

Project Contact

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Description of the Smart Growth Challenge

The Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Council of Governments (CWCOG) is requesting EPA technical assistance for ***Redevelopment for Job Creation***. Our community faces challenges in developing appropriate and coordinated public policy and strategies to support economic diversification efforts aimed at new or growing economic clusters, which also support health and social equity concerns.

In 2010, the Cowlitz Economic Development Council completed the “Turning Point” strategic plan for economic diversification that identified potential growth sectors for our region. These include specialized manufacturing, advanced logistics and distribution, healthcare, and professional/technical services. The report identified the need to prepare the local workforce for employment in these industries. It also emphasizes the importance of creating quality places in order to attract a good talent pool and employers who need a highly qualified workforce.

Our technical assistance request would be focused on redevelopment and infill areas located in or adjacent to neighborhoods in the urban core that would create more livable communities and offer sustainable economic opportunity. These neighborhoods have the greatest ethnic diversity and the lowest socio-economic status in our region. The people living in these neighborhoods are also negatively impacted by factors in their environment that impact their social determinants of health, negatively affecting educational attainment, economic security, housing stability and health outcomes.

Our region is disproportionately burdened with poor health outcomes and lacks access to a diverse and sustainable economic base. Cowlitz County ranks 33rd out of 39 counties in the state of Washington for overall health outcomes, based on a number of health, community and economic indicators. Details can be viewed at the [County Health Rankings and Roadmaps Report](#). Our county ranks even lower on social and economic indicators, including educational attainment, unemployment, child poverty, children