

RURAL CHAMPION COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

WALLACE COUNTY

Background Information

Seeing how community development programs have worked in neighboring counties, the Wallace County Foundation invested in seeing what a new program could look like for their communities. This included researching other programs and working throughout the county to identify priorities, as well as solutions and how it could be carried out long-term.

The goal for Wallace County's Rural Champions Grant is to establish and explore community development and the opportunities that can come from that office. For multiple years there has been organized conversation about creating a form of community development, to not only improve our space, but to also start diversifying and growing our economic base.

The Rural Champion will be the point person to work to create a community development office that would continue to exist beyond the twelve months of this project. The Rural Champion will evaluate topics what structure community development should take in Wallace County and avenues for long-term funding, but also pressing issues such as expanding our agricultural economy, increasing available housing and a financially distressed senior care center.

The goal for Wallace County's Rural Champions project was to establish and explore community development and the opportunities that could come from that office. Emphasis was put on housing, economy and entrepreneurship, and thinking about the most sustainable way to move the office beyond the Rural Champion funding.

Community Development is needed in Wallace County because of:

- A disconnect of resources and knowledge available to rural places like Wallace
- A lack of a point person as a state and regional contact
- To create a sense of hope and optimism about the state of Wallace and rural Kansas

Steps to Success

The overarching goal and ultimate success of Wallace County's project will be the creation of a community development position and secured sustaining funding for the position beyond the Rural Champions Grant. Initial primary goals included the economy and housing, and a financially distressed senior care center.

At the start of this RC year, there was a Zoom call with Jenny Russell from Republic County for an 'Eco Devo Bootcamp'. Some of the first things that were suggested were things like establishing a neighborhood revitalization plan, enacting vacant property ordinances, starting a land bank and creating revolving loan funds for businesses. These ideas were brought to the county commissioners and city councils. These were big ideas they weren't ready for.

After a little time, the idea of incentivizing people to demolish dilapidated properties and sell vacant homes was the appropriate approach to this project rather than punishing property owners for having the properties. Local/regional funds were found to establish a four-part housing program. This is generating some of the needed results, but manifests in a more positive, well-received way than ordinances or tax-abatements in a conservative area with strong property-right views.

A conscious effort was made to try to provide programming and opportunities across the county. The mural project placed three murals in each of the three small communities in Wallace County. The music series provided funding and organization for three live concerts in each of the three communities as well. The committee included:

- County Commissioners
- Wallace County Foundation
- WaCo Visitors Bureau
- Weskan Community Improvement Association
- City of Sharon Springs
- WaCo Chamber of Commerce
- USD 241 & USD 242
- Local Businesses
- Local Property Owners
- Fort Wallace Museum

Solutions

Some of the examples of research and surveying that has been done in the last year was completing the Housing Assessment Tool (HAT), completing a community housing survey, hosting a community book club with community discussions, hosting the Kansas Department of Agriculture Growth Initiative programming, establishing a housing committee and establishing a workforce recruitment committee.

There was an opportunity to organize funding for a storefront and signage incentive program for local businesses. Funding from the county equaled to \$5,000 and an additional \$10,000 from the

Wallace County Foundation. These funds did have a 1:1 matching requirement for the business owners. This is being received well and has given a big sector of people something to think and discuss.

Completing the cross-county mural project was a well-received accomplishment. This project culminated in a driving tour to 'unveil' the three finished murals. This project had good timing as an early 'successes for the Community Development push.

Russell Plaschka was hosted in Wallace with the Kansas Department of Agriculture with a presentation titled "Kansas Ag Growth" early in the project to provided for a facilitated community conversation to establish broader goals for community development.

To continue communication with communities, a branding the Community Development initiative was created with a simple logo, established a Facebook presence with insightful information and started the first email "newsletter" for Wallace County Community Development. There had been many emails and messages from locals and from across the state that the newsletter was very well done and provided a lot of content.

The implementation grant will be used for various aspects supporting the community development efforts:

- Gap funding for the community development department through January
- Supporting the mini grants developed for storefront & signage incentives available to Wallace County businesses and those looking to create a storefront for visual and exterior improvements.
- Printing and postage for Every Door Direct Mailer to be sent out to all Wallace County mailboxes to communicate the current incentives available through WCCD
- Include business incentives and four housing incentives and hiring incentive.
- Registration to upcoming events and membership feeds to regional and state organizations for educational and networking opportunities for WCCD contract position
- Provide basic office supplies for contracted position
- Supplies to make basic improvements to community parks.
 - The main priority will be updating and improving course signage and marketing for the disc golf course at Sharon Springs South Park. These materials and the course will then be promoted by the WC Visitors Bureau.
 - Other areas may include the purchase of paint and supplies for gazebo

improvements, repainting basketball court lines, adding pickleball court lines and netting etc.

GRAHAM COUNTY

Background Information

Approximately 12 years ago the former ED program was narrowly focused on wind farm development and not much else. This caused there to be a loss of public and private sector support and funding. The lack of knowledge about available resources had led to stagnation of the community. Also, the lack of a single point of contact for regional and state contacts in the Economic Development world has limited involvement by the county.

The issue was that Graham County was missing out on a variety of opportunities, programs, information and lacked communication links to the various governmental entities, as well as citizens & businesses in the county.

County officials knew that to have success, there needed to be a re-established community development office. With entrepreneurship at the center for the program development, the work of the champion quickly expanded to establishing eight project committees. Communities come together throughout the county have bought-in and committed to continued long-term program support.

