

MWCA- Best Practices

Summer 2010

Re: Southwest Workforce Council

Submitted by: Connie Ireland, DEED

I would like to nominate the SW Workforce Council for their innovative ideas and moving them to action.

The SWWFC has been actively involved in their region, southwest Minnesota, in reaching beyond their mission of workforce development to understanding the dynamics of regionalism. Beginning over four years ago, the council first began with their interests in understanding what the driving factors in regional sustainability. The council has recognized the value of all of the partners in their WorkForce Centers and capitalized on the data and information that staff brought to their attention. From this, council members and staff from the partner organizations became actively involved in leading, facilitating, and collaborating with other regional entities. This regional vision has resulted in several initiatives that are being replicated or expanded on a statewide basis.

Southwest Minnesota is faced with a declining population, aging population; lower than state average incomes and lower educational attainment. To overcome these obstacles, the region through collaboration, has developed new innovative approaches and strategies to change their future. The region is rich in new opportunities to develop renewable and alternative energy resources. The region is the home to the state's renewable/alternative energy emerging industry cluster. This represents hundreds if not thousands of new jobs in these and related industries'; including expansion of the region's manufacturing businesses. These existing and new occupations and industries will require new talents, skills, and technology. The opportunity for jobseekers is tremendous, higher wages, new jobs, additional educational attainment and the demand for talent.

Minnesota's competitive advantage will be enhanced by southwest Minnesota's ability to not only compete globally but lead through these regional efforts in capitalizing on their assets. The region becomes vital and sustainable by building new and existing industries and attracting and retaining talent. The region has begun to build their

“regional identity” and be recognized for not only their quality of life but their competitive advantages for business.

This process is not short-term nor has the implementation been a quick fix. The importance of building relationships and trust among other organizations (including non-profits), education, economic development, public officials and industry has taken place over the past four years. This relationship building has required the focus, vision, and commitment that the Southwest Workforce Council has invested in. Through their leadership and partnership with their workforce development partners this vision has become a success. The result is new partnerships and collaboration with education, economic development, industry and other regional organizations. These collaborations have required the Council to take risks, prioritize their strategies in a targeted approach with a long-term vision. The Council’s ability to “talk the talk” and “walk the walk” has been critical to build this regional investment and commitment of not only time but financial resources. This approach required the Council to be neutral, not be recognized as the leader, but focus on the end result of outcomes and impact for the region. Southwest Minnesota has been the beneficiary of this strategic approach to building regional capacity.

Southwest Minnesota has successfully received millions in investments due to their partnership and alignment of resources. The Council, in collaboration, has received funding for several initiatives; MNREM (WIRED), Community Based Job Training grants, FIRST grants, Strategic Doing, Blue/Green Alliance, Minnesota State Energy Sector Partnership grants, FastTrac initiatives only to name a few. In addition, several other community projects have developed as a result of the leadership of the Council and partner staff. To say the least, the Council, through their vision, has built the infrastructure to change the future landscape of Southwest Minnesota. Because of this alignment and leveraging of resources this model for replicating or building capacity across the state has received national recognition.

The lessons learned are simple, it is not about being acknowledged for being the leader not taking the credit. The success and celebration happens as a result of the impacts for new jobs and new opportunities for individuals and businesses. The importance of building relationships and trust can never be under-estimated as the results are ever rewarding. Never chase the funding but rather chase the needs and demands of individuals and business. Replicating and building capacity is not difficult but it requires creative and innovative ideas and the ability to understand a greater impact beyond your own geographic boundaries. I am happy to express my appreciation for the opportunity to be part of, and in alignment with my colleague, Juanita Lauritsen and the Southwest Minnesota Workforce Council.

