



NADO FORWARD:  
A Vision for 2030

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*This report presents a strategic plan designed to guide the future organizational development of the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO). The NADO 2025-2030 Strategic Plan articulates an ambitious path forward that is designed to reinforce NADO's role as one of the leading national associations representing the interests of regional community and economic development practitioners in the United States. This strategic plan is the culmination of a comprehensive and inclusive process that blended data analysis with extensive stakeholder engagement.*

The creation of this strategic plan began with a series of engagements during which NADO member organizations, NADO board members, and NADO leadership were asked to provide input.

### Timeline for the Development of the Strategic Plan

-  **June 2023:** The process of soliciting input into this strategic plan began at the 2023 NADO Summer Board Meeting in Park City, Utah.
-  **November 2023:** Input into this strategic plan was also solicited from the NADO membership during the 2023 Annual Training Conference held in Cleveland, Ohio.
-  **April-May 2024:** Member surveys were conducted and focus groups were held to gather comprehensive input, ensuring that the voices of NADO's stakeholders directly shape the plan's priorities and actions.
-  **June 5-6, 2024:** NADO's 2024 Board Meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico was utilized to discuss preliminary findings and define the next steps, aligning strategic objectives with the needs and expectations of NADO members.
-  **July-September 2024:** The first draft of the strategic plan was developed and reviewed, integrating feedback to refine strategies and objectives.
-  **October 21-24, 2024:** The final framework for the strategic plan was presented at the 2024 Annual Training Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.
-  **December 2024:** The final 2025-2030 NADO Strategic Plan is adopted by NADO's leadership.

## NADO 2025-2030: Strategic Planning Process

The following describes key elements of the strategic planning process through which input and data was compiled to develop NADO's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan.

### **Organizational Assessment:**

- Comprehensive review of NADO's current operations, challenges, and alignment with nonprofit best practices.
- Analysis of operational and funding structures to identify key issues and priorities, particularly in fund development.

### **Assemble the Facts:**

- Collaboration with NADO leadership to confirm project scope, responsibilities, and timeline.
- Thorough assessment of mission, vision, values, and services based on comparative research with similar organizations.
- Documentation and presentation of data and findings to stakeholders.

### **Convene Voices:**

- Engagement with stakeholders through interviews and surveys to gather diverse perspectives.
- Exploration of NADO's historical context, reputation, partnerships, and revenue strategies.

### **Strategic Planning:**

- Evaluation of strategic options based on assessment findings.
- Discussion and refinement of strategic objectives at key NADO events.

### **Plan Development:**

- Collaborative creation of the strategic plan with NADO leadership.
- Integration of research, analysis, and stakeholder voices.
- Finalization of the strategic plan as a consensus-driven roadmap for future action.

## Summary of the Previous Plan

NADO's previous 2020-2025 strategic plan centered around six key strategic pillars:

1. **Build Institutional Innovation**
2. **Create New Partnerships**
3. **Promote Organizational and Staff Capacity**
4. **Broaden Advocacy and Networking**
5. **Expand Organizational Resources**
6. **Strengthen Membership Base**

Within the span of those five years, NADO successfully achieved progress within all six of the plan's pillars and demonstrated success in implementing the previous plan's "roadmap" which detailed specific action items for NADO to undertake. Among many other accomplishments, some of the key successes from the past five years include the following:

- More than 18 new partnerships resulted in more than 30 new projects and \$12 million in revenue.
- The NADO Research Foundation annual budget grew from \$1 million to \$3 million.
- NADO significantly expanded its team, doubling the size of its staff.
- Approximately 250 new resources were provided focused on emerging trends in the community and economic development field.
- More than 400 participants engaged in peer learning programs.
- More than 40 Excellence in Transportation Awards were awarded.
- More than 500 Aliceann Wohlbruck Impact Awards were awarded.
- More than 100 advocacy meetings were held in Washington DC with NADO leadership and partner organizations, federal officials, and congressional offices.
- NADO successfully advocated for the introduction and passage of key legislation benefitting NADO's membership.
- A new website was developed and launched, along with a NADO brand update and a variety of new online resources.

Given these and many other accomplishments within the past five years, NADO's 2025-2030 strategic plan has been conceptualized as an increasingly ambitious menu of options that is intended to continue pushing NADO's organizational success and level of service to its membership to greater heights. This new strategic plan builds upon many of the core tenants of the previous strategic plan, while also recommending a variety of new pursuits.

### Strategic Plan Philosophy -----

The 2025-2030 strategic plan contains an ambitious agenda that is meant to continue to push NADO forward. Accordingly, the philosophy behind this plan is one of setting ambitious goals. In doing so, some goals may take longer to achieve than the five-year timeline set out within this plan. The philosophy underpinning this plan maintains that it is a worthy pursuit for NADO to set ambitious targets, even if some of those targets may take longer than five years to reach completion.

### 2025-2030 Strategic Focus Areas and Goals -----

In response to evolving needs and feedback from members, the NADO 2025-2030 Strategic Plan is structured around three focus areas that make up the core framework of the new plan. These focus areas represent key themes toward which NADO should

direct its continued progress in order to successfully serve its membership, fulfill its mission, and enhance the overall professionalism and effectiveness of the organization.

