



CASE STUDY:

## EDD-TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT FOR REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN WISCONSIN

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## Overview

Economic Development Districts (EDDs) play a vital role in fostering regional economic growth, often working across multiple jurisdictions to support diverse communities. Building strong and lasting partnerships with Tribal Nations is a key opportunity for enhancing regional resilience and prosperity. However, many EDDs face challenges in effectively engaging with Tribal Governments, including uncertainties about shared economic interests, limited capacity for relationship management, and the need for culturally respectful collaboration.

**The Economic Development District Community of Practice Tribal Engagement microsite features more resources for EDDs working with Tribal Nations, including an engagement guide and a map of EDD-Tribal land overlaps.**

This brief series explores the approaches taken by three Wisconsin EDDs to develop meaningful partnerships with Tribal Nations within the state. By examining strategies that have strengthened these relationships, it highlights best practices, lessons learned, and economic development outcomes that have benefited both EDDs and Tribal communities. Through knowledge-sharing initiatives like the Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP), EDDs across the country can gain valuable insights into fostering stronger, more collaborative relationships with Tribal Nations, ultimately advancing inclusive regional development.

## Background

The nation's 400+ designated EDDs each serve unique regions with distinct populations, landscapes, economies, and lifestyles. These EDDs are charged with formulating economic development strategies (including maintaining the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, or CEDS) for their respective service areas, whether rural and isolated communities or in large metropolitan regions. Successful strategies integrate the interests of all regional stakeholders, including Native American Nations that are present in their respective service areas.

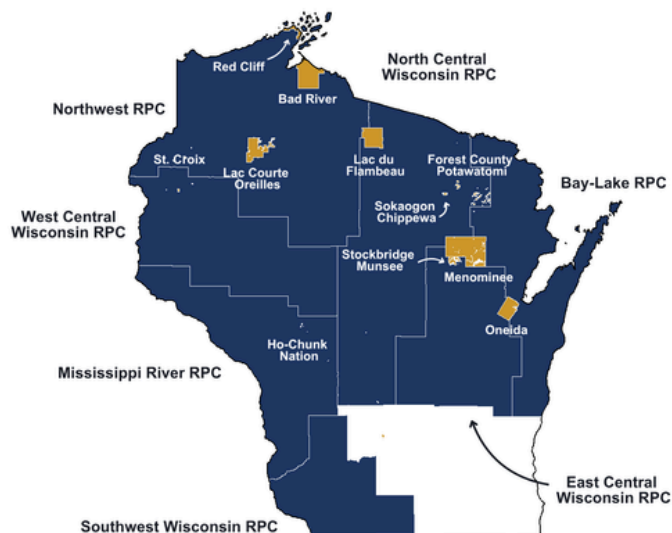
There are currently 574 federally recognized Native American tribes and Alaska Native entities in the United States. Of these, 228 tribes are in Alaska and the balance are in the contiguous United States. An interactive map displaying the intersections between sovereign Tribal land and EDD service areas is [available online here](#).

The federal government has a government-to-government relationship with these tribes, meaning they are sovereign domestic entities with their own governments, operating within the framework of federal law and oversight. As sovereign domestic nations, they have their own governing structure, with self-determination and the right to self-govern on their lands. These ‘federally recognized domestic nations’ are referenced as tribes, nations, bands, pueblos, communities, and native villages, depending on their history, locales, and government formalization. The NADO RF brief [Tribal Engagement for Economic Development Districts](#) explores this unique status and the implications that it brings for EDD-Tribal relationships.

The Northern Great Lakes region can serve as a regional macro view of Tribal lands - Minnesota is the home of 11 tribes; Wisconsin anchors 11 tribes; and Michigan with 12 federally recognized tribes residing in that state. (Wisconsin has a 12th tribe, Brothertown Indians, which is in the process of seeking federal recognition).

### Mapping the Landscape

The following map displays the overlaps between Tribal lands and EDD service areas in Wisconsin.



### Wisconsin Statewide Perspective

Wisconsin's diverse economic, social, and Tribal landscape has fostered a range of EDD-Tribal economic development planning initiatives. Much of the state is rural, with large areas of forests and farming. The three largest cities are Milwaukee (population 561,385), Madison (280,305 population) and Green Bay (105,744 population). The main economic drivers for Wisconsin are agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism. In addition to the general categories of economic drivers, there are eight Fortune 500 and twenty Fortune 1000 companies headquartered in the state.

