

# **2010 COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (CEDs) SURVEY AND COUNTY MEETING SUMMARY OF RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

The Association of South Central Oklahoma Governments (ASCOG) utilized part of its annual grant money from the United States Economic Development Authority (EDA) to implement a grassroots input process to review, modify, and complete the biennial Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs) report. A two-prong approach ensured adequate opportunities for input from all residents and decision-makers.

The first approach consisted of on-line surveys for all residents and business owners within ASCOG's eight-county region. Fifty-one (51) residential respondents and twenty-one (21) business owners responded to the on-line survey. Responses were enlightening and provided a good cross-section sampling for those unable to attend the county meetings. The analytical breakdown of the questions and answers are provided including relevant write-in responses for questions in Addendum B for Business Owners. The analytical breakdown of the questions and answers are provided including relevant write-in responses for questions in Addendum C for Residents.

The second approach consisted of on-site meetings held within each of the counties within the ASCOG region. Members of ASCOG's Executive Board of Trustees, who also represent their respective counties of residence, determined the dates, times, and locations for the meetings in their respective counties. The meetings began on May 3 and were held on various dates and times through May 27, 2010. The on-site meetings proved to be very informative and fairly well attended (5-14 at each meeting) by community leaders having good insight to the assets and needs of their respective counties. Items discussed at each of the meetings included:

1. Purpose of developing a CEDs
2. Significance of collaboration and regionalism for economic development
3. Encouragement to participate in ASCOG's online survey for economic development as either a resident or business owner
4. Development of current list of major employers
5. Listing of employers who were new or expanded the number of employees within the last 2 years
6. Listing of employers who went out of business, moved out of the county or reduced the number of employees within the last 2 years
7. Identifying the county's assets for attracting new businesses or industry
8. Identifying the county's limitations for attracting new businesses or industry, and
9. Producing a game plan for what ASCOG could do to promote economic development within each respective county.

Significant input for each county was recorded with emphasis on existing employers to secure commitments to remain in the county and assisting them to explore ways to

expand and increase the number of their employees, identify new businesses to develop them as community stakeholders and encourage further development, and identify companies that were no longer in the communities and identify what factor(s) caused them to go out of business, move, etc. The identifications of employers in each of these groups served several purposes. First, it revealed there were significant employers in every county and each of these employers should not be taken for granted. It also helped identify factors companies use to choose location, start a business or increase the number of employees. Lastly, factors were also identified that led to company demise, relocation out of the county, or reduction in employees. This self-examination, self-appraisal process was enlightening. Each of the sessions was held to a two (2) hour maximum. However, there were several at each meeting ready to continue with the discussions. The specific or somewhat unique factors for the meeting are listed below.

### **ALL 8 COUNTIES**

Employers, assets, and deficits common to all or most every county in the region will not be repeated but rather included in this paragraph for listing. Every county identified government, K-12 school systems, health care professionals, and retail merchants as major employers within the county. Almost every county also included excellent school system, recreational opportunities, tax incentives, available labor force, low cost of living, and work ethic as assets. Almost all of the counties also listed their deficits as lack of a workforce specifically pre-trained for many manufacturing jobs and general appearances of the communities (too many absentee owner homes, boarded up buildings, and inoperable cars in driveways).

### **CADDO COUNTY**

The Caddo County meeting took place at the Caddo Kiowa Technology Center in Fort Cobb, Oklahoma, on May 25. Major employers within the County include Western Farmers Electric, Caddo Electric Co-Op, PSO Washita Station, Cornell Correction Center, Cana Farms, Blue Canyon Wind Farms, Wind Hollow, Stockman Livestock Auction, Dolese, Harrison, VJ Stone, Love's Travel Stop, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Tribal offices, Riverside Indian School, Tribal Casinos, and the Caddo Kiowa Technology Center.

Employers hiring new or additional employees included Wind Hollow, Halliburton, the Casinos, a grocery store in Hinton and a restaurant in Hinton. It was also noted that Agri-tourism was a growing business in the county with many being engaged as guides for private hunting and fishing trips.