In addition to the **focus areas** that make up the core framework of the new plan, within each focus area, underlying **goals** are established to help guide organizational progress.

### **Focus Area 1: Ensure Member Success**

- *Goal 1 - Identify new funding opportunities for members*
- *Goal 2 - Strengthen the talent pipeline of regional leaders*
- *Goal 3 – Improve NADO’s ground game*

### **Focus Area 2: Expand Regional Expertise**

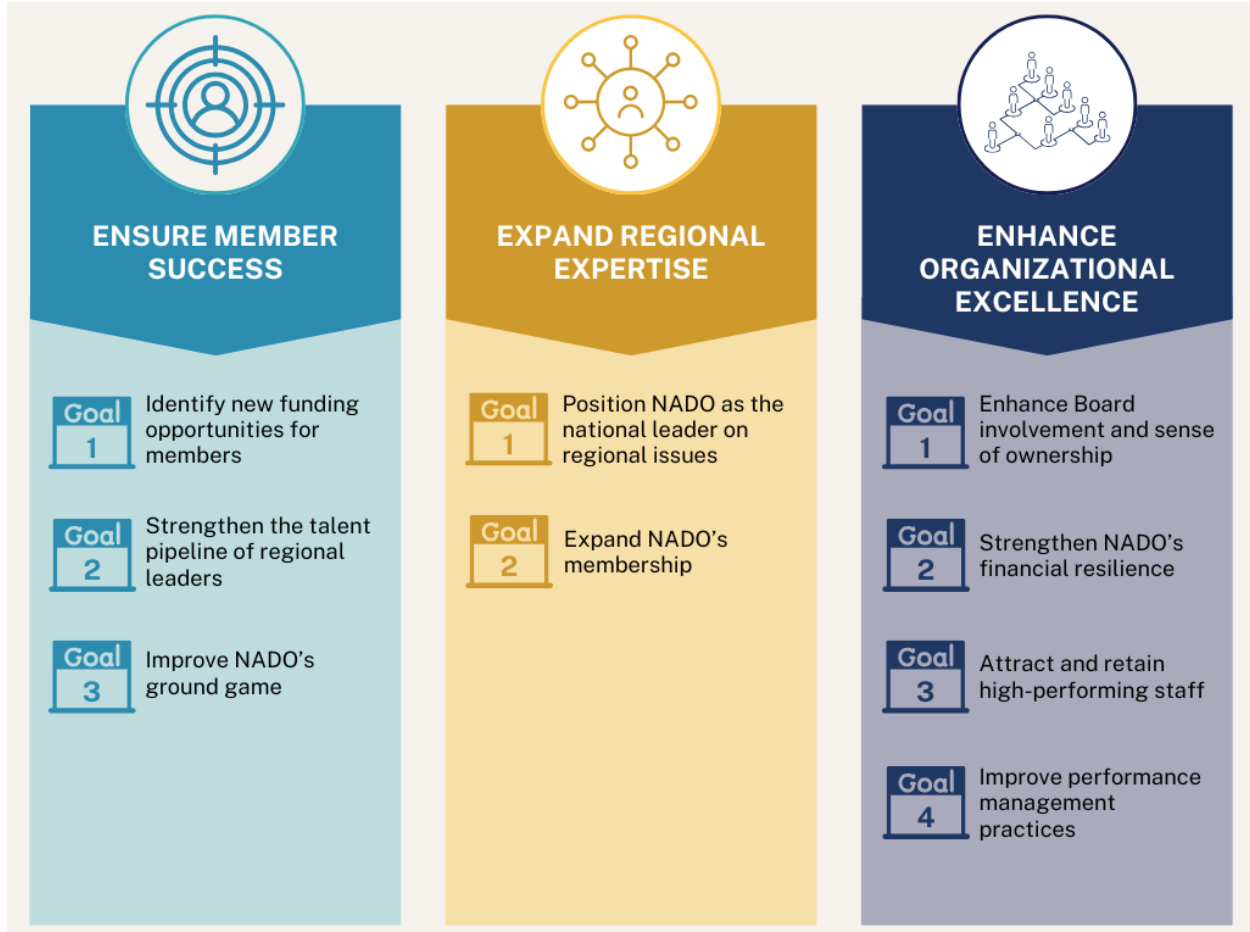
- *Goal 1 - Position NADO as the national leader on regional issues*
- *Goal 2 - Expand NADO’s membership*

### **Focus Area 3: Enhance Organizational Excellence**

- *Goal 1 - Enhance board involvement and sense of ownership*
- *Goal 2 - Strengthen NADO’s financial resilience*
- *Goal 3 - Attract and retain high-quality staff*
- *Goal 4 - Improve performance management practices*

## **Focus Areas and Goals** -----

The following analysis further expands on the intended purpose of each of the focus areas and goals. The three focus areas establish the plan’s direction, while each of the goals address specific challenges and opportunities identified through the comprehensive process of stakeholder engagement that was undertaken during the plan’s development. The goals are intended to be both responsive to stakeholder feedback and proactive in addressing key organizational needs. By focusing on these key areas, NADO aims to empower its membership base of Regional Development Organizations to achieve greater impact and success in their communities, reinforcing NADO’s commitment to supporting and facilitating sustainable economic and community development within communities across the country.



