

Wisconsin's Top Rural Development Initiatives for 2006

Project Briefs

ArtsBuild

In March 2004, the Office of Continuing Education at the University of Wisconsin Platteville undertook a bold and innovative venture in support of rural artists in southwest Wisconsin. Using resources from the University System and numerous project partners, the OCE launched ArtsBuild, an initiative completely new to the multi-county region served by the university, and also quite unique within the scope of projects funded statewide.

ArtsBuild is an economic development program - a "New Economy" effort. It offers a wide range of assistance to local artists interested in beginning or expanding their arts-related businesses. ArtsBuild increases the professional and business capacity of arts people through educational offerings, mentoring, counseling and networking.

ArtsBuild has accomplished the following in its first year and a half:

- Worked directly with over 200 southwest Wisconsin artists (plan was 30) .
- Surveyed artists regarding their needs/desires (165 responses)
- Matched 27 mentors with 66 program participants (plan was 15)
- Sponsored over 45 classes unique to arts businesses
- Conducted 14 community meetings in 8 southwest Wisconsin counties (plan was for 5)
- Established an Internet marketing mechanism through Wisconsin Common Market
- Developed a strong, helping network of communities, agencies and organizations
- Established a region-wide Arts Council
- Published the first directory of artists in this region

Intended from its inception to be a collaborative effort, ArtsBuild was planned and is being operated in conjunction with: the Platteville Small Business Development Center, Wisconsin Common Market, Platteville Business Incubator,

the Wisconsin Arts Board, and Arts Wisconsin. Since then two technical colleges, the Spring Green Center for Innovation and Creativity, and the Shake Rag Center for the Arts have joined the partnership, as have county and municipal governments through a new component called SmART Communities. By building the capacity of various organizations and municipalities to help the arts market cluster, ArtsBuild is building the entrepreneurial capacity of the region.

A critical aspect of ArtsBuild success has been the creation of a new network of artists and craftspeople. Better yet, the hundreds of artists involved have begun to establish their own "mini-networks," related to a community or to respective medium (e.g. visual arts). An "entrepreneurial spirit" is developing - in individuals, groups and communities. It's electric and growing rapidly as word spreads from artist to artist, community to community. ArtsBuild has fostered an entrepreneurial climate that recognizes and nurtures creativity and innovation. One artist wrote:

"Many people are blaming you for all this excitement. This ArtsBuild program has been bringing people together from various art venues and it has become very exciting. Thank you."

The three counties that comprise the core of ArtsBuild activities are quite rural - with a core population of fewer than 100,000. ArtsBuild is particularly replicable in smaller, rural areas that have little in the way of "cultural infrastructure." It has proven to be an effective mix of business support and community organization. In a little over a year, ArtsBuild has made an extraordinary contribution to the growth and vitality of the arts in the small, rural communities of southwest Wisconsin. It isn't rocket science, it is entrepreneurship! Any community can do it. ArtsBuild can be a model for many types of new rural initiatives, not just those related to the arts.

Waupaca Healthy Communities Youth on Boards Initiative

Waupaca Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth Coalition (HCHY) has worked since 1999 to transform the city into a leader in infusing youth into the civic life of the community. Search Institute data revealed that the youth in the community felt that they were not valued. The community responded by giving them a voice. The city passed an ordinance in 2003 that required each city committee to add a youth member. The Library, Parks and Recreation, Airport, Wellhead Protection, Cable TV, and Historic Preservation committees now have voting youth members.

Youth members of city committees and their allies among the youth and adults in the city have built a new youth center, broken ground on an expansion of the young adult library, and created a community foundation with two youth members of the board. UW-Extension has provided support and training to the process; Mayor Brian Smith and city manager Henry Veleker have nurtured the youth and adult board members into collaborative working relationships; and city departments, including the library and recreation departments, have given youth significant roles in planning, staffing, and overseeing operations.

Ownership and pride in the engagement of youth is broadly shared among members of the community. Youth feel ownership of public projects such as the library and recreation center and spend time raising money and improving programs in public institutions. Elected officials and department heads are justifiably proud of their work to involve youth. UW-Extension has built capacity for youth-adult partnerships in community decision-making through training and regular support.

