



**Community Innovation Grant  
FINAL Report**

<b>Organization:</b>	REAP Investment Fund, Inc.		
<b>Project Title:</b>	Vision West ND Plan Director Supports		
<b>Primary Contact:</b>	Shirley Brentrup		
<b>Amount:</b>	\$199,000	<b>Grant Term: 11/1/13 to 12-31-15</b>	<b>Grant ID:</b> 28801
<b>Report Date:</b>	February 2016	<b>Submitted By:</b>	Shirley Brentrup



***Just in case the reader of this report needs a bit of background:***

*In 2012, the REAP Investment Fund implemented a HUD Sustainability Project in 19 counties in western North Dakota called Vision West ND. Seventeen counties completed a county strategic plan. Four segments of the Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation completed local strategic plans. Each of these plans has a Plan Director. Once these county and segment plans were written, the project team moved on to the creation of the Regional Sustainability Plan.*

*At that time, it was evident more needed to be done for these local Plan Directors. We had seriously underestimated the role and immense work load Plan Directors would initiate, implement and direct.*

*This Technical Assistance for Plan Directors project aimed to fill that void and to assist local Plan Directors towards their plan's implementation and goals. It was also expected to increase networking, reduce isolationism, increase skills and ultimately increase results.*

*The HUD grant was completed in January of 2015. Since that time, the Vision West ND Regional Plan is being implemented under the direction of the Vision West ND Consortium which continues to meet, plan, educate and collaborate on local and regional issues.*

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What specific aspects, components or activities related to your work over the entire grant term were most instrumental to making progress? Why was each important? (Up to three answers, 200 words maximum each)

1.	<p>The most instrumental activity providing the best investment for the Plan Directors were 3 technical assistance retreats held in September 2014 and April and August of 2015. The retreats provided information to the Plan Directors and other attendees from their communities in a special “just for them” setting. This was more successful than traditional communication methods like emails, newsletters, webinars and even personal visits.</p> <p>The retreats presented (1) opportunities for networking, (2) for receiving education in specifically requested areas, and (3) for sharing their best practices. They viewed this as invaluable. Relationships were built that would likely not have happened otherwise. Each took away tools and materials that will assist them now and in future efforts. The retreats addressed the isolationism we had noted earlier. They continue to build relationships within their communities and within their region. The original intent was to hold only two retreats but the Plan Directors requested a third. We held one retreat in the north (Minot), one in the middle of the region (Watford City) and one in the south (Dickinson). By doing this, we were able to reach all the Plan Directors for at least one retreat and many attended all three.</p>
2.	<p>Another instrumental component of the project was the communication efforts from the project’s Technical Assistance Team. Personal visits and telephone calls by the technical assistants to the community leaders and Plan Directors provided an element of accountability to someone outside the local community. The teamwork between the technical assistance staff and the local Plan Directors helped build relationships that led to the knowledge of being supported and valued by Vision West ND and REAP. This led to increased attendance at the VWND Consortium meetings by the Plan Directors and in some cases, additional people from their communities.</p> <p>The relationship between the Technical Assistance Team and the local Plan Directors significantly increased the capacity of the local Job Development Authorities and/or Economic Development Organizations that many of the Plan Directors were affiliated with. Bringing expertise, resources and support from Vision West ND, USDA Rural Development, the Bush Foundation, the North Dakota Dept. of Commerce and many other agencies was instrumental in the completion of several local projects.</p>

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3. Training sessions were designed to building and enhance community capacity. This was the core of all the training provided. This included developing the core components of their sustainability plans through the use of new tools. We included opportunities for learning about county economic drivers, training on social media (including helping them set up new accounts), identifying how to work within the values of rural cultures and learning more about the community's key success factors identified in their original planning process.

We learned about being aware of the importance of community diversity and how to work within a changing culture. We addressed opportunities in value-added industry. Plan Directors learned new skills in grant writing techniques and in communicating directly with private and public funding sources.

What key lessons did you learn about doing your work during this year? Were any the result of something you might characterize as failure? (Up to three answers, 200 words maximum each)

1. We learned there are funding limitations placed on the Plan Directors. We identified counties with paid economic developers as their Plan Directors are much more active. They were more likely to continue working their sustainability plans than Plan Directors employed in positions not directly providing financial support for economic development.

The eight counties in southwestern North Dakota have long-term funded economic developers. They are organized and support one another. This was evident in their approach and implementation processes. The counties in the northern tier are not as organized. Some northern counties have limited, part-time city developers instead of county development offices. The northern counties with county economic developers were much more open to working on their plans because the plans fit their job activities.