**Focus Area 1: Ensure Member Success**

As an organization, NADO succeeds when its members succeed. A key tenant of NADO's mission is to provide resources, training, advocacy, and support that helps Regional Development Organizations (RDOs) and their communities thrive. To achieve this, NADO will continue to advocate for funding and policies that support RDOs, and to cultivate favorable conditions for the sustainable development of NADO's member organizations and their regions.

Furthermore, recognizing that the long-term success of the regional development industry relies upon strong leadership, NADO is committed to fostering a robust institutional framework to train and foster future leaders. In general, NADO will remain committed to providing the highest level of service to its member organizations in order to support their success.

**Goal 1: Identify New Funding Opportunities for Members**

NADO is committed to creating a favorable funding and regulatory environment for its members. In addition to continuing to work closely with one of NADO's closest federal partners, the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic

Development Administration (EDA), NADO will also strive to develop stronger relationships with other federal agencies, national associations, congressional staff, philanthropic organizations, and other strategic partners. In doing so, NADO will strive to increase the diversity of funding sources that are available to NADO members, in order to help them expand their programmatic offerings and to strengthen their financial security.

### **Goal 2: Strengthen the Talent Pipeline of Regional Leaders**

The future of regional development relies upon the cultivation of strong leaders. NADO will expand its emerging leader and mentorship programs to equip early and mid-career staff with skills training, resources, and connections to one another. NADO will continue to expand its existing emerging leader and mentorship programs toward this end. Additionally, NADO will continue to position its conferences – including the Annual Training Conference and the Washington Policy Conference – as key opportunities for skill development and networking. NADO will maintain and enhance the quality of these events by offering diverse programming and specialized tracks designed to attract a broader range of RDO staff. To improve accessibility, NADO will explore scholarships for first-time attendees and discounts for organizations with limited budgets or those sending multiple staff members.

### **Goal 3: Improve NADO's Ground Game**

One of NADO's key strengths lies with the expertise of its staff, who provide valuable support to NADO members. Moving forward, staff will focus on enhancing communication with member organizations at all levels to deliver consistent, personalized assistance. To further leverage staff expertise, NADO will explore fee-for-service offerings such as regional studies and tailored forums. Future programming will be crafted to meet member needs. Additionally, strengthening connections with state associations will also be a priority. Enhancing collaborative work with state-level networks of RDOs will help align programming and bolster the effectiveness of NADO's understanding of RDO needs as well as NADO's advocacy on behalf of RDOs.

## **Focus Area 2: Expand Regional Expertise**

As a leading national organization for RDOs, NADO is committed to strengthening its position as a thought leader on regional issues impacting community and economic development stakeholders of all kinds. Toward this end, NADO will strive to expand the expertise of both its staff and its membership, ensuring that RDOs and their work remain central to discourse on community and economic development at the national level. NADO will also strive to expand and broaden its membership, thereby extending the reach of RDOs to support more communities and more projects across the country.

### **Goal 1: Position NADO as the National Leader on Regional Issues**

NADO will leverage the expertise of its staff and members to further strengthen its role as a thought leader in the regional development field. To achieve this, NADO will establish working groups focused on key areas like community development, workforce, transportation, housing, and public health. These groups, chaired by board members and staffed with subject matter experts, will identify key issues impacting the NADO membership. In turn, NADO's advocacy team will advocate for related policy priorities that will bolster the success of RDOs and mitigate key challenges they are facing. NADO will also enhance its resources offerings and streamline the organization of its online resource center in order to increase utilization of resources and help RDOs adopt new approaches and best practices.

### **Goal 2: Expand NADO's Membership**

NADO's strength lies in the strength of its members. Expanding membership will expand NADO's reach so that NADO can serve more communities. Boosting membership will also bolster the diversity of ideas and perspectives guiding NADO's work, and will increase revenue which will, in turn, enhance NADO's ability to support its membership. Toward these ends, NADO will launch a Board-led recruitment and retention campaign, leveraging Board members' networks and state association RDO networks to promote the benefits of NADO membership. This campaign will be predicated upon a target market study to identify growth opportunities and ways to re-engage existing members. NADO will also explore the feasibility of financial incentives, such as recruitment credits and loyalty programs, to attract and retain members more effectively.

### **Focus Area 3: Enhance Organizational Excellence**

NADO is dedicated to continuous growth and innovation to better serve its members and maintain financial stability. Over the next five years, NADO will strengthen board involvement to ensure that the viewpoints, skillsets, and talents of its members remain central to NADO's mission and activities. Additionally, to ensure long-term resilience, NADO will bolster its financial security, retain top-tier staff, and attract new talent. Furthermore, NADO will increase transparency through enhanced reporting on operations and the implementation of this strategic plan, further fostering member engagement and trust.

### **Goal 1: Enhance Board Involvement and Sense of Ownership**

NADO's board is vital to organizational excellence and member engagement. To strengthen board effectiveness, NADO will evaluate board structure, roles, and responsibilities, benchmarking against industry best practices. This will ensure that NADO is equipped for success and that its leadership is aligned with member needs. NADO remains committed to fostering a diverse organization and a diverse board that reflects its membership's wide range of perspectives. To

achieve this, NADO will explore strategies to ensure that all states have a representative on the NADO board, thereby promoting inclusivity and a broader range of input.