Employers losing employees included 3 grocery stores, 2 appliance stores, a furniture store, a movie gallery and a pharmacy. The employer losing the most employees is the Caddo County school systems which lost about 50 jobs due to state budgetary cutbacks.

Caddo County representatives listed additional assets as the Technology Center where employee training can be customized for employers, small airports at 3 locations in the county, interstate highway access to both I-44 and I-40, enterprising work force, low insurance rates, abundance of natural resources, diverse agriculture opportunities,

water quality and abundance, access to Cameron University, Southwestern State University and Redlands Community College within easy driving distance from anywhere within the County, a large, surplus wastewater capacity at Anadarko, and all communities in Caddo County having interactive service through OneNet, a strong internet provider for high-speed telecommunications training opportunities including the ability to interact with locations around the world for anything from classroom interactions between school children in different countries to watching a brain surgery while it is being performed. This technology is also available to businesses desiring to teleconference or train from remote locations or to remote locations.

These same representatives identified their perceived deficits as the commercial electric rates, workforce availability and training (need startup time for some applications), tax rate structure, and telecommunication infrastructure. An analogy for the latter was a description of a 2-lane road serving 8 lanes worth of traffic. The high-speed telecommunication capabilities are installed and in use at the school systems, however, accessing the infrastructure is too difficult because of the number of users desiring to get on at the same time. Resolution was described as difficult, if not impossible because of the number of telecommunication providers (AI-Tel, TDS, Hinton Telephone, Carnegie Telephone, Pioneer Telephone Co-Op, and AT&T) who do not appear to be inclined to work together to get adequate infrastructure installed.

Caddo County's game plan includes trying to resolve the telecommunication infrastructure issues so that they can take full advantage of the advanced systems the schools have in place, trying to attract more eating establishments, attracting employers offering higher paying jobs instead of being content with minimum wage employers, and a better marketing and advertising plan for the area. A grant application has been submitted and approved by the Oklahoma Department of Commerce for Community Development Block Grant that will match local funds to rehabilitate a building at the county fairgrounds used for the annual American Indian Exposition. Improvements from this grant are expected to bring more opportunities for economic development because the exhibit building will also be available for various meetings.

## **COMANCHE COUNTY**

Representatives for Comanche County met in Lawton at the Comanche County Courthouse in the County Commissioners' Conference Room on May 27. Major employers in the County include Goodyear Tire and Rubber, Republic Paper, Temple-Inland, Bar-S, Standley, Northrup-Grumman, Raytheon, Cameron University, Great Plains Technology Center, Civil Service and Military personnel at Fort Sill, Banks and Credit Unions, Cosmetic Specialties, Private Schools, Marie Detty and other social service employers, correctional facility, Taliaferro and Southwest Behavior centers, utility companies, Silverline Plastics, Casinos, Construction Companies, and Auto Dealerships.

Businesses that are new or have expanded the number of their employees include Goodyear Tire and Rubber, Built Better Enterprise, Daycare Centers, and the Hotel/Service industries.

The loss of employment over the last two years has not been from the decline in employers as has been in the change of situations. Fort Sill has changed to more of training facility where the troops are trained and are deployed in a short length of time.

This has caused a ripple effect in that troops are not stationed at Fort Sill long enough to be interested in buying a house or investing in the community like they were before when their duty assignments at the post lasted longer. Additionally, Cameron University has replaced many full time professors with part-time instructors. These have had a negative impact on the overall economic development of the community. It was also noted that the number of individuals and families needing assistance (i.e. food stamps and low-cost housing) is growing even though more family members have some type of employment than in previous years.

Assets for the county were listed as health care, recreational opportunities, strong arts and cultural programs, rich history, untapped Native American resources, ethnic diversity and culture, and worldwide connectivity through the internet. Offering some uniqueness due to military families from all over the world being stationed at Fort Sill, Comanche County residents were described as having rich and fulfilling cultural and ethnic diversity and opportunities rarely experienced in most places.