Those who were volunteer Plan Directors were more likely to fall away from that position due to a lack of time and funding. While this provides a challenge for counties to fully implement their county plans, we do not characterize it as a failure. This is because, with the exception of just one county, all counties are involved or represented in the regional planning effort on the VWND Consortium.

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2.	<p>We also learned that some of the people who originally took on the position of Plan Director were no longer in that position. In some cases, a replacement was not named. This caused us to change direction in how we were going to work with the communities.</p> <p>In some cases, we were able to engage the Vision West ND consortium representative from that county, who either took on the role of plan director or passed information on to others in the community that could work particular aspects of their plan. In some cases, we had no response whatsoever from anyone in a county, even if there was a consortium representative. This indicated to us that there was not an interest in continuing the work at the local level in that county, though the county input was continued at the regional level through the consortium representation.</p>
3.	<p>While we provided education on capacity building in the retreat setting and worked individually with local Plan Directors, capacity for plan implementation continues to be an issue at the local level. We identified late in the project that much of the capacity problem is related directly to communication. Communication between Plan Directors and local leaders is not adequate in many counties resulting in lower levels of support from local leaders. This often happens because the counties have full control over the economic development budgets and developers are concerned about “rocking the boat.”</p> <p>We don’t view this as a failure, but rather an opportunity for training the local Plan Directors and city and county developers on how to effectively communicate with and engage local leaders in a positive way, specifically county commissions and city councils. This is one area we will address in the future.</p>

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Looking at the community innovation process diagram on the last page of this report, and how it might relate to the work you completed through your grant, is there any aspect of the model or any other way of thinking about community innovation that was instrumental to the success of your work?

Certainly the need for technical assistance in implementing plans at the local level had been identified early in this process. We originally believed the Plan Directors and their steering committees were in the “test and implement solutions” portion of the community innovation process model and this is what we planned for. However, when we developed the steps for implementing the plan, we learned that in some instances Plan Directors and their steering committees had gone back to the “generate ideas” area. In some communities, we needed to go back to the “increase collective understanding of the issue.”

Plan Directors were involved in the activities of this grant project in the beginning and they identified activities they needed. However, they needed more. To increase our understanding of where the communities were in the model, we conducted an initial survey of Plan Directors and the steering committee members who had originally generated the county or segment plans. This helped us identify the Plan Directors and the committee member’s level of need throughout the region.

It became abundantly clear that what the Plan Directors wanted was to have someone help them with project development and funding. Most importantly, they wanted to learn from each other and learn what works in similar areas. Increasing collective understanding through the retreats significantly increased the quality and quantity of ideas that were generated. Implementations of those ideas were often difficult due to lack of funds for implementation.

While not all Plan Directors learned to work their local plans, several of them did identify and complete individual elements. For those with measured levels of success, we witnessed the development of significant relationships with and buy-in from local leaders. This helped them to stay focused and productive when the political winds or the economy shifted or when local leadership lost its way or became distracted by other issues.

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What progress, if any, have you made toward achieving an innovation—a breakthrough in addressing a community need that is more effective, equitable or sustainable than existing approaches—and why do you think you are closer now, or further away, than when you started the grant?

We identified significant project achievements in ten of the counties. The counties with significant project achievement have organized and enjoyed collaborative efforts from across community sectors including economic developers, businesses, city and county government and education. Four other counties have experienced a slower but forward movement. They have progressed but have not seen significant progress in fulfilling their county plans and have not had as much collaboration. Two of the counties made a decision to be involved at the regional level and not to participate in this Technical Assistance for Plan Directors project. Both believe their efforts at the regional level are much better served. Three of the counties have demonstrated limited participation at the local and at the regional level. We have not been as successful with the four segments located on the Fort Berthold Reservation that participated in local planning. One of these communities reaches out to us when they need assistance. Two of the communities have completed projects identified in their community plans. None of the four have been responsive to us when we have reached out to them, however. This is likely due to the change in tribal leadership after the planning process took place.

In several instances we witnessed innovation on specific projects that had been in the planning process for years finally come to fruition. The community center in Dunn County is a good example. In other instances, Plan Directors never got to the implementation phase as described in the model. We learned that if Plan Directors moved from generating ideas to testing and implementation without attention to capacity building, communities weren't able to push through to implementation and on to innovation.

Despite the different tiers of achievement at the county and segment levels, we are much closer to achieving community innovation than before this project was started. By strengthening the efforts of Plan Directors at the local level, we have been successful in bringing greater attention and their collaboration to the Vision West ND Consortium, which in turn will bring positive long-term benefits to the counties and cities within the 19-county region.

