influence, despite its size, is truly remarkable.

Key to the organization's success is maintaining focus on the organization's main priorities. "MSRC's number one priority is to facilitate the development of its CEDS." This process functions like a 'regional forum' and allows all parties to discuss and agree upon regional long-term goals. Although MSRC may facilitate the CEDS process, it is the "work of everyone."

Scott also noted the importance of working with the Economic Development Administration (EDA) Economic Development Representative (EDR) assigned to work with EDA stakeholders in Maryland is key and the need to "get them to visit your region." When Scott's EDR visits, he shows her around the region and arranges meetings with MSRC Board members. Scott uses MSRC's resources to staff up partner organizations, and finds that "having a small staff gives us flexibility." MSRC is well integrated with and in direct communication with member counties and Scott is "in constant contact with local Economic Development Directors." MSRC stays at the "5,000-mile mark to monitor and is prepared to jump in when it's time to act."

MSRC has played a key role in many transformative initiatives both within the region and across the state of Maryland. The Maryland Broadband Cooperative (MdBC) was formed in 2006, and spearheaded by all five of Maryland's regional councils, including MSRC. The Cooperative's goal is to bring internet services to the most rural and underserved places in Maryland. Through state and federal funding, MdBC has been able to build a middle-mile fiber network in the state which serves as a national model. MSRC is a member of the Rural Maryland Council, which brings together representatives from across the state to administer grants, monitor legislation, and identify

Mid-Shore Regional Council

Executive Director, 2005 - present

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Show how projects and CEDS provide a regional benefit even when projects may be located in only one part of your region

- MSRC's number one priority is to facilitate the development of its CEDS

- Use funding to staff up your partners, not your District

- Engage with your EDR and get them to visit your region

- Understand who you work with versus who you work for

- Be prepared to give credit to others and know that although the credit may come back eventually, it will be for the EDD and not for you

projects and priorities for rural Maryland.

The Eastern Shore Regional GIS Cooperative (ESRGC) is a 19-year partnership between Mid-Shore Regional Council, the Tri-County Council of the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland (TCCLES), the Upper Shore Regional Council and Salisbury University. Providing GIS support for counties was a goal of MSRC's and the Cooperative now has a staff of 11 dedicated to the region. The Eastern Shore Entrepreneurship Center was created by the MSRC in 2004 to help advance an entrepreneurship ecosystem on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The project was started with state and EDA seed funds and includes a Revolving Loan Fund, tech accelerator, and agriculture innovation center. Finally, the Eastern Shore Resiliency Toolkit is a two-year project launched in July 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver a suite of tools to assist decision-makers in their recovery efforts. The project was funded thanks to EDA grants to the MSRC ($400K) and TCCLES ($107K) and is another partnership between the MSRC, TCCLES, and ESRGC. Thanks to the project, MSRC and TCCLES have made substantial progress towards addressing many resiliency goals in their respective CEDS.

MSRC established the Shore Gourmet non-profit, whose mission is to promote and sustain value-added agricultural businesses on Maryland's Eastern Shore, utilizing initial grants from USDA Rural Development. Since 2016 the MSRC has provided guidance and funding to support the partnership between Shore Gourmet and the Chesapeake Culinary Center to provide assistance to start, grow, and diversify regional value-added products and brands as well as educational and training opportunities for students and adults interested in resource-based businesses. These projects are just a few examples of how MSRC has leveraged partnerships, and its relationship with federal agencies to meet the needs of its community and make progress toward meeting CEDS goals.

MSRC's involvement with the Rural Maryland Council, SERDI, and NADO has been key to its engagement at the state, regional and national levels. MSRC joined NADO six years ago and Scott has benefited from "open communication" with staff and other members. The Rural Maryland Council, which includes the five Maryland Regional Councils representing 18 rural counties, meets monthly and Scott has developed close relationships with his fellow Executive Directors. Scott also benefits from SERDI's engaged network.

Challenges abound, especially during the covid pandemic when the "stress was overwhelming". Scott knows his role takes "a lot of commitment" and he "takes his responsibility seriously". To do his job well, he feels like he "has to be everywhere, all the time" and it is "hard to take time off." Despite all this, Scott feels that it is "exciting to be involved in many things" and make a difference in his community.

Scott had advice for regional organizations, particularly

Serves Caroline, Dorchester, and Talbot counties

KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Broadband Infrastructure
- Strategic planning and technical assistance for local communities, including the CEDS
- Small Business Development
- GIS support to local governments
- Transportation Planning

Founded in 2001
41 member board of directors
      16 non-voting members

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STRONGER DISTRICTS STRONGER REGIONS
A Professional Development Program for EDD Staff

ONADO
Research Foundation

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managing relationships with regional partners. Regional organizations shouldn't "get out in front of their member governments, but instead, teach them what you do" as an organization. You "have to show projects and CEDS provide regional benefit" even when projects may be located in only one part of your region.

Key to effective Board Relations is "educating them about the role of Mid-Shore." Scott does an orientation for new board members, who then have "one less thing to worry about because they know that there is a 'plan'." An Executive Director should "understand the motivations of your Board and partners" and have a clear understanding of "whom you work with versus whom you work for." Scott recommends that Directors be prepared to "give credit to others" and know that although "the credit may come back eventually, it will be for the EDD and not for you."

Grant applications and management are a key part of MSRC's work, like many regional organizations. Scott knows that it is key for MSRC to do the work upfront on grants, including due diligence on the projects and procedures. MSRC currently has a $10M grant provided by the State of Maryland and allowed its member governments to decide which projects to fund, while MSRC's role is to facilitate and manage grant compliance.

Scott wants Mid-Shore to ultimately help others do their jobs and serve their constituents. MSRC created a brochure for both the State Legislature and counties to explain what the organization does and to further emphasize the regional benefit of its work. At the same time, he wants MSRC's projects and work to speak for themselves and doesn't want publicity to emphasize MSRC but rather the project partners and the communities that benefit. MSRC and Scott's leadership is a clear example of a small but mighty organization whose presence can be felt throughout the region and whose creative work has been critical to providing unique resources for its member communities.