The representatives offered very insightful information and candid observations regarding deficits. The perception is that the local media puts way too much emphasis on negative events within the communities. When crime rates are compared, the Lawton area has a much lower crime rate than Oklahoma City or Tulsa. However when someone does a web search on Lawton, the number of hits for murders and other crimes makes it appear that Lawton is a dangerous place to live. The perception is that a murder gets headlines when it happens, when a person is arrested, when they go to court, when they are sentenced, when they appeal, and when the final disposition is determined. Blighted areas were also listed as a deficit. Business professionalism appears to be lacking in many aspects. The airport corridor from I-44 at the 11<sup>th</sup> Street exit to the Airport does not offer a good first impression for Lawton. Positive information and area self-marketing lack focus and persistence. The community has many promotional opportunities that are not being identified or utilized. There needs to be a "Get to Know Your Community" program to educate newcomers and lifelong residents alike about all the positive opportunities offered in the area. Sufficient better paying jobs are not available. Affordable housing also needs to add more units.

Comanche County's game plan included developing a career ladder program to help employees in lower paying jobs get training needed to transition into higher paying jobs, esthetic improvements to the airport corridor, improving self-perception, engaging existing businesses of the positives offered, encouraging growth, developing and using the internet to promote a more positive image, exploiting regional connections, promoting intermodal rail service, promoting development of four lane roads from Ardmore to Amarillo, and promoting cultural and Native American assets found prevalently throughout the area. In summary, it was noted that instead of promoting that Lawton was the home of a former Miss America, it should promote the fact that two of the high schools had back-to-back state champion debate teams. More effort should be made to accentuate the positive and cleanup the blighted areas.

## **COTTON COUNTY**

Cotton County representatives met at the Cotton Electric Co-Op Conference Center in Walters, Oklahoma on May 3. Current major employers include Cotton

Electric Co-Op, casinos, home health care, Co-Op elevator, and banking. No effort was made to identify increases or decreases in employees by specific employers.

Assets include inexpensive land, adequate water, low utility rates, interstate access (I-44), high-speed internet services, a local airport, rail service at Temple, close to a regional airport, close to state university (less than 25 minute drive), low crime rates, quality of life (several churches, golf courses, lakes and parks), quality of school system (Walters was rated 3<sup>rd</sup> best in state), and electricity capacity.

Listed deficits included the fact that there were no hospitals or urgent care facilities in the county, no way to offer tax abatements or change the tax base significantly, no E-911 services, low population (only 4 towns in the entire county), community appearances, lack of sufficient restaurants/cafés, lack of a regional solid waste facility, lack of sufficient housing, and no natural gas in many locations. There was also discussion on the problem that the county had because of its low tax base. It is difficult for a city such as Walters to offer any incentives to companies that are looking for a place to locate or expand. Difficulty with state bureaucracies such as the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality work a hardship on communities due to all of the fees and fines generated from a rigid approach to resolving issues.

Cotton County's game plan includes getting E-911 implemented before the state mandate takes effect and there is no choice for a provider or PSAP. Being without E-911 is not only an economic development hindrance but also a safety factor. The high cost of county addressing might be lessened if the GPS database from Cotton Electric is usable. The cost of equipping and operating may require the county to participate in a regional collaboration with another county.

The number of absentee owners creates difficulties in addressing community appearance problems but the issue still must be addressed as practically as possible. A regional landfill as a collaborative effort between the county's 4 towns and the surrounding rural areas is needed to reduce hauling costs and create some revenue stream that is currently being funneled out of the county to other landfills.

## **GRADY COUNTY**

The Grady County CEDS meeting was held at the Canadian Valley Technology Center in Chickasha on May 25. Current major employers include Badgett Machine Shop, Baby Screw Shop, Hart Manufacturing, Royal Filter, Canadian Valley Technology Center, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, Green Bay Packing, Enogex, PSO, Electric Co-op, Chickasha Airport, Cimarron Trailer, Liquid Nitrogen, Mid-West Tower, Braum's Dairy, Grady County Hospital, Copeland Manufacturing, Wheel & Tire Manufacturing, Amber Pipe Yard, and the Oil and Gas Industry related employers.

New businesses or businesses that increased the number of employees within the last two years included a dog food plant in Chickasha and the Morris Motorcycle/Residential Wind Turbine Company in Chickasha.

Businesses that went out of business, moved out of the county or decreased the number of employees within the last 2 years include Hart Manufacturing and large losses in the oil and gas industry and related supporting businesses.