This Technical Assistance for Plan Directors project has been a building-from-the-bottom-up effort that has brought about a tremendous amount of success for individual growth and for county level projects. It has also provided for continued collaboration of Vision West ND's regional efforts and for shared recognition at the state and national levels.

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If you did not achieve the innovation, what additional progress, work, or steps would be required to reach that breakthrough or innovation?

We were able to achieve the innovation in more than half of the 19 counties. In the counties where we are still at the “test and implement solutions” level, it was the lack of inclusion and collaboration with the local leaders that was missing. Even though most of those leaders saw value in and were involved at the regional level, they were not being engaged through collaboration at the local level. For these Plan Directors it was a struggle to understand how to get “buy-in” locally. Many felt their positions and efforts didn’t warrant the attention of local leaders who were inundated with more pressing issues of rapid and demanding development.

What are the next steps or plans, if any, for continuing this project?

The Vision West ND Consortium has been exploring a number of other opportunities that will strengthen plan implementation at the county, segment and regional levels. This is being done through discussions with local leaders and local Plan Directors. One of the requests from Plan Directors is to keep networking and to work on collaboration and idea sharing. The VWND Consortium has made this commitment and will schedule upcoming gatherings in conjunction with at least two Consortium meetings each year. Agendas for the sessions will be developed by the Plan Director in the host county with assistance from the Vision West ND administrative team.

Another identified effort is to engage local leaders in leadership succession planning and knowledge transfer. Local leaders who have been in the trenches” for several years demonstrate typical “burned out” attitudes. Unfortunately in small rural communities, it is very tough to find a successor. The succession planning/knowledge transfer event is viewed as an opportunity to improve inter-generational relationships in the community and infuse local leadership with new energy.

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If you could go back to the start of your grant period and give yourself one piece of advice or learning, what would it be? Why would this have been important to know?

It would have been nice to have begun with a better understanding of the capacity issues for each county or segment. There was a long gap between when the plans were initiated and when the follow up and technical assistance was provided by this project. It took some time to know the issues that were commonly shared and those that were more personal or individual to a Plan Director or a community. This included the real or perceived barriers to capacity building. Once we reached these realizations, we were able to effectively and collaboratively refocus our work giving attention to those who were on board while trying to bring others back to the project and to participate.

What else would you like to share with us? (Optional)

Just to clarify in the graph *below*, the “we” is predominately the Vision West ND Consortium. The REAP Investment Fund, Inc. is extremely proud that the VWND Consortium continues its work as that is the ultimate prize of any project – that those assembled under the project continue to implement the goals of the project. The REAP Investment Fund currently works to assist rural businesses and development in the region. Their focus is to bring progress and funding to their regions and to provide economic development through their loan programs.

The Bush Foundation Community Innovation grant was so timely to this project and has been greatly appreciated. On behalf of the two boards (VWND Consortium and the REAP Board) and the Plan Directors, we thank you for the funds for this project but most of all for identifying that what we do is important enough to warrant a partnership with the Bush Foundation.



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**Instructions:** Consider the project funded by your Community Innovation Grant and place an X in the primary focus area(s) for each timeframe.

Our project work has focused on...	We did this prior to this grant reporting period	We did this during this grant reporting period	We plan to do this in the future	We do not plan on doing this
Identifying a community need	x	x		x
Engaging stakeholders to increase collective understanding of the issue	x	x	x	
Generating possible solutions to the issue or problem	x	x		
Testing or beginning to implement possible solutions to the issue or problem		x	x	

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### Financial Report (Confidential)

Please attach an income and expense statement for this grant period to date that includes a side-by-side comparison with your original grant budget. Feel free to include a narrative of your expenses and income, if helpful.

Vision West ND Plan Director Supports Original Project Budget 2014		Approved Revision March 2015	Final Income & Expenses 12-31-15	Final Expenses by Fund Sources	
Budget		Revised Budget	Final Budget	Bush Foundation	HUD Grant
<b>SOURCES OF SUPPORT</b>					
Bush Foundation	\$199,000	\$199,000	\$199,000	\$199,000	
REAP - Vision West ND Implementation	60,000	60,000	60,000		60,000
REAP - Vision West ND Travel	6,000	6,000	6,000		6,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$265,000</b>	<b>\$265,000</b>	<b>\$265,000</b>	<b>\$199,000</b>	<b>\$66,000</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>					
Technical Support	160,000	159,997	158,197	158,197	
Coach/Mentor - Contracted Position	96,000	96,000	96,000	35,000	61,000
Operating Expenses / Overhead		5,003	6,803	5,803	1,000
Travel	9,000	4,000	4,000		4,000
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$265,000</b>	<b>\$265,000</b>	<b>\$265,000</b>	<b>\$199,000</b>	<b>\$66,000</b>