Community members have described the impact of Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth. One young woman who has been involved was asked how it made her feel about Waupaca:

"I put some effort into it and now I want to come back and see it. I want to raise a family here."

An adult observed that HCHY engages youth outside their age group:

"Three to four generations working on an activity breaks down fear, builds comfort level between generations. The community sees the success, the bond between generations all the time. It strengthens community when youth and adults are talking in the streets."

Waupaca has created a sustainable model for recruiting youth, conducting evaluation, and providing training each time a new youth committee member is seated. County Extension offices across the state have similar training materials available. The ordinance adding a youth member to city government committees can be adapted by other cities. Cities, towns, counties, and community-based organizations can benefit from the Waupaca model for youth engagement.

Shawano County Rural Health Initiative

The Shawano County Rural Health Initiative began in 2003 when a planning team of 30 Shawano area residents collaborated with ThedaCare, a health care organization, to address the problem of rural health. A series of focus group discussions with farmers, agricultural business professionals, health care providers and members of community organizations identified the lack of access to health care as the major concern facing farm families. Many Shawano County farm families have no health insurance, and others who have insurance have high deductible policies. As a result, the majority of farm families have no coverage for routine check-ups and preventative care.

These findings led to the formation of the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative. The Initiative is organized under a board of directors, which includes twenty representatives from local businesses, health care, public health, farmers, and other community members. A Rural Health Coordinator was hired to make house calls to farm families to provide free health assessments, information about low-cost

social programs, safety assessments and referrals to programs dealing with financial support and other issues. The coordinator is responsible for carrying out the day-to-day functions of the initiative. The board provides ongoing support in the areas of coaching, marketing, and fund raising.

A diverse group of people with different areas of expertise started this Initiative. This unique partnership stretched members out of their comfort zones to work toward the goal of providing preventative health care to farm families. When this Initiative started, ThedaCare offered \$60,000 in start-up funds and challenged the local community to match their support. That goal has been met with funds from local businesses including; Greenstone Credit Services, Shawano Medical Center, M & I Bank, Associated Bank, Mid County Co-op, AgVentures, Bay Lakes Co-op, and CRI/Genex. Additional funds were received from individuals, the Mielke Family Foundation and a federal appropriations grant, and fundraisers.

Agriculture is a major contributor to the economic well being of Shawano County. Farm families are vital to our economy as is their good health. The Health Risk Assessment done on the farm includes testing for cholesterol, blood pressure, glucose, BMI, and body fat analysis. The Coordinator has met with over 170 farm families, making almost 800 separate house calls. Families report making changes for better health such as eating a lower fat diet, getting more exercise, and using medications to reduce their risk of heart disease and to control diabetes. Vouchers are also available to help defray the cost of mental health services.

Our mission is to sustain and improve the health of farm families and to provide a connection to community resources. Other communities can use our program as a model to build partnerships to meet their specific needs. Our model brings together agriculture and health care professionals. Both are needed to build trusting relationships with the farm families. By going to the farm, we are able to provide a service to farmers who would not otherwise use preventative health care. When a partnership like this is developed, funding partnerships are

also created for the sustainability of the program.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Countryside Park Cooperative

The Countryside Park Cooperative: A Retirement Community near Cumberland, Wisconsin, was part of a family estate that included undeveloped lakeshore - a likely scene for upscale development. Had the property sold as a unit, the park would have been eliminated, forcing 18 elderly households - many with disabilities - into a rental market requiring 3 or 4 times their lot rents. West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency (West CAP) was asked to purchase the property. Seventy-five percent of park residents said they had no other living options; 95% simply wanted to stay. Trailer park residency was the most affordable option - as it is for thousands of rural Wisconsin households.

West CAP negotiated discrete purchase of the park with a plan to transfer ownership to the residents. A pro forma schedule demonstrated feasibility, but the deal required replacement of a failed septic system. The City of Cumberland agreed to match CDBG funds for sewer & water extension to the site, a mile east of the city. A resident cooperative was formed in June, 2005. The purchase was closed in September, 2005. Sewer and water hookups were made in October and the park was annexed into the City.