Assets were identified as low cost of living, availability of land, direct access to I-44, development around I-44, new airport facility at Chickasha, location near the metropolitan area of Oklahoma City, housing availability, low crime rates, excellent

schools, the Canadian Valley Technology Center, higher education opportunities through University of Science and Arts in Oklahoma located in Chickasha as well as close commuting distances to Cameron University, University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City University and several other private universities, and rail service that runs through the county with several stops especially in Chickasha.

When listing deficits, the largest part of the discussion was the lack of having some businesses that some mid-sized communities have that hurt the perception of what the county had to offer. Specific examples included not having a Barnes and Noble Bookstore, a Starbucks coffee shop, and similar stores/shops that are now considered staples for growing communities. The only other deficit discussed was the negative perception that non-Oklahoma natives have regarding the weather in Oklahoma specifically as it relates to tornados.

Grady County's game plan is very simple. Work on community appearances and do better marketing to draw in staple stores that citizens in other similar sized communities take for granted.

## **JEFFERSON COUNTY**

Representatives for Jefferson County met at the Rock Island Railroad Train Depot Museum in Waurika on May 13. Current major employers include Jefferson County General Hospital, More Booms, Joe Robinson Welding, Livestock Auction, Metalspand, Copperhead Construction, Stuart Ranch, Conner Auto Group, Family Dollar, Dollar General and Catfish Bills.

Businesses that hired more employees include Cantina Restaurant, Tax Service firm, Dollar General Store, Miller Roof Construction, Robinson Plumbing, General Repair Shop In Ringling, and Hasting's Restaurant.

Businesses that no longer operate or have reduced the number of employees are a Pizza Store, an appliance store, and LMR Construction Company.

Assets in Jefferson County include low property tax, cheap water rates, low crime rates, 2 major state highways (SH70 and SH81), high speed internet services, recreational opportunities (large lake and golf courses), library and public facilities, inexpensive land, higher education opportunities within commuting distance including Cameron University in Lawton and Midwestern University in Wichita Falls, Texas, low pollution and low cost of living.

Deficits identified include lack of sufficient lodging (motel/hotel), lack of adequate housing, low county population which makes getting a good job more competitive, community appearances, lack of sufficient eateries, lack of retail stores (specifically clothing stores), and not having E-911 (although this is scheduled to be addressed on the July election ballot).

Jefferson County's game plan consisted of bringing the E-911 issue to resolution, creation of zoning ordinances to help clean up communities, addressing several blighted areas (specifically Anderson Street in Waurika because it is directly across from their golf course which brings in the most visitors), and increasing efforts to draw in more tourism by better promotion of such events as their annual Rattlesnake Hunt and the golf tournaments.

## **McCLAIN COUNTY**

McClain County representatives met at the Mid-America Career Technology Center in Wayne on May 19. McClain is one of the more fortunate counties because Interstate 35 traverses the county in a north and south direction while Interstate 44 is in the northern tip and it is accessible to Interstate 40 which runs east and west. Major current employers in McClain County include large Native American casinos, H&H Mechanical, D&H Construction, Mid-America Technology Center, ESP, Barrett Trailers, Blackwell Enterprise, Pioneer Telephone, Blanchard Building Center, Matador, Yarborough, C&S, and 2 auto dealers.

Businesses that have increased the number of employees include Walgreens, Braums, a dentist office, CATO, a physical therapy office, Blankenship Oil, Rodney's Pizza, Tractor Supply, Hibbet Sports, and Factory Connect.

Businesses that have decreased the number of employees include Lindmark Advertising, Barret Trailers, a dry cleaners, and Spencer's grocery store.

McClain County Assets include the county's location regarding major interstate highways, railroad accessibility, availability of land, workforce availability, Mid-America Technology Center and the flexible and tailor-made training opportunities offered on-campus, close proximity to an international airport (Will Rogers in Oklahoma City), low cost of living, higher education opportunities due to all of the major universities located just across the river in Norman, Oklahoma City and Edmond, quality of life, low-cost, reliable utilities, tax incentives, water availability, workforce character (ethics, loyalty, etc.), natural gas availability, active Chambers of Commerce and businesses, shopping opportunities, eatery options, recreational opportunities, excellent schools and well-maintained county roads.

