

Central Iowa Sustainable Communities Initiative

Applicant Abstract

August 23, 2010

The central Iowa region's application for the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant proposes an unprecedented consortium that includes the Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), the City of Des Moines, the western suburbs (represented by the cities of West Des Moines and Urbandale), the northern suburbs (represented by the City of Johnston), the eastern suburbs (represented by Polk County), Polk County, Warren County, Dallas County, the Center on Sustainable Communities (COSC), the Greater Des Moines Partnership (GDMP), and the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines (CF).

I. Capacity of the Applicant

The Consortium is organized to represent the citizenry of the central Iowa region and involve them in addressing sustainability issues in the region. The Consortium has formed a steering committee to initiate and oversee the creation of a Regional Plan for Sustainable Development (RPSD). The steering committee has identified Angela Connolly, a Polk County Supervisor, former MPO chair, and current Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority (DART) chair, as its chairperson. Des Moines Mayor T.M. Franklin Cownie, an avid sustainability champion, has been tapped as the steering committee's vice chairperson.

Staff slated to work on the RPSD include seasoned professionals, all of whom have been involved with the creation and coordination of regional, multi-jurisdictional, multi-disciplinary planning efforts. Representation on the steering committee includes an array of organizations and jurisdictions throughout the region and individuals that represent public and private interests. There is experience in outreach at a regional level and experience with outreach to specific municipalities and stakeholders, including those typically underserved, among the group. These professionals bring complementary experiences and provide a collective base of knowledge and skill sets in planning for regional economic development, housing, transportation, land use, and infrastructure.

II. Needs/Extent of the Problem

The MPO's long-range transportation plan forecasts the central Iowa area to grow to 650,000 residents by 2035. Now is the time to plan for this growth. There currently is no unifying vision or organization guiding the area's land use, housing, and transportation development. Disjointed progress is underway, and some organizations offer services at the regional level. Still, numerous entities push their own visions without fully appreciating the needs of the greater metropolitan area. Housing, transportation, accessibility, economic development, health, and the environment are considered somewhat in isolation. This sector-specific planning produces some of the most acute challenges currently facing the region, including:

- Nearly half (49.2 percent) of area residents utilize more than 45 percent of their income for housing and transportation costs;
- Over 95 percent of all regional trips utilize automobiles;
- The area is home to the second most polluted river in the country (Raccoon River);
- Poverty and low educational attainment are concentrated in the central city; and,
- Major flooding events are occurring more frequently.

The area leadership aspires to break down this isolation phenomenon and work collaboratively to create a better region for the long term. Not only does the region lie at the crossroads of two major interstates, it lies at the crossroads of rural and urban America, at the crossroads of autonomy and collaboration, at the crossroads of status quo and creating a more sustainable future in the heartland of America.

III. Soundness of Approach

The central Iowa RPSD will provide a comprehensive framework for future development of the region, creating new and integrating existing regionally-planned components. Grant funding will facilitate the creation of regional housing, environmental, and land use plans. It also will provide the opportunity to produce a long-range regional transit plan and a strategic plan for economic and workforce development, both of which are vital components of the central Iowa RPSD. The formulation of the RPSD ultimately will provide the chance to link these key endeavors to one another as well as to other existing regional plans. Additionally, the RPSD will suggest updates to existing plans in order to align all regional planning efforts. The RPSD, with its time horizon stretching to 2050, will relate the findings of the aforementioned studies and plans to the overall multi-disciplinary vision, goals, and initiatives underway in central Iowa.

An alternative scenarios model that can reliably depict the results of a variety of planning and policy decisions is the centerpiece of this application and will sharpen the regional visioning process. If awarded this grant, the central Iowa region would enter into a contract for the creation of a robust alternative scenarios model. Such a model would help policymakers and the public understand the long-term implications of various planning and policy decisions. The interactive alternative scenarios model would engage the public through graphic depictions of alternative scenarios. It would include choices about future regional development including housing, transportation, transit, development location and density, policies about urban form, and the environment. These planning and policy choices would produce immediate adjustments to a regional growth model and other outcomes, such as commute times, cost of living, government spending, and air quality. In conjunction with a real-time voting mechanism, the alternative scenarios model would provide participants in the RPSD process with sophisticated tangible feedback on planning and policy issues that often seem remote and abstract. The alternative scenarios model should be a tool for engaging a larger section of the public and a system that allows for their informed input, thereby providing policy-makers with a stronger basis for establishing the RPSD vision and goals.

A steering committee with representation from each Consortium partner will guide the project. The steering committee will receive input from regional partners, public forums, a speaker series, key regional planning staff via a technical committee, and the government oversight committee that will be comprised of the area city managers.

Project completion will require three years. During this time, three stages will be executed:

- I. Data collection and creation of the regional alternative scenarios model;
- II. Visioning that will leverage the model to identify the vision and goals for the region; and,
- III. Creation of the RPSD, based upon the vision and goals.

IV. Leveraging Resources

There is a sense that the central Iowa region is at the tipping point for regional development. The variety of leveraged resources is indicative of this tipping point; the Consortium will leverage funds from numerous entities if the RPSD grant is awarded. The Consortium will draw upon communities, the private sector, and federal resources to successfully execute and implement the RPSD successfully.

V. Achieving Results and Program Evaluation

The Consortium is committed to the outcomes identified by the grant program and enthusiastic about addressing the additional outcomes specific to issues in the central Iowa region. In the course of solidifying the Consortium organization and confirming support for the outcomes, one of the steering committee members exclaimed that this project would be his “most important contribution as a public official!”