

LEVERAGING REGIONAL PLANNING  
EXPERTISE FOR LOCAL IMPACT:

# Tips for EDDs on Contract Planning Services for Member Communities

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Economic Development Districts (EDDs) can provide municipal and county governments with a broad portfolio of economic and community development programs and services. Through the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) and other regional planning initiatives, EDDs empower member communities to set a regional vision and roadmap for economic success. In many cases, EDDs also use this planning expertise to offer member communities an expanded, localized set of planning services that help them to address specific needs. These include, but are not limited to, neighborhood master planning, economic asset studies, cluster analyses, comprehensive plans, organizational studies, market studies, and local economic development planning.

When contracting with larger, national firms or consultants for similar services, communities sometimes report a lack of knowledge about their specific needs and context and are left with cookie-cutter plans that don't adequately account for local conditions. Fortunately, EDDs can provide quality planning services with a deeper understanding of local conditions at a fraction of the cost of private consulting firms.

The following tips are drawn from the experiences of EDD staff who have managed fee-for-service or contract planning services in their member communities. Each was interviewed about a particular project: River Valley Regional Commission (GA) built an interactive GIS data hub for a rural county; Middle Georgia Regional Commission (GA) managed a neighborhood community action plan, Centralina Regional Council (NC) co-developed a five-year staffing study for a fast-growing municipality; and Western Piedmont Council of Governments (NC) conducted a demographic audience analysis for a local arts nonprofit. Though these EDDs are based in the Southeast, the lessons learned are applicable to EDDs across the country.

## HIGHLIGHTED PROJECTS

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- **River Valley Regional Commission** developed the [Harris County Data Hub](#), an online interactive database that provides a variety of data sets and GIS layers that can help guide development patterns across the county.
- **Middle Georgia Regional Commission** partnered with the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood Organization and other local stakeholders in Macon, GA to develop Imagine Pleasant Hill, [a community action plan](#) addressing six priority areas with the goal of revitalizing a historically disinvested neighborhood and giving residents a concrete framework for driving future growth.
- **Centralina Regional Council** co-developed a [five-year staffing study](#) with the City of Albemarle, NC to help the municipality better plan and understand the financial impact of certain staff positions to meet an increased demand for city services.
- **Western Piedmont Council of Governments** contracted with Arts Culture Catawba, a local nonprofit, to conduct an [ArcGIS Tapestry analysis identifying target audiences and patron demographics for arts and culture organizations across Catawba County, NC](#).

### **Tip #1: Contract directly with member communities to diversify revenue and deepen local impact**

Contracting directly with member communities and regional stakeholders can be an effective way to diversify organizational revenue streams while providing communities with more direct support in meeting local and regional economic development goals. River Valley Regional Commission (RVRC) signed an annual renewable contract with Harris County, Georgia for GIS mapping services and has since marketed those same services to other municipalities and counties across the region, creating a sustainable revenue stream. Centralina Regional Council contracted with the City of Albemarle to co-develop a 5-year staffing study and now offers contracted services to all city and county governments through a Master Services Agreement. Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG) contracted with Arts Culture Catawba, a local nonprofit, to conduct a demographic audience analysis that applies its regional data expertise to strengthen the creative arts sector in its region. These examples show that direct contracting can take many forms and that each contract can serve as a proof of concept or replicable model for additional work across the region.

## **Tip #2: Clarify the line between dues-funded services and contract work**

Member communities typically pay dues to EDDs. It is important to clarify what services are provided through membership dues and what services will require additional contracts and funds to support. RVRC had GIS expertise for its planning work but did not provide it as a service to counties before building the Harris County Data Hub as a fee-for-service project. Centralina's Master Services Agreement structure explicitly distinguishes between baseline regional services and additional contracted modules like group facilitation, staffing studies, and strategic planning. Drawing this line clearly protects the EDD from scope confusion and helps member communities understand the value of both their dues and any additional investment.

## **Tip #3: Make contract planning services available to all communities in the region**

It can be easy to continuously work with the same partners and communities that are active and engaged in EDD work, but outreach must be made to other communities to ensure an even distribution of EDD staff time and expertise across the region. After building out the Harris County Data Hub, RVRC actively marketed GIS mapping services to other municipalities and counties in the region because it recognized that Harris County was not alone in its lack of data access and support. MGRC chose to work directly with the Pleasant Hill neighborhood in Macon, a historically disinvested community rather than defaulting to more established or active partners.

## **Tip #4: Let initial conversations open the door to new contracting opportunities**

An initial conversation or a small project with a member community can easily result in additional contracting opportunities as EDDs learn more about a community's economic development needs. Centralina's staffing study with the City of Albemarle grew directly out of conversations related to land use and strategic planning. That basic regional engagement surfaced a specific local need that became a contracted project and, ultimately, a 2025 NADO Aliceann Wohlbruck Impact Award recipient. RVRC approached Harris County with the Data Hub concept, and the resulting project has since led to plans for additional GIS layers and pursuit of outside grant funding to expand the service. Both examples originated as casual conversations that developed into more substantive projects.

## **Tip #5: Use regional planning processes to surface local needs**

EDDs must be observant and continuously looking for ways to provide additional planning support to member communities as they conduct regional planning like the CEDS and other regional economic development work. Regional conversations held throughout the CEDS process can be valuable forums for communities to express their broader needs and for EDDs to identify where their programming or services can help. WPCOG's presentation on data trends for regional nonprofits led directly to Arts Culture Catawba requesting a targeted audience analysis. Both examples demonstrate the power of EDDs' convening role and the opportunities that naturally surface from it.

## **Tip #6: Before taking on new contracts, think strategically about capacity, expertise, and mission alignment**

Opportunities to contract with member communities and regional stakeholders are out there, but EDDs need to be strategic about which ones to pursue. Before engaging in new contracts, consider whether staff can take on new projects without jeopardizing staff time for existing commitments, what services or expertise the EDD has on staff that would be useful in advancing local and regional economic development goals, and how the EDD can package and market those services to potential clients. EDDs should also consider whether a new service risks mission creep or falls outside the organization's scope, and what pricing levels are needed to maintain organizational financial stability.

RVRC used one full-time GIS staff member to build a replicable service it now markets across the region, demonstrating how existing expertise can be packaged into a scalable offering. Centralina developed a reusable service framework and methodology from the Albemarle staffing project that can now support all governments in the region. MGRC's planning process in Pleasant Hill developed and grew staff capabilities by finding new ways to engage with the public, demonstrating that well-chosen projects can build new capacity even as they require careful investment of staff time.



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