Deficits identified included lack of ready-to-move into facilities and overall appearances in some portions of communities within the county.

The county's game plan is to promote water capacity, conduct a demographic inventory to identify exactly what is available to lure businesses to relocate to McClain County and improved marketing through the internet.

Charlie Dry of American Gateway informed those attending the meeting that 5 companies with an employment potential of 800 were considering the American Gateway location across from the Mid-America Tech Center as a place to expand their operations. He said that there was one other that had looked at the location but had decided to locate in the Fort Worth area, but the remaining five were still looking at the Wayne, Oklahoma area. He also said that the questions companies were asking about had to do with the schools in the area and what types of training were available.

## **STEPHENS COUNTY**

Representatives from Stephens County met at the Red River Technology Center in Duncan on May 10. Major current employers include Halliburton, Family Dollar Distribution Center, Pre-Paid Legal, Cameron Measurement Systems, and Richards Manufacturing.

New businesses within the last 2 years include Sentry International and Hampton Inns. Existing businesses that have increased their number of employees include Cameron Measurement System, KellPro Computer Systems, Duncan Regional Hospital and several nursing homes.

Businesses that have gone out of business in the last 2 years include Goody's Department Store, Red's Beds, Enventure Global, Haulmark, and Solitaire Manufacturing. Businesses that have experienced reductions in the number of employees include Halliburton, Cimarron, Hydro Rig, Superior Manufacturing, and Wilco.

Assets identified include water availability, potential workforce (depending on pay), non-union area, money availability to help create jobs, cheap land, available buildings, within 2 hours of DFW Airport, Red River Technology River, Cameron University campus in Duncan, quality of life, low insurance rates because of good public safety services, three electric providers to choose from, and inventory tax reductions compared to other states.

Deficits included not having a four lane highway connecting to Interstate 35, toll fees for the better interstate running north and south through the state (I-44), community air service needs upgraded, infrastructure is in need of major repairs and improvements, and not having E-911.

On the brighter side, there are several prospective employers looking at the Duncan area for a location. These employers are associated with fabrication and wind energy.

## **TILLMAN COUNTY**

Representatives for Tillman County met at the Great Plains Technology Center in Frederick on May 3. Current major employers were listed as Henniges in Frederick, Southwest Correctional Facility, Southwest Rural Electric Co-Op, Van der Laan Dairy Farms, Tipton's Children's Home, and Farming industries.

The only new employers or businesses that increased the number of employees Businesses opening in the last 12 months were mainly in retail or service based businesses including a gift shop, a new restaurant, a hardware store, a hair salon, an auto repair shop, a dentist's office and an electrician's business.

The only business suffering any reduction in employees that could be identified was a trucking company.

County assets include having employees available that have a non-union, strong work ethic, low utility rates, availability of real estate, good climate, low cost of living, interest free loans for start-up businesses, an airport, rail service, good state highway accesses, long-term leasing at the airport industrial park, internet infrastructure in place, Great Plains Technology Center that offers customized training, adequate water supply, natural gas availability, good hospital and medical services, functional E-911 system, and higher education opportunities at Cameron University in Lawton, Western Oklahoma State College in Altus, and Midwestern University in Wichita Falls, Texas.

Deficits include electric system capacity and transmission capabilities, limited upper degree opportunities in higher education, number and quality of available workforce, community appearances, lack of local community support of businesses, communities not set up to take advantage of events, and not taking advantage of natural resources to create events such as those available at Hackberry Flats.

On the bright side, the Southwest Correctional Facility has an opportunity to expand its operations which will create more jobs and the dairy industry is poised to hire more employees if they can get additional water for the milk cows.

Tillman County representatives identified four areas to work on to bring in economic development. The first was to identify what needs are existing for workforce development and then implement corresponding training to meet those needs. The second was to actively lure more and better service providers such as insurance agents, automotive repair shops, tire shops, and retail sales. The third is to bring in a grocery store tailor made for rural areas, and fourth is to increase the number of restaurants and cafes in the county.