Wisconsin economic development efforts are led by the Wisconsin State Administration, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the eight regional Economic Development Districts, the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council (GLITC), and other county and city economic development agencies, as well as established businesses, universities, and the Tribes themselves.

## Tribes in Wisconsin

There are 11 federally recognized Native American tribes in Wisconsin. Each one is a sovereign domestic nation, governed by its respective constitution and Tribal laws, and holding a Tribal government to federal government relationship on their lands. With the State of Wisconsin, the Tribes have a State to Tribal Sovereignty relationship. Wisconsin Native American Tribes focus on the wellbeing of their nations and invest their resources to provide for their nation. For the community, their economic development focuses on various needs such as health care, education, job creation, and caring for the environment to leave a better place for future generations.

In addition, various Wisconsin Tribes have enterprises to strengthen the economy. One example is Menominee Nation, whose forest-keeping approach to harvesting lumber is recognized worldwide as a premier example of forest management. There are many others. Oneida Nation operates a \$100 million asset bank, Green Bay Bank, which has provided bridge financial services on the Menominee reservation. Ho-Chunk Nation's All Native Group (ANG) provides federal contracting in information technology, and the Forest County Potawatomi Tribe's Potawatomi Ventures helps to diversify the Tribal economy and reinvest to generate long-term, sustainable growth.

## EDDs in Wisconsin

The case studies below share insights into three EDDs' engagement and inclusion with the respective tribes in their regions. Some EDDs may have limited engagement or relationships that have not yet been fully developed, while others have found mechanisms for full and respectful engagement and collaboration.

### Case 1: North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission

The North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (NCWRPC) serves a 10-county region with 450,000 residents in north central Wisconsin. The region is predominantly rural and is geographically diverse, with lakes and forests in the north giving way to flat, agriculturally rich plains in the south. It is home to 267 local units of government, including four Tribal nations: the Sokaogon Chippewa Community, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, the Forest County Potawatomi Community, and Ho-Chunk Nation.

North Central Wisconsin's population is growing slowly and aging rapidly: it added just 4% to its total population from 2010-2020, and its share of residents who are 65+ is projected to

rise from 20% to 30% by 2035. Much of its population is seasonal; the EDD estimates that as many as half of homes are only occupied part-time in some areas. Educational attainment and incomes are slightly below state and national averages; again, this is offset by an affordable cost of living.

The region's economy is driven by manufacturing, healthcare, and government. Agriculture remains vital, producing goods like dairy, cranberries, ginseng, and timber. Population aging, declining labor force participation, and decline in some key sectors are major challenges, but the economy is buoyed by its diversity and growth in sectors like recreation and tourism. Key goals of the EDD include addressing workforce skills gaps, supporting entrepreneurship and small business development, and investing in renewable energy, broadband, and resilience work.

### ***Tribal Engagement***

While the North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission works with four Tribal nations across its ten-county region, two major economic development projects showcase how patient relationship-building can pay off for regional development. These projects—the renovation of a key manufacturing facility for a Tribal Enterprise and the construction of a multipurpose incubator and educational facility—grew out of a long process of building trust and sharing expertise for a variety of regional economic development initiatives.

NCWRPC was a key partner to the Lac De Flambeau Business Development Corporation's workforce training and business development center project, which opened in 2022. The EDD completed a 2017 feasibility study and provided grant assistance and ongoing technical support throughout the project, which was the recipient of a \$3 million EDA grant in 2018. The facility has a variety of classroom and meeting spaces that are home to trades training programs, financial services assistance for small businesses, and youth entrepreneurship programs. At its opening, it was projected to create 40 jobs, retain 30 jobs, and spur \$6 million in private investment.

Another key collaboration between NCWRPC and the Lac De Flambeau Tribe was the 2022 construction of a new building for a longtime Tribal enterprise, Simpson Electric. Simpson Electric had been building Digital Panel Meters, Analog Panel Meters, and Test Instruments since 1936, but its long-term manufacturing facility was approaching the end of its useful life and was too expensive for the enterprise to replace. Its closure would have cost 15-20 jobs. The Tribe approached NCWRPC for support writing a \$2.6 million EDA grant that supported the construction of a new plant across the street from the business incubator. The new building is anticipated to create as many as 72 new jobs.