### **Goal 2: Strengthen NADO's Financial Resilience**

To ensure long-term financial stability, NADO will diversify its revenue streams. NADO will consider various avenues for reducing its dependency on federal grants. NADO will also strengthen its efforts to seek new funding sources, including corporate sponsorships and philanthropic contributions. Additionally, NADO will consider options for modernizing its dues structure in order to reduce its reliance on voluntary upgrades. Having strengthened its financial resilience, NADO will seize opportunities to preserve a robust staff size, continue legacy initiatives, and improve service delivery.

### **Goal 3: Attract and Retain High-Quality Staff**

During the five-year term of the previous strategic plan, NADO was able to more than double its staff size, which in turn allowed NADO to enhance the quantity and quality of the resources and support that it provides. To sustain this growth, NADO will take steps to secure the organization's financial standing while also ensuring that it remains an attractive workplace for employees. NADO will ensure its compensation packages remain competitive and will invest in professional development aligned with key focus areas. By supporting continuous learning and professional expertise, NADO will empower staff to lead new initiatives and elevate the level of service to its members.

### **Goal 4: Improve Performance Management Practices**

NADO will develop a system of regular reporting on the implementation of this strategic plan to ensure transparency and keep NADO leadership apprised of progress and key deliverables. NADO will also devise methods of tracking analytics, key performance indicators, and metrics of success so that NADO's progress can be accurately tracked and measured.

## **2025-2030 Strategic Plan Implementation Strategies** -----

To further direct NADO's forward progress over time, within each of the three core focus areas, potential implementation strategies have been identified beneath each goal. These **strategies** establish specific action steps that NADO leadership, staff, and/or membership could consider undertaking in pursuit of each goal.

It is important to note that this plan is meant to be utilized as a living document. The strategies contained herein should be treated as approaches that may evolve and change throughout the implementation of the plan, depending upon the status of organization's evolving goals and needs.

*The following outline demonstrates how the recommended potential strategies for the implementation of this plan fit within the overarching framework of the strategic plan's focus areas and goals.*

## **Focus Area 1    Ensure Member Success**

### **Goal 1            Identify new funding opportunities for members**

- Strategy 1    Expand and diversify federal advocacy
  - a.    Prioritize new, non-EDA opportunities
  - b.    Provide more opportunities for members to interact with officials from a wider network of federal agencies and national organizations
  - c.    Develop an advocacy training program
  - d.    Incorporate new technology (e.g., action alert functionality on NADO website)
  
- Strategy 2    Provide guidance and resources to help NADO members access funding sources

### **Goal 2            Strengthen the talent pipeline of regional leaders**

- Strategy 1    Expand emerging leader and mentorship programs
  
- Strategy 2    Improve accessibility of conferences and events
  - a.    Explore the feasibility of financial incentives, such as:
    - i.    Scholarships
    - ii.   Multi-attendee discounts
    - iii.   100% state incentives
  - b.    Experiment with policy tracks and other conference programming formats that may attract a wider array of RDO staff members

### **Goal 3            Improve NADO's ground game**

- Strategy 1    Enhance interpersonal communication between NADO staff and member organization staff at all levels
  
- Strategy 2    Explore fee-for-service opportunities that align with NADO's mission and deliver added value to members
  - a.    Region-specific forums on emerging topics, such as:
    - i.    Elected official training
    - ii.   Coal communities

- b. Fee-for-service offerings, such as:
  - i. CEDS
  - ii. GIS
  - iii. Regional studies

Strategy 3 Enhance collaboration with state associations

## Focus Area 2 Expand Regional Expertise

### Goal 1 Position NADO as the national leader on regional issues

Strategy 1 Create working groups chaired by NADO board members and supported by dedicated NADO personnel who serve as subject matter experts. Organize working groups based on focus areas, such as:

- a. Community and Economic Development
- b. Workforce Development
- c. Transportation
- d. Housing
- e. Public Health, Human Services, and Aging

Strategy 2 Expand NADO's center of market intelligence for RDOs

- a. Conduct research projects that raise awareness of the RDO industry and issues impacting RDO performance, such as:
  - i. Salary survey of NADO member organizations
  - ii. Enhanced GIS map of RDOs
- b. Supplement case studies and best practices publications with human-interest stories to reach a broader audience and illustrate the positive contributions of RDOs
- c. Reorganize and streamline content on NADO's website to improve the user experience
  - i. Create website subpages that correspond with working group topics
  - ii. Consolidate digital assets, including CEDSCentral.com and RuralTransportation.org, and house them on the main NADO website

Strategy 3 Enhance NADO's working relationships with other national associations and national leaders in the economic development field

### Goal 2 Expand NADO's membership

- Strategy 1 Launch a Board-led membership recruitment and retention campaign
- a. Complete a target market study to understand where and how NADO could expand its membership or re-engage existing members
  - b. Explore the feasibility of financial incentives, such as:
    - i. Recruitment credits
    - ii. Loyalty program
  - c. Utilize NADO board members and their networks, and Regional Chapters and State Associations, to implement a membership drive