The need for the re-establishment of the Graham County Community Development (GCCD) Program has been discussed for several years. This project is essential as the county is in dire need of a "Point of Contact" for community development efforts. The re-establishment will focus on "Entrepreneurship" development for the County, with emphasis on Business Retention/Expansion and creating an entrepreneurial environment for existing business expansion and new startups.

The scope of work to be completed in within the first year includes 11 goals. The impact of the re-establishment of the organization will greatly benefit the business community of the entire county, the overall population, and support and assist with entrepreneurial development in the county. This will improve communication with the citizens and business community of the county, as to opportunities and programs that may benefit them. The office will serve as a "One Stop" shop for entrepreneurs seeking to start a business and for existing businesses looking to expand and/or diversify. Assistance to the business community in the area of Workforce Development will also be a benefit to the business community.

Gaps/Barriers Identified: Capacity Barriers:

- Overcoming lack of assistance from previous

ED

- Convincing individuals that community development is something worthy of a salary or a paid position in a rural, conservative space with a low tax base

Steps to Success

The primary goal for this project was the establishment of a countywide development program. This has been achieved via the GCCD. The success is evident in the commitment of funding from the cities, community foundations and the county for 2024, in order to continue to efforts being made.

Through business visits, the Rural Champion served as the GCCD Coordinator and found great support for the current program and efforts being made. Now, all communities in the county are involved and impacted through a monthly newsletter, calendar of events bulletin, Facebook page, email blasts, as well as quarterly meetings with each community.

Great progress has been made, through the involvement of business owners, citizens and public officials. The support for the GCCD and the various projects has been overwhelming, as evidenced by the number of individuals becoming involved in Committees and projects. With support of Dane G. Hansen Foundation, the “13 Ways to Kill Your Community Book Club” brought out the interest in the betterment of the Graham County by all the citizens involved, and Committees were formed to address issues/ideas arising from the Book Club discussions.

The first thing the GCCD Coordinator did was establish an office with an “open door” policy, welcoming anyone with questions, ideas etc. The coordinator visited every business in Graham County in person, as well as each Community to introduce the GCCD, himself and to deliver a copy of the book - “13 Ways to Kill Your Community,” and inviting each to attend the book club meetings. GCCD also developed an email group list through the contact for communications from the GCCD office.

Involvement consisted of all incorporated and unincorporated cities, the county commission, the county’s community foundations, financial institutions, the area chamber of commerce, all civic organizations, as well as healthcare & education (USD #281) and seniors/youth are involved and need to be.

The former ED Board was not an appropriate representative of the county, businesses, cities, citizens, nor education, healthcare etc. Now, in GCCD, all are represented on an Advisory Council. While the GCCD is a County Department and

reports to the County Commission, the Advisory Committee meets monthly to provide input, ideas, suggestions, and receive a report on activities of the GCCD.

Solutions

There was very little collaboration prior to the GCCD being formed. Cities and the County Commission were not communicating, and the smaller Communities described a “disconnect” from each other and the County. The “13 Ways to Kill Your Community Book Club” brought together people in the community who knew of each other but had never really met. This project brought people together for a common cause.

This has been overcome via communication efforts, through a monthly newsletter – “Grow Graham County” and the Facebook page – “Grow Graham County Kansas,” and regular email and phone contact. A GCCD webpage is being developed and the Hill City Area Chamber of Commerce is a great collaboration partner with the GCCD. The “13 Ways to Kill Your Community” book chapters are referred to on a regular basis and impacts each committee’s efforts.

From the “13 Ways to Kill Your Community Book Club,” nine different committees were formed:

- Business Development
- Travel & Tourism Development
- Workforce Development
- Agriculture Development
- Leadership Development
- Housing Development
- Youth Development
- Health & Wellness committee.
- Other Committees are being considered to address specific wants & needs in the community

The only change for this project is that it has been confirmed that the GCCD is and will continue to be in existence. The project is supported by the county and cities within Graham, both financially and through volunteers supporting efforts, programs and projects.

Overcoming the previous lack of broad efforts by the former ED organization was a hurdle. It was a struggle getting citizens and cities to buy in to what the GCCD has set out to achieve. Additionally, it was difficult to receive continued funding from the county and additional funding from the cities/ community foundations of the county for the future of the GCCD.

The implementation grant will be used to support various aspects of the new GCCD goals:

- Gap funding for GCCD through Jan. 2024
- Funding needed to Leadership Graham County program up and running for the first

year.

- Applications will be taken from the business community and general public for the initial leadership class, with some businesses sponsoring employee's application fees to assist with costs.
- Future leaders are needing to be educated on the opportunities to serve the Community, the GCCD, and have a better understanding of governmental processes, and overall economic development efforts.
- Brochures to market Graham Co. attractions throughout the state through "Central Brochure Distribution," as well as at travel shows, via the NWKTC.
- Advertising in the Ultimate Guide to Northwest Kansas, which is distributed by the NWKTC throughout Kansas and at travel shows in Wichita, Kansas City, Omaha and Denver.
- Working capital for the Travel & Tourism Committee: Expenses for committee members to attend Northwest Kansas Travel Council and State Travel & Tourism Conference meetings in the Region, when the GCCD coordinator is unable to attend.
- Matching funds as needed for other grant opportunities such as the Tourism Marketing Grant and DG Hansen Foundation funds.
- Website development and annual fee for a Graham County Travel & Tourism website.
- The Travel & Tourism Development Committee is working to get the county to pass a county-wide TGT, for future funding for the promotion of the Travel & Tourism sector in Graham County.
- Selling ads in the Ultimate Guide for 2024, to assist with the cost of a Graham County attractions page.