



## **Wisdom from the Field: 10 Practical Tips for EDD Staff to Improve Projects and Programs**

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No one ever said doing regional economic development was easy. Whether navigating complex partnerships, aligning diverse community needs, or securing the right resources, EDD staff routinely face a wide range of challenges in their efforts to drive meaningful change. While there's no single roadmap for success, one of the best ways to chart a path forward is by learning from peers who've tackled similar hurdles.

This resource shares ten pieces of advice from Economic Development District staff whose 2025 NADO Impact Award-winning projects show how vision, planning, and collaboration can lead to meaningful results. These insights offer practical guidance for moving initiatives from concept to completion, reflecting the creativity, determination, and problem-solving needed to advance economic and community development. Whether you're starting a new effort or working to complete an existing one, these lessons provide real-world encouragement from those who've successfully navigated the path.

## Tip #1

### ACT EARLY TO IDENTIFY THE MOST URGENT NEEDS AND CONVENE KEY PARTNERS

#### Example: Local Administrative Advisor Program

*The Local Administrative Advisor Program, piloted by R6 Regional Council, provides hands-on planning and administrative support to small and rural communities lacking local capacity. With statewide expansion backed by Utah's legislature and all seven AOGs, the program has improved operations, compliance, and planning while helping communities access funding and plan for sustainable growth.*

"Start now! The challenges small communities face in managing essential municipal functions won't solve themselves, and waiting only makes the problems harder to fix. Begin by identifying the most pressing administrative gaps in your region and build partnerships with key stakeholders—regional planners, city administrators, and state agencies—who can help support the effort.

Seek funding opportunities early, whether through grants, state programs, or regional collaborations, and focus on demonstrating the long-term value of professional administrative support. Most importantly, tailor the program to meet the unique needs of each community, ensuring flexibility and sustainability. The sooner you start, the sooner you can make a real impact in strengthening small towns and positioning them for future growth."

**Travis Kyhl**, *Executive Director*  
R6 Regional Council (UT)

## Tip #2

### CO-CREATE A SHARED VISION WITH STAKEHOLDERS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PROCESS

#### Example: Southwest Colorado's Opioid Settlement Collaboration

*The SouthWEST Opioid Response District (SWORD) was established to guide equitable use of opioid settlement funds across five rural Colorado counties, with a focus on harm reduction, treatment, and recovery support. Region 9 EDD leads the initiative—unique among Economic Development Districts in the state—by coordinating stakeholders and managing the program to ensure strategic, community-informed investments.*

"It is important to begin by creating a shared vision of success with all key stakeholders—including individuals with lived experience—to collaboratively define clear goals and desired outcomes. This inclusive process not only fosters early buy-in and a sense of ownership, but also ensures that a diversity of perspectives shapes the foundation of the initiative, setting the stage for long-term impact and sustainability."

**Laura Lewis Marchino**, *Executive Director*  
Region 9 Economic Development District  
of Southwest Colorado

### Tip #3

## FORM STRONG PARTNERSHIPS THAT BRING TOGETHER A WIDE RANGE OF INSTITUTIONS AND STAKEHOLDERS

### Example: Building Veteran-Friendly Communities in East Texas

*The East Texas Council of Governments' (ETCOG) Veteran-Friendly Community Designation Program provides a framework for recognizing communities that actively support veterans across key areas like housing, employment, and healthcare. ETCOG led the program's development and implementation, with two pilot communities earning the designation in its first year and setting a standard for regional veteran inclusion and planning.*

*"Collaborating with educational institutions, healthcare providers, faith-based organizations, transportation providers, other regional councils, and community stakeholders can help create a framework that is both inclusive and scalable. Build in flexibility to accommodate both urban and rural community strengths and challenges, and empower communities through self-assessment tools that encourage continuous improvement."*

**Lindsay Vanderbilt,**  
*Director of Communications*  
East Texas Council of Governments

### Tip #4

## LET DATA GUIDE THE PROCESS AND BROADEN YOUR COALITION

### Example: Home for All: Northern Kentucky Housing Strategies Report

*The Northern Kentucky Area Development District (NKADD) led a regional housing initiative across eight counties that produced 50 actionable strategies to address affordability, accessibility, and income alignment. Through data analysis, community planning, and coalition-building, NKADD created a practical framework released in 2025 to help local governments and partners close housing gaps and support regional economic growth.*

*"This project was successful because we took our time and followed the data. The data helped unite all key stakeholders to participate on the different committees and facilitated the committees' discussions. NKADD staff went beyond our usual elected officials and community partners to invite private, public, and nonprofit organizations to participate. We focused not only on partners who would naturally support the work, but also made sure to include partners who might be opposed to new housing policy to provide balanced and realistic expectations."*

**Tara Johnson-Noem,** *Executive Director*  
Northern Kentucky Area Development District

## Tip #5

### EMPOWER COMMUNITIES THROUGH LOCALLY DRIVEN PLANNING

"Locally driven planning processes work! While many of our plans may be formal documents with top-down requirements, there is a beauty to working with a community that wants to develop its own plan for the future. By taking ownership of the process, the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood told the larger community what they wanted and needed and gave themselves agency, when, for too many years, the neighborhood's wishes had been overlooked."