## **Focus Area 3 Enhance Organizational Excellence**

### **Goal 1 Enhance Board involvement and sense of ownership**

- Strategy 1 Evaluate the current board structure, roles, and responsibilities to ensure that NADO's approach reflects association best practices
- Strategy 2 Diversify board representation to ensure that strategic direction is inclusive of the wide variety of perspectives within NADO's membership
- Strategy 3 Explore potential approaches to ensure representation of every state on the Board

### **Goal 2 Strengthen NADO's financial resilience**

- Strategy 1 Develop a sustainability plan that does not rely on federal funding to preserve and continue vital aspects of key programs, such as the EDD Community of Practice
- Strategy 2 Increase the non-federal share of NADO's revenue
- a. Corporate sponsorships
  - b. Philanthropy
- Strategy 3 Modernize NADO's dues structure
- a. Reduce reliance on voluntary dues upgrades; ensure that higher dues levels correlate with increased benefits to encourage upgrades
  - b. Implement a system for incremental dues increases over time

### **Goal 3 Attract and retain high-quality staff**

- Strategy 1 Ensure that compensation packages are competitive with the market

Strategy 2 Invest in professional development opportunities, especially in areas of subject matter expertise that align with working group topics

**Goal 4 Improve performance management practices**

Strategy 1 Report quarterly on strategy implementation

Strategy 2 Track analytics for communication campaigns

### Five-year Roadmap

A five-year roadmap is presented below that is designed to guide the plan and its implementation, beginning with a series of “phase one” activities within each core focus area, with additional phased activities to follow. NADO staff responsible for implementing the plan will use this rubric as the basis of a workplan that will be used internally to direct and manage the plan’s progress. Given that this strategic plan is meant to be a living document, the order of implementation activities and the strategies themselves may evolve and change over time, in accordance with the NADO staff and leadership’s assessment of the organization’s most pressing needs and priorities. NADO staff will also develop more detailed internal-use documents and tracking systems to guide the implementation of the plan.

Roadmap visual located on next page.

# NADO FORWARD: A VISION FOR 2030

## FIVE-YEAR ROAD MAP

	Ensure Member Success	Expand Regional Expertise	Enhance Organizational Excellence
<b>PHASE I</b>	Gather information on member needs; develop enhanced information-gathering techniques to track funding opportunities and relevant resources that may be valuable to members	Identify subject matter area experts within the NADO membership and engage them through working groups; better align NADO's research, advocacy, and initiatives with key topics identified by the working groups	Develop a method for tracking the progress of the strategic plan's implementation; define metrics, track analytics, and create a schedule for regular progress reports
<b>PHASE II</b>	Develop new techniques, trainings, and partnerships designed to help the NADO membership learn about and successfully access new funding opportunities and resources	Devise a wider reaching NADO advocacy strategy focused around the working group subject matter area topics and policy priorities designed to advance related goals	Develop a financial sustainability plan that allows NADO to maintain robust staffing levels and continue to implement the key initiatives that are of greatest value to the NADO membership
<b>PHASE III</b>	Explore fee-for-service opportunities that align with NADO's mission and could deliver added value to members; explore other direct methods of serving NADO member organizations in new ways	Explore how NADO could further expand its membership; develop new member recruitment and engagement strategies; engage	Evaluate NADO's board structure in comparison to other peer organizations and take steps to ensure that NADO's approach is reflective of association best practices broadly
<b>PHASE IV</b>	Expand NADO's advocacy efforts to include an enhanced emphasis on a wider range of federal funding sources that could help fund NADO member organizations longer term	Enhance NADO's working relationships with other national associations and national leaders in the economic development field	Explore opportunities to invest in the professional development, retention, and expertise of NADO's staff
<b>PHASE V</b>	Expand emerging leader and mentorship programs and further engage emerging talent through NADO events, working groups, trainings, advocacy, and leadership roles	Expand NADO's center of market intelligence for RDOs; update and organize content on NADO's website to increase utilization and effectiveness of resources	Provide board members with more finely tailored roles and responsibilities, and a greater degree of ownership over various aspects of NADO's continued development

## Appendices: Feedback from Survey, Focus Groups, and Board Retreat

Collected feedback underscores the need for improved member services, more robust advocacy efforts, and expanded leadership development programs. Stakeholders have expressed a desire for greater organizational capacity to ensure sustainability and adaptability.

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### Appendix A: Membership Survey Analysis

#### Introduction

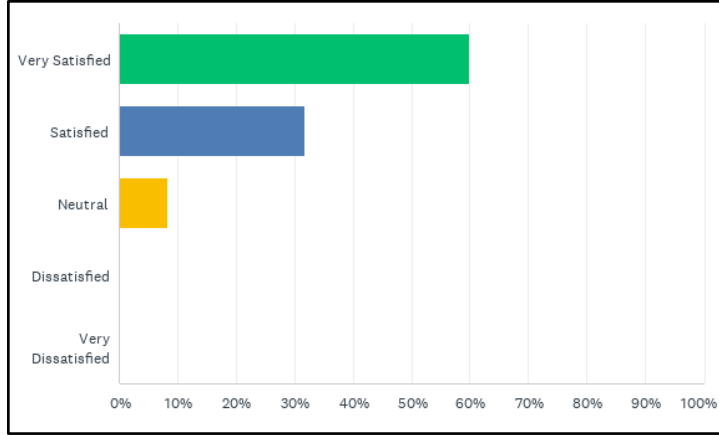
PMA administered a brief thematic survey to NADO members between the 15th - 29th of May 2024 to gather broad, high-level feedback from a large cross-section of members. Delivered to potential respondents through NADO newsletters, the survey received 85 responses from members serving in a variety of positions including executives, planning directors, program staff, and more.

