



Economic
Development and
Growing the
Economy



Profiles of Best Practices

Wisconsin's Plastic Valley: Plastics Cluster Group

Community, County

Juneau County

Area of Project Impact

Wisconsin – Statewide

Population Affected

250,000

Situation

Plastic industry organizations share mutual needs with regard to education, tax credits, technology and networking. An effort was required to bring together interested parties involved in the plastics industry since it was felt that mutual objectives, issue identification and problem solving could lead to increased profits for the industry. In addition, the sector needed to gain support from legislators and other agencies. Due to the competitive atmosphere that existed, the challenge was to build partnerships of trust and support while still allowing individual businesses to maintain their competitive edge.

Economic Development Strategies

In order to advance the economic strength of Wisconsin's plastic industry, a strategy was developed to form an association that would unite plastic companies, plastic vendors and support groups such as educational institutions, state agencies, county economic development groups, national plastics associations and other interested parties.

Forming this association provided opportunities including:

- Using the strength of the organization to design and implement plastics educational programs;
- Obtaining grants to promote the plastics industry in Wisconsin to state and local officials;
- Achieving tax incentive programs conducive to the plastics industry; and
- Providing a network system for the advancement of the industry including technological methods and equipment.

Implementation

In 1998 the new Community Resource Development Agent for Juneau County, who had been in private business working with the plastics industry, decided to bring together several parties to discuss the benefits of creating a state plastics association. As a result of the meeting, a new organization called Wisconsin's Plastic Valley Association was created to address the concerns of the members. The formation of the Association provided a vehicle for a number of key developments.

First, the Association received several grants for marketing. Second, the Wisconsin plastics industry created significant educational programs including a Plastics Associate Degree at the technical college level and a youth apprenticeship plastics educational program that combines academic and technical classroom instruction with workplace learning.

In addition to these programs, the formation of Wisconsin's Plastic Valley Association provided an important networking opportunity. Members had a chance to discuss technological advances and to build supportive methods of production based on what they observed during the touring of manufacturing operations of association members.

Last of all, elected officials, including the Governor of Wisconsin, became extremely interested in the concerns of the plastic industry. The Wisconsin's Plastic Valley Association and provided a vehicle for addressing the entire plastic industry through the. This allowed the Governor's staff to assist in key issue identification and program implementation.

Partners and Leadership

Wisconsin's Plastic Valley was created utilizing a strategic plan developed at the first key meeting. In a unique decision, the members of the association decided that two parties would serve as Co-chairs, instead of having just one leader. The plastics industry wanted to implement a strategy whereby they would have one chair to represent their industry and they wanted an additional chair to represent the supporting agencies and organizations. Thus, over the next five years, the Association was co-chaired by the Juneau County UW-Extension Community Resource Development Agent serving for the support groups and CEOs serving for the plastics industry.

Partners included:

Twenty-nine plastics companies; Wisconsin Department of Commerce; UW-Extension-Center for Community Economic Development; Alliant Energy/WPL; Oakdale Electric/Dairyland Power; American Plastics Council; The Society of Plastic Engineers; Madison Area Technical College; Western Wisconsin Technical College; Chippewa Valley Technical College; Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership; Northwest Outreach Manufacturing Corporation; Community Resource Development Agent from Juneau County UW-Extension; Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development; Economic Development Corporations in Juneau, Sauk and Columbia County; Mauston High School Principal; Family Consumer Education Program in the Baraboo, Wisconsin High School; University of Wisconsin-Stout; University of Wisconsin-Platteville.

Outcomes

As a result of this very active and unique collaboration, the plastics industry in Wisconsin obtained numerous opportunities to foster growth of their sector. One of the most significant developments was that the Association obtained six grants; funds totaled \$132,000. The grants enabled the Wisconsin plastics industry to promote its industry through marketing materials. Several marketing flyers were created and mailed to hundreds of organizations. In addition, a Wisconsin's plastic industry map was created and distributed to the international satellite offices of the Wisconsin Department of Commerce. A website was also created for Wisconsin's Plastic Valley. The American Plastics Council printed and mailed a Wisconsin industry newsletter to over 600 recipients statewide at no cost to the association.

The grants also provided salaries for Association personnel and funded their travel to Wisconsin high schools and technical colleges in order to promote plastics as a career field. An Associate Degree in Plastics was created through the Madison Area Technical College. In addition to that program, an educational process was created between 13 technical colleges and two University of Wisconsin Campuses to allow the obtainment of a Bachelor's Degree in Plastics.

Another major outcome was that where the plastics industry had been guarded in their discussions with one another, a more trusting environment was created which allowed industry representatives to share ideas, to obtain additional business and to get tax incentive programs. For example, a networking system was created to allow the transference of Plastics Technology Association members via a plant-touring program.

The support of elected state and local officials was also realized and nurtured. Wisconsin's Plastic Valley has been recognized for its success by several organizations at various events including, amongst others, the Governor's Build Wisconsin Strategy and the Wisconsin Economic Summit on three different occasions.

Wisconsin's Plastic Valley is a model of collaboration building that can be used by any industry. At this writing, several organizations have met with the Juneau County UW-Extension CRD Agent and key plastics members to receive information and guidance toward the creation of associations in their industries.

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