**Greg Boike**, *Director of Planning and Public Administration*  
Middle Georgia Regional Commission

#### **Example: Pleasant Hill Neighborhood Strategic Plan**

*The Middle Georgia Regional Commission (MGRC) supported the creation of the Pleasant Hill Strategic Plan, the first fully community-led planning effort for Macon's historically significant Pleasant Hill Neighborhood. MGRC facilitated public engagement, coordinated with local officials, and drafted the final plan, which now serves as a community-owned roadmap for revitalization.*

## Tip #6

### SHOW THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF NONTRADITIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE TO SECURE BUY-IN

#### **Example: Flowery Branch Bay Park Trail**

*The Georgia Mountains Regional Commission (GMRC) assisted the City of Flowery Branch in planning a 1.75-mile trail to connect Flowery Branch Bay Park with the downtown district, aiming to improve walkability and access to local amenities. GMRC supported the city's successful grant application and the project is expected to boost local business, tourism, and community health through increased foot traffic and recreational use.*

"With rising construction costs, it can be very difficult for communities to afford infrastructure projects, especially those that may be viewed as "unessential." For others pursuing similar projects, explaining the significant positive economic impacts of trails can show local leaders and funders that trails are essential to the health of local economies.

Highlighting the revenue trails can generate from tourism and increased patronage of local businesses better demonstrates monetary return on investment, making it clear that trail projects can significantly benefit local economies. The economic impact of trails can convince local leaders and funders that, although non-traditional, trail projects are worthwhile investments in economic development."

**Maggie Smith**, *Project Manager*  
Georgia Mountains Regional Commission



## Tip #7

### DELIVER QUICK, TANGIBLE WINS TO MAINTAIN MOMENTUM

#### **Example: Strategic Planning and Action for Revitalizing Communities (SPARC)**

*The East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (ECWRPC) launched the SPARC program to deliver one-day workshops that help small communities create tailored revitalization strategies in areas like downtown development, housing, and grant planning. Funded by EDA, the program served 16 communities from 2021–2023, with ECWRPC providing planning expertise, coordination, and grant support to ensure alignment with regional goals and actionable outcomes.*

“Start small, stay flexible, and focus on community empowerment over prescriptive planning. Structure your program to deliver quick wins—like renderings or site layouts—that communities can share, adapt, and build on. A one-day format creates momentum without overwhelming local stakeholders, and keeping the application simple encourages participation from resource-constrained towns.”

#### **Joe Stephenson,**

*Principal Planner – Economic Development  
East Central Wisconsin Regional  
Planning Commission*

## Tip #8

### RELY ON EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONALS, TAKE YOUR TIME, AND REMAIN PATIENT AND ADAPTABLE

“Build your team with experienced professionals who bring expertise in strategy, legal frameworks, and implementation—but don’t rush the process. Lasting outcomes emerge through consensus, not control, while flexibility and patience are just as essential to long-term progress.”

**Sarah Stoeber,** *Executive Director  
San Luis Valley Development  
Resources Group & Council of  
Governments (CO)*

#### **Example: San Luis Valley 1041 & IGA Project**

*The San Luis Valley Council of Governments (SLVCOG) led a groundbreaking regional effort to protect local water resources from export by establishing a Joint Planning Board and uniform regulations through an Intergovernmental Agreement. As the first initiative of its kind in Colorado, SLVCOG coordinated outreach, legal support, and stakeholder participation to create a shared framework for evaluating water export proposals and safeguarding the region’s future.*

## Tip #9

### FRAME PROJECTS AS CATALYSTS FOR BROADER IMPACT

#### **Example: Barkley Regional Airport Sewer Extension Project**

*The Purchase Area Development District (PADD) supported a major infrastructure project extending sewer service to Barkley Regional Airport in Paducah, KY, including 7,000 feet of new lines and a pump station. PADD managed the grant process, coordinated with federal partners, and oversaw the project's administration, helping replace an outdated system and improve service for residents and a new \$43 million terminal.*

"Ensure the project strategically leverages local match to strengthen the case for federal investment. Be creative in engaging a broad range of stakeholders and use clear, data-driven evidence to demonstrate regional impact. While the primary goal of our project was to support the new airport terminal, we were intentional about highlighting how the sewer extension also benefited nearby households and laid the groundwork for future initiatives. Framing the project as a catalyst for not only infrastructure development, but also economic growth and workforce advancement, helped showcase its broader significance and long-term value to the region."

**Mattea Mitchell**, *Community and Economic Development Director*  
Purchase Area Development District (KY)

## Tip #10

### RELY ON TRUSTED, ON-THE-GROUND PARTNERS TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION, ESPECIALLY FOR PROJECTS COVERING LARGE GEOGRAPHIES

#### **Example: Expanding the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Aroostook & Washington Counties**

*The Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC) played a central role in expanding entrepreneurial development through its Center for Business Growth by securing funding, coordinating partners, and delivering targeted technical assistance. This shift enabled NMDC's Business Advising program to provide specialized support to over 24 scaling businesses, boosting capacity, efficiency, and long-term sustainability.*

"Don't try to go it alone with large geographic projects! This project's boundary was two counties, including the largest county east of the Mississippi river, representing over 9,000 square miles of territory that had to be covered. With projects this large, there is a critical need for robust & engaged community champions to ensure the success of programs. The success we saw in reaching businesses across two vast counties was directly attributable to the commitment and local knowledge of our community partnerships with the Southern Aroostook Development Corporation and Sunrise County Economic Council."

**Jon Gulliver**, *Director of Economic & Community Development*  
Northern Maine Development Commission

Compiled by **Brett Schwartz**, Associate Director, NADO Research Foundation.

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