The survey asked respondents six questions relating to their organizations, as well as their experience interacting with NADO:

1. How satisfied are you with your current membership experience with NADO?
2. Which NADO offerings, resources, and benefits do you find most valuable?
3. What methods of communication from NADO do you find to be most valuable?
4. What are the biggest challenges or concerns that your region is facing at this time?
5. What new initiatives or programs would you like NADO to consider that could enhance your organization's effectiveness?
6. What can NADO do to increase your engagement or participation in its activities and resources?

#### **How satisfied are you with your current membership experience with NADO?**

Respondents expressed overwhelming satisfaction with their current membership experiences, with over 90% describing themselves as either "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied." No overt dissatisfaction was apparent, with only a fractional minority of members listing their experiences as "Neutral."



<u>Satisfaction Level</u>	<u>Percentage &amp; Number of Responses</u>
Very Satisfied	60.00% (51)
Satisfied	31.76% (27)
Neutral	8.24% (7)
Dissatisfied	0.00% (0)
Very Dissatisfied	0.00% (0)
<b>Total Respondents</b>	<b>85</b>

**Which NADO offerings, resources, and benefits do you find most valuable?**

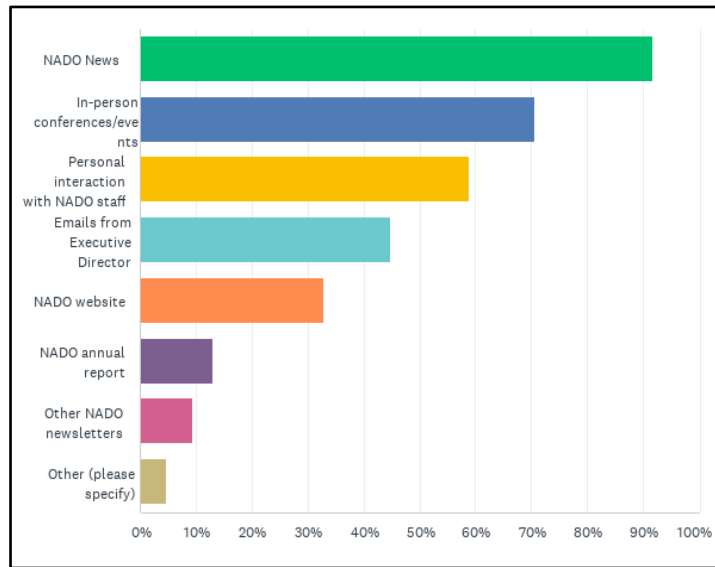
Members noted their appreciation for a wide variety of NADO activities, ranging from diverse program offerings to NADO’s multi-pronged approach to federal engagement. These perspectives support findings from the focus groups, particularly around members’ high valuation of NADO’s networking opportunities and legislative program:

1. **Training & Development Opportunities:** Emphasis on diverse training sessions, workshops, webinars, and conferences covering advocacy, best practices, legislative updates, and more, valued by newcomers and leaders alike.
2. **Networking & Peer Collaboration:** Valuable networking opportunities, both in-person and online, alongside peer sharing through mentorship programs and community webinars, fostering nationwide collaboration and resource exchange.
3. **Advocacy & Legislative Engagement:** Appreciation for NADO's advocacy, especially in representing rural interests and lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill,

alongside valued legislative updates and resources aiding in navigating complex issues.

**What methods of communication from NADO do you find to be most valuable?**

Respondents enjoy NADO communications from a variety of modalities, with their highest preference being NADO news (>90%), although, in general, they tend to prefer in-person and one-on-one interactions over digital methods aimed at a mass audience. This significantly coheres with findings from the focus groups, wherein members emphasized their consistent desire to attend in-person gatherings, as well as their enjoyment of communications like the Washington Update:



<u>Satisfaction Level</u>	<u>Percentage &amp; Number of Responses</u>
NADO News	91.76% (78)
In-person conferences/events	70.59% (60)
Personal interaction with NADO staff	58.82% (50)
Emails from Executive Director	44.71% (38)
NADO website	32.94% (28)
NADO annual report	12.94% (11)

Other NADO newsletters	9.41% (8)
Other (please specify) <sup>1</sup>	4.71% (4)
<b>Total Respondents</b>	<b>85</b>

**What are the biggest challenges or concerns that your region is facing at this time?**

Members elaborated upon a large number of challenges in their regions, ranging across funding, housing, rural-urban disparities, and many more. The vast majority of the issues raised herein were also emphasized by focus group participants, adding to their salience as concerns for members:

1. **Workforce & Employment:** Demand for skilled workers, staffing challenges, workforce shortages, recruitment, retention, and workforce development initiatives.
2. **Housing & Infrastructure:** Concerns about housing shortages, affordability, workforce housing, and infrastructure’s impact on economic development.
3. **Financial Stability & Funding:** Challenges related to funding reductions, financial stability, access to funding for critical projects, and sustainable funding sources.
4. **Rural Development Disparities:** Disparities between rural and metro areas in terms of funding allocation, economic opportunities, and access to resources.
5. **Community Resilience & Sustainability:** Population decline, “brain drain,” economic diversification, and the impact of federal policies on community development.