The resident equity contributors are primary among a list of collaborators including:

- Federal Home Loan Bank, Chicago, AHP Development Grant: \$110,000
- The City of Cumberland, CDBG applicant, co-funder of sewer/water extension .
- WI Department of Commerce, CDBG: \$206,000
- West Central Regional Planning, CDBG writers
- Bremer Bank, Menomonie, construction loan: \$100,000
- Northcountry Development Fund OR Bank of Turtle Lake, long-term mortgage financing (replaces construction loan): \$170,000
- The WHEDA foundation, housing repair grant: \$32,884
- The Otto Bremer Foundation, water/sewer

connections grant: \$39,000

- West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency, Inc. (West CAP), developer

The project solves a critical affordable housing problem. It enables sustainable, cooperative residency for 21 households (including expansion units), providing them with municipal sewer and water, repairs for individual mobile homes, landscaping enhancements, and a community center/storm shelter. It increases the value of the Countryside Park retirement community. It adds land and improvement values to the City of Cumberland, including the properties between the original city limits and Country View.

Because mobile home residency is so widespread in rural Wisconsin - last resort affordable housing for many low-income households - there are numerous situations in which the Countryside Park Cooperative model could be replicated. Because projects of these kinds are not investment opportunities, replications would require the leadership of a non-profit developer able to obtain financing and provide organizing assistance. Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs) such as West CAP are likely candidates for such activities.

Gogebic Range Leadership Academy New Service Learning Initiative

One of the many issues facing Iron County is the lack of volunteers willing to engage themselves in community events and projects. Recruiting volunteers was one of the key economic development strategies identified in the Iron County Strategic Plan (2003).

In response, the Gogebic Range Leadership Academy (GRLA), a community-based leadership development program in existence since 2001, introduced a service learning component into their regular educational curriculum. Starting in the 2004-05 academic year, all academy participants were required to become involved in a community project in order to graduate from the academy.

Significant outcomes have resulted from this

initiative. In addition to providing service learning experience to 20 future community leaders, two new community events were created and an existing cultural facility will be enhanced and better promoted. In the 2004-05 academy class, participants created two new events: an ice-sculpture competition and a family snow-shoe day. In the 2005-06 class, one group agreed to improve and expand on the snow-shoe day to create a day-long "family fun" day and the second group adopted a local arboretum to improve both its and promotional efforts.

All of the service-learning projects exhibited very high levels of community partnership by involving numerous community partners including the Hurley and Mercer Chambers of Commerce, the Iron County Development Zone Council, Iron County UW-Extension, MSU Extension, Hurley School District, the local Master Gardeners Club and many other partners.

The spirit of collaboration was extremely high, with shared membership on the various committees and cooperation with event planning and promotion. For example, both of the new events created by the leadership academy participants were designed to support and enhance an existing local event: the Stormy Kromer Pursuit Cross-country Ski Race.

The impact on the community is tremendous. There are now 20 newly trained and motivated local volunteers who are willing and able to become engaged in local community events and projects. Plus, there are now two new community events in place, attracting scores of area youth and families in a variety of fun and healthy activities that support a local economic development initiative.

These new events helped the Stormy Kromer Pursuit race attract 164 skiers and bring an estimated \$21,500 into the local economy. Importantly, mechanisms are already in place to ensure that these events continue for years to come.

This initiative can certainly be modeled by other leadership training programs. Participants go through an issues identification process to help

identify projects, speakers are invited to discuss their successful community projects and project management lessons, class time is set aside for participants to work on their projects, and the groups are given an opportunity to present their projects to the public.

This type of curriculum modification can be replicated by any leadership development program that wants to better train its participants and make an immediate and long-lasting impact on their community.

Tri-County Regional Economic Development Corporation

Green Lake, Marquette, and Waushara County have similar economic and demographic characteristics, issues, and volunteer county economic development corporations (EDCs). Beginning in 2002 with the assistance of UW-Extension, the three county EDCs began meeting with one another to discuss the possibility of working together. By 2004, they decided to work together as a region and with the assistance of UW-Extension outlined a proposal to form a regional economic development corporation. In 2005, the Tri-County Regional Economic Development Corporation (TCREDC) incorporated and hired an executive director in October to serve the three county region.

