

Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program
Application by the Regional Economic Area Partnership of South Central Kansas

ABSTRACT

The *South Central Kansas Regional Plan for Sustainable Development* will be a catalyst for change in our region. Since its founding in 1997, the grant applicant, the Regional Economic Area Partnership (REAP) of South Central Kansas, has made considerable progress in promoting collaboration among its member counties and cities on a number of critical regional issues. The tendency of our region, however, has been to respond to singular situations, with focus on a particular concern. We have not practiced the art of integrating multiple issues over issue boundaries under shared long-range strategies. We are a region of many units of government with independent-minded and often competitive leaders. Development of this plan will cause us to think and work together outside of our usual and accustomed roles.

We expect that development of this plan will move REAP to a new level as an organization. Creation of the plan will require new regional partnerships to be formed among local units of government, non-profits and the private sector. We will have to acquire new skills of regional collaboration and opportunities will open for new leadership arrangements in the region. The plan will cause us to formalize those new relationships and compel us to practice regionalism.

By doing so, the plan will strengthen the region's competitiveness in today's world economy and its long-term viability as a place where people want to live, work and play. With an eye toward future generations, we worry about how our individual communities will survive, often forgetting how communities within our region are tied together economically, socially and environmentally. We must work together if we are to survive individually, and the plan will set forth strategies by which we can cooperate to our mutual benefit.

We expect the *South Central Kansas Regional Plan for Sustainable Development* to contain strategies to promote the long-term viability of our economy with a key focus on job creation and retention. We will know the plan has succeeded when employment and household income growth in the region remains constant and relatively stable over the long-term. It will be deemed a success when the unemployment rate within the region varies no more than the national rate through business cycles.

We expect the plan to address how to make it possible for everyone to have access to affordable quality housing in a livable neighborhood from which they can afford to reach their place of employment. There are common strategies that jurisdictions within the region can adopt that will promote this end.

The plan must acknowledge the strong regional preference to travel in one's own personal vehicle. Key regional strategies would be to assure that the level of congestion on the transportation system grows no faster than the rate of population and employment growth within the region. Among these would be to offer safe, cost-effective alternative transportation modes to those who may want or need other options. In addition, the plan would be an impetus for us to better coordinate transportation planning within the region in order to optimize available local, state and federal funding resources.

The plan must address a number of significant environment challenges that the region will face in the years ahead in order to maintain its economic competitiveness and livability. The region may be given a non-attainment designation for ozone in the next several years and will have to successfully implement an Air Quality Mitigation Plan for ozone in order to regain attainment status. This occurrence will necessitate significant new regional cooperation, particularly in transportation planning. The region will

also have to resolve long-term how it will provide adequate water supply to its industry and citizens and distribute that water in a cost-effective manner. Critical to the success of any environmental strategy within our region will be to achieve an appropriate balance among rural and urban interests in accessing environmental assets.

Underlying all the plan's strategies are a concern with how the built environment affects the health of the region's citizens. Community health is critical to the sustainability of any region and strategies regarding how the community is designed and built will be central to the plan. The plan will have succeeded when the design of healthy communities becomes the design standard for the built environment in all our jurisdictions and when the health of the community improves as measured by several key indices.

Plan Process. Creation of the *South Central Kansas Regional Plan for Sustainable Development* will be transformational for our region. Because we anticipate that its development will be a complex, adaptive process, we are scheduling the work over the allowed 36 months.

We anticipate considerable debate from stakeholders about what "sustainable development" means for the region. Achieving meaningful consensus will involve:

- 1) Correctly diagnosing our situation (Phase 1: Project Initiation, Existing Conditions Analysis [10 months]);
- 2) Engaging stakeholders in creating a shared vision (Phase 2: Alternative Regional Sustainability Scenarios & Vision [9 months]);
- 3) Developing shared goals, objectives and action strategies (Phase 3: Livability Elements of the Regional Sustainability Plan [11 months]); and
- 4) Reaching consensus (Phase 4: Alternative Regional Sustainability Scenarios & Vision [6 months]).

In order to accomplish this task, the Consortium anticipates hiring a qualified project director to manage a multi-disciplinary consulting team. Necessary skill sets for the project director and consulting team will include experience in community engagement processes, public awareness campaigns and consensus building, as well as a clear understanding of the program's purpose. Their work will be overseen by a Leadership Team consisting of Consortium members and will be supplemented by the participation of Consortium members in a committee structure focused on critical strategy areas.

With completion of the plan, REAP will create a Regional Sustainability Council to oversee plan implementation and to continue community education and outreach efforts. Each Consortium member will be asked to adopt the *South Central Kansas Regional Plan for Sustainable Development* and to commit to its implementation through the amendment of existing plans and policies, as appropriate.