**What new initiatives or programs would you like NADO to consider that could enhance your organization’s effectiveness?**

Members noted a number of desired actions on NADO’s part to benefit their organizations, many of which were echoed in the focus groups (programming, costs, and advocacy):

1. **Diverse Programming:** Offer varied events tailored to different regional interests.
2. **Effective Communication:** Emphasize clear, early communication of conference details.

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<sup>1</sup> Responses: Board member reports, presentations to DDAA Board of Directors, virtual trainings, and virtual events.

3. **Cost Management:** Address concerns about membership fees and event expenses.
4. **Advocacy & Legislative Support:** Advocate for sustainable federal funding and policy changes.
5. **Accessibility & Engagement:** Remote access to board meetings for wider participation.

### **What can NADO do to increase your engagement or participation in its activities and resources?**

Respondents affirmed many of their previous comments, underlining the importance of these issues:

1. **Diversification of Offerings:** There is a need for a wider range of topics and training, particularly relevant to rural communities.
2. **Resource Allocation & Funding:** Calls for increased funding, lower costs, and fiscal management training are prevalent.
3. **Communication & Interaction:** Clearer communication, regular interaction with regional managers, and skill-building opportunities are desired.
4. **Enhance Participation & Access:** Remote attendance at Board meetings and more localized events to boost engagement.



## Appendix B: Focus Group Analysis

### Introduction

PMA hosted three focus groups with NADO members between the 24<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> of May 2024. The sessions were attended by an average of seven participants (totaling 21) who hailed from 13 states, providing an encouragingly broad cross-section of members. The participants largely represented councils/associations of governments or regional councils, while a smaller proportion were leaders of economic development bodies, and a few worked at planning commissions/boards. The majority of attendees were chief executives, followed by a smaller but sizable group of community development directors (or comparable roles), rounded out by a handful of planning professionals. These attendees had widely diverse experiences with NADO, both in terms of longevity and depth.

The discussions centered around three key questions:

1. How would you describe your current and recent interactions with NADO?
2. What are the biggest challenges facing your organizations?
3. How can NADO better support you/your organization and what recommendations would you make for NADO's updated strategic plan?

### Overarching Themes

The following high-level themes and suggested strategies emerged from across the three discussions:

1. **Varied Interactions with NADO:** Plan responsively to the large variance in members' knowledge about and levels of interaction with NADO.
2. **Time to Leverage Content:** Navigate the dynamic of members having access to NADO content that they value, but often lacking the time to take full advantage of it.
3. **Staff Access to NADO:** Increase the accessibility of NADO resources/events to junior- and mid-level staff at member organizations.
4. **Build on Advocacy "ROI":** Expand advocacy efforts to federal contacts to enhance what is widely seen as a valuable "return on investment" for members.
5. **Diversify Advocacy/Funding:** Diversify federal funding sources and agency relationships beyond the EDA.
6. **Elected Leadership Turnover:** Assist members in responding to the major challenge of increasingly rapid turnover among local elected officials.

### Interactions with NADO

Attendees described largely positive experiences with NADO, highlighting its high-quality content, helpful staff, productive engagement with federal bodies, timely member

outreach, and many more areas. These dynamics and others were expanded upon in the following subjects:

1. **Varied Interactions with NADO:**
  - a. **Wide Spectrum:** Attendees have had widely diverse experiences interacting with NADO, with most individuals having had some involvement, some members having had extensive involvement (including Board service), and a few members having had little to no involvement.
  - b. **Resource Access & Usage:** Members have access to valued NADO content, but often lack the time to take full advantage of it (***“All of the stuff is there,” but...***). Additionally, some attendees noted that many NADO events are prohibitively expensive for their smaller organizations to attend, especially when attempting to pay for junior- and mid-level staff members. Others described a more general desire to increase accessibility to NADO resources for less senior staff.
2. **Strong Engagement with Events/Programming:** Participants attend a wide variety of training activities and events, particularly the general and policy conferences, all of which were strongly praised. More broadly, members deeply value the networking and relationship-building activities enabled by NADO across its programming.
3. **Robust Involvement with Federal Government:** Members overwhelmingly appreciate the federal advocacy and relationship-building activities spearheaded by NADO, which are viewed as a clear, tangible benefit (***“a direct ROI on dues”***). Additionally, attendees highlighted the value of communications about federal government news (ex: newsletter, Washington Update), which provide them with exposure to these happenings.

### Organizational Challenges

Beyond those mentioned elsewhere, participants discussed several challenges facing their organizations, many of which are related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, although a variety of others are more structural and long-term:

1. **Elected Leadership Turnover:** Attendees universally decried the major challenge of increasingly rapid turnover among local elected officials, which continues to hamper productive relationship-building.
2. **Workforce Development:** Some members face barriers to recruiting staff, often owing to budgetary limitations and prohibitively high market-rate salaries.
3. **Lack of Funding Diversity/Allocation:** Some participants elaborated that their organizations overly rely on EDA funding. Relatedly, some members expressed a desire to receive more greater funding for general administration, as opposed to solely programs.