The TCREDC's formation involved the county EDCs and the county UW-Extension offices in Green Lake, Marquette, and Waushara Counties with funding from County Boards, a DOC grant, and local businesses. The TCREDC executive director, hired in September of 2005, has worked on over 50 business and community development projects. His coaching, consulting, and acting as a go-between has enabled local businesses to remain in operation, expand, and relocate within the region. The area is now viewed by others as one region. Various groups and organizations have been pulled together to participate in projects and programs to help local businesses prosper.

The TCREDC is a partnership between the Green Lake, Marquette, and Waushara County EDCs. The TCREDC consists of representatives

from the EDCs and is fully supported by the three county EDCs who have agreed that the best approach to improve local economic conditions is to work together as one region. The three county UW-Extension offices have worked together to assist the TCREDC in their formation. The three county boards have are contributing equally to the funding of the TCREDC. The TCREDC has established collaborative relationships with all of the economic development organizations in the three counties and broader regional entities.

TCREDC will work in cooperation with public and private entities to promote the region and assist businesses in order to attract, stimulate and revitalize commerce, industry, and manufacturing in the region resulting in the retention and creation of viable living wage jobs. TCREDC will provide the opportunity for timely response to questions and requests for business development information and to anticipate and react to situations or issues that could result in a loss of business and employment in the community. TCREDC will enhance the economic conditions in the community through business retention and expansion resulting in job security and creation.

The process used by the Green Lake, Marquette, and Waushara County EDCs, who had rarely spoke to one another, to form the TCREDC is well documented. With the assistance of the three county UW-Extension offices, the county EDCs found a common ground, explored the various ways they could work together, developed an outline of how to work together, and formed the TCREDC. The TCREDC is a model of how an organization can operate if it has a truly regional view of economic development.

Washington Island Brands

Washington Island Brands, LLC which owns the Washington Hotel, Restaurant and Culinary School on Washington Island, Wisconsin, was to work with the Washington Island Farmers to restore and agricultural economy to the island. Growing a select wheat variety that would be hearty and have excellent qualities for baking products was part of that plan. The intent was

that the hotel was going to mill the wheat into flour to make breads, muffins, bread mixes, and pastries. The opportunity came from the farmers grew more wheat than what Washington Island Brands needed.

Washington Island Brands worked with Vandewalle & Associates to determine what would be the strongest opportunities of their wheat and to identify end users in the state that could offer them the highest value while still maintaining the integrity of the product and the story of the place. Through their search, Capital Brewery was identified as a potential partner and after some initial meetings at the brewery, meeting the farmers on the island, and understanding the quality and quantity requirements for the wheat by Capital, Island Wheat beer was born.

Michael Fields collaborated to make the seed varieties the best they could be. Vandewalle & Associates understood the value proposition and helped to position the product to the appropriate end users. Capital Brewery came on board and with their marketing firm Glowac, Harris Madison, and instantly understood the value of quality ingredients and the connection to the local economy. Calumet worked with the farmers to clean, dry and store the seed in isolated bins, and Briess worked with both the farmers and the brewery to understand what the end user needed and the producer needed to provide.

Sales of Island Wheat Beer have exceeded all expectations and across the State people are talking about Washington Island. The sale of the wheat has allowed island farmers the ability to work on a more full-time basis and to provide for their families. There has been a rise in tourism on the island, with more people making the trek to see the fields, spend a night at the Washington Hotel, and spend their money at local establishments. The wheat has also given the people of Washington Island a renewed sense of pride in their place and a belief that they are a valuable contributor to the State's offerings.

As a model, the initiative focused not on what the island could grow and how to sell it, but rather on partnering with existing establishments to use locally-produced raw materials as their ingredients. The next step was then working with the end users and the farmers to determine what were the quality, quantity and formulation requirements of the raw material that would make an easy substitution, or addition, to their process. Then the job was to connect the chain of processors between the producer and the end user. The end result is that local producers have successfully tapped into an existing market that provides stability for the local economy.

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Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc.
110 Baker Street, Suite D
Waunakee, WI 53597
608-850-4411
608-850-4412 FAX
wirural@tds.net
www.wirural.org

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