The groundwork for those signature projects was built by years of engagement with all the region's tribes. NCWRPC has less extensive relationships with the Potawatomi and Mole Lake Tribes but recently completed a trail network planning project for the former and a comprehensive plan for the latter. Over the years, it has engaged tribes on all kinds of regional planning work, including hazard mitigation, transportation, and economic development plans, growing relationships through consistent engagement, reliability, and careful work. Respect for Tribal culture and governance, notes NCWRPC Executive Director Dennis Lawrence, has been a key piece: "They do things differently, and you have to adapt to that...for example, sometimes they can't share all their plans or data, and we pledge to keep sensitive information confidential."

Going forward, Lawrence hopes that the work NCWRPC has done with Tribes has laid the foundation for future collaborations. He is particularly interested in working with the region's Tribes on tourism initiatives considering their importance to the region's culture and history. The recently completed Mole Lake Tribe plan has contributed to momentum for a new museum to showcase and preserve its traditions.

Looking ahead, Lawrence sees opportunities to build on its project successes. The Lac du Flambeau incubator's evolution into youth entrepreneurship and advanced manufacturing programs offers a model for future workforce development. Meanwhile, initiatives like Potawatomi's trail network and a proposed Mole Lake cultural museum could be key pieces of an enlarged regional tourism sector, a significant goal for the RPC.

## **Case 2: Bay-Lake Regional Planning Commission**

The Bay-Lake Regional Planning Commission (Bay-Lake RPC) serves an eight-county region of northeast Wisconsin centered on Green Bay. Northeast Wisconsin is rich in natural beauty and has extensive and diverse natural resources that create recreation opportunities, drive tourism, and benefit the regional and local economies. The northern part of the region is known for its extensive forests, wetlands, rivers, and lakes while the central and southern area consists of agriculture, forests, wetlands, and the Green Bay and Lake Michigan coastlines. The Wisconsin Oneida Nation reservation covers much of the southern area of the region.

Its 604,000 residents are unevenly distributed, with four counties containing 85% of the region's population. The region has a slightly lower educational attainment rate than the state overall and is growing slightly slower as well. It anticipates adding 8% more people by 2040.



The region's economy is diverse: manufacturing, healthcare, and retail are key sectors. Tourism, driven by outdoor recreation and cultural heritage, contributes significantly. Wages are slightly lower than state and national averages, but the region benefits from a relatively low cost of living, which helps offset income disparities. Despite its strengths, challenges persist, including pockets of poverty, limited broadband access in rural areas, and a need for workforce development to meet the demands of a changing economy. Investment priorities for Bay-Lake include infrastructure resilience, renewable energy, and education.

### ***Tribal Engagement***

The Bay-Lake region includes only one Tribe, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. Bay-Lake has longstanding relationships with the Tribe through both engagement on its economic planning work and technical assistance projects. In the past few years, there has been increasing interest in collaborating on brownfields and transportation projects.

Bay-Lake's relationship with the Oneida Nation primarily operates through staff-level connections, particularly through the CEDS process. It has reserved a seat on the Bay Lake CEDS committee for Oneida's Community Development Director, ensuring that the Tribe's voice features prominently in its planning work. On the technical assistance side, the RPC completed a Tribal Comprehensive Plan in the early 2010s and a Hazard Mitigation plan in 2019. It has also assisted the engineering department with budget and coordination challenges and has discussed updating the comprehensive plan in 2025.

The RPC aims to be a cost-effective partner, often able to support projects through its EDA Partnership Planning grant. Sidney Swan, Assistant Director of RPC, offered some insight into the partnership projects, noting "We want to be able to help them as much as possible, and we're going to be a lot cheaper than outside contractors; however, building broader relationships remains a challenge." While the RPC participates in regional Tribal tours and outreach events, these haven't yet led to deeper engagement. "We'd love to be able to present to the council," says Swan, "but we need to build those relationships carefully and through the right channels." Recent successes with brownfields, including winning an EPA grant to conduct regional brownfield assessments in all eight counties and the Oneida Nation, suggest this patient approach is beginning to yield results.