## Support Desired from NADO and Recommendations for the Strategic Plan

Based on the experiences and challenges described above, attendees laid out a range of direct requests to NADO for organizational support (largely focused on increasing/diversifying programming), while also providing feedback on how NADO can strategically navigate federal relationships and the organization's identity in the process of finalizing the updated strategic plan:

### Desired Support

1. **Increase Management Training for All Staff Levels:** Attendees universally desire further professional development opportunities for themselves and staffers at all seniority levels, including new staff members. Several of the following subjects were highlighted:
  - a. Financial management
  - b. Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)
  - c. Post-COVID federal funding environment
  - d. Housing affordability and innovations
  - e. Succession planning
  - f. Human resources management
  - g. **For newer staff:** legislative interactions and policy implementation (how to *“further current activities with more tools”*)
2. **Expand Programming & Events:** Participants were eager to attend more events and suggested that NADO replicate and expand chapter meetings, host additional regional meetings, and facilitate more community tours. In reference to earlier points, it was also suggested that some conferences could be combined to make them more accessible/affordable.

### Strategic Plan Recommendations

1. **Advocacy & Relationships:** Participants roundly entreated NADO to diversify its funding and governmental relationships beyond the EDA (ex: USDA, DOT, HUD), while also expanding interactions with existing federal partners.
2. **Strategic Differentiation:** The need to further differentiate NADO's value proposition from that of NARC was highlighted, given an observation that NARC may be shifting its audience away from solely MPOs.
3. **Organizational Diversity:** Attendees emphasized that NADO should do everything within its control to promote the demographic diversity of its membership.



## Appendix C: Insights from June 2024 Board Meeting

The Summer Board Meeting was held from June 5-6, 2024, in Santa Fe, NM.

### High-Level Takeaways

#### Strategic Pillars

Board members largely expressed support for the existing key pillars, while also pushing for some strategic areas to be expanded and new items to be incorporated:

- **Partnerships:** The importance of creating/maintaining partnerships was emphasized, as well as the desire for these partnerships to be more accessible to member organizations.
- **Advocacy/Networking:** Members also highlighted the need to bolster advocacy and networking activities and assist members with diversifying funding sources.
- **Emerging Leaders:** Members pushed for more training/growth opportunities for junior staff.

#### Strengthening NADO Communications

Members offered several suggestions for better tailoring NADO communications to their needs:

- **Content Organization:** The need to simplify and reorganize online content was emphasized, for example, by creating program-specific resource areas.
- **Messaging:** Various recommendations were offered to better target digital messages including by creating action alerts and organizing some emails by content themes.
- **Assistance/Training:** Several forms of support/education around accessing content were requested by members including phone support and training on using the member portal.

#### Increasing Engagement with NADO

Board members articulated a variety of strategies to enhance member organizations' staff involvement with NADO at all stages of the engagement pipeline:

- **Recruit New Members:** Recommendations centered on targeting prospective members, diversifying membership options, and connecting non-members with federal contacts.
- **Re-engage Less Active Members:** Members proposed focusing on increasing associate members' involvement.
- **Engaging with Federal Officials:** Other ideas included hosting an increased number of meaningful interactions with federal officials.
- **Engage Member Staff Beyond the Executive Director:** Suggestions included diversifying content, segmenting modules by seniority, and hosting content with narrow topical focuses.

### **EDA Modernization and the Role of RDOs and EDDs**

Members noted many strategies for communicating the positive impacts of EDA partnerships, increasing attainment of EDA funding, and decreasing disparities between RDOs and EDDs:

- **Rebrand EDA Partnerships:** Recommendations included emphasizing the regional development aspect of partnerships and laying out clear stages in the partnership process.
- **Navigating Strength Disparities Between RDOs and EDDs:** Members suggested building relationships between regional and state organizations, measuring organizational performance, and increasing networking opportunities, among other interventions.
- **EDA Funding Challenges:** Problem areas include unclear funding criteria, inadequate post-decision feedback, regional disparities, and communication difficulties.

### **Community and Economic Development Focus Areas**

Board members described a broad array of needs across several subject areas, while also noting which other national associations to draw lessons from:

- **Common Needs:** Members listed a wide range of needs including funding process reforms, as well as increased funding, authority, and assistance for regions and smaller communities.
- **National Associations:** Many associations were highlighted including NACO, NARC, CTAA, SBDC, and NADCO.

### **NADO-offered Fee-for-services**

Members would be interested in several fee-based services including: Industry research (e.g., salary survey); One-to-one support (e.g., GIS services); Training and Facilitation services (e.g., Executive Director training).

### **Utilizing NADO Board Members as Ambassadors**

Board members envisaged several ways they could amplify their outreach to partners/funders including by bringing project proposals to funder visits and sharing resources with funders.

### **Improving the NADO Board Member Experience**

Members recommended a variety of measures to improve their service experience, particularly by enhancing team building, adjusting election processes, and improving meeting management.