Indeed, Bay-Lake hopes to continue to expand on its successes. Swan is interested in making Oneida's cultural and community goals a more prominent part of the region's objectives, including in the CEDS. Bay-Lake RPC aims to continue to grow the circle of partnerships in the region and to eventually reach beyond the planning staff level, potentially by presenting before the Oneida Council. Meanwhile, delivering collaborative projects will continue to be a key objective for the RPC.

### Case 3: East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission

The East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (ECWRPC) serves a ten-county region situated in east-central Wisconsin anchored by the Fox Cities, Oshkosh, and Fond du Lac metropolitan areas. The region features a mix of urban areas, agricultural communities, and natural landscapes, including an extensive network of rivers and lakes. The Menominee Indian Tribe in its north is a major contributor to cultural and economic life in the region, as are the Oneida Tribe and the Stockbridge Munsee, two smaller communities.

East Central Wisconsin's population of 675,000 residents is growing slowly, mirroring state trends. Incomes and educational attainment are lower than state averages, and the region's median age is strongly bimodal: Menominee County's median age is only 31, but Marquette and Waushara average 50. Like in the regions served by Bay-Lake and North Central Wisconsin, a low cost of living and rich cultural and natural amenities somewhat counterbalance the lower-than-average wages.

The region's economy is dominated by manufacturing, agriculture, and healthcare. The construction and professional services sectors are growing substantially, and specialization in paper, machinery, and food manufacturing help the region contribute significantly to the state's GDP. Key economic challenges include an aging population, workforce challenges, and the need to expand broadband to rural areas. The EDD prioritizes investments in infrastructure, education, and economic diversification to strengthen the economy and ensure long-run resilience.

#### ***Tribal Collaboration***

East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission's engagement with three Tribal nations exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges of EDD-Tribal collaboration. While it maintains strong project-based partnerships with the Menominee Tribe, ECWRPC has more limited relationships with the Stockbridge-Munsee Community and Oneida Nation. Unlike some EDDs, East Central does not have formal Tribal representation on its board. Instead, ECWRPC continues building relationships through specific initiatives and personal connections. Transportation planning is a key originator and ongoing source of contact between the EDD and the three Tribes. The CARES Act was a significant catalyst for collaboration. Tribes, particularly the Menominee, applied for funding that hadn't been previously available, ECWRPC was able to use its institutional knowledge to assist them with grant applications and compliance. More recently, EDD staff joined a USDA tour of Menominee Tribal Enterprises as part of the Rural Partners Network.



Interpersonal relationship building has been a key part of ECWRPC's work with the Menominee Tribe. "Listening is a big part—we've been able to build trust," says Executive Director Melissa Kraemer Badtke. ECWRPC staff have met regularly with the Menominee Economic Development Representative, including for informal discussions. This has helped them understand the Tribe's priorities, and how they fit into the region's broader economic development landscape. Understanding Tribal priorities, particularly for community support and environmental stewardship, helps the EDD align its programs and CEDS strategies.



Looking ahead, ECWRPC aims to deepen its Tribal relationships through sustained engagement. While informal connections have proven effective, staff see opportunities to formalize these partnerships, potentially through structured collaborative initiatives. "You need to attend relevant meetings and listen to stakeholders, and really hear their stories," notes Kraemer Badtke, emphasizing how trust enables more substantive collaboration. ECWRPC's experience shows that patient relationship-building can lay groundwork for future economic development opportunities that benefit both Tribal and non-Tribal communities.

## Conclusion

The experiences of Wisconsin's Economic Development Districts highlight the importance of trust, patience, and adaptability in building meaningful partnerships with Tribal Nations. While each EDD has taken a distinct approach, common themes emerge—consistent engagement, respect for Tribal governance, and a focus on shared economic priorities. Building structures for engagement, including offering seats on the CEDS or other committees, can be particularly impactful. Whether through transportation planning, business development support, or cultural tourism initiatives, these collaborations illustrate the potential for mutually beneficial regional development.

As these relationships continue to evolve, the lessons learned can serve as a model for other EDDs looking to strengthen their engagement with Tribal communities. Moving forward, sustained dialogue and deeper integration of Tribal perspectives into regional planning will be key to fostering long-term economic resilience across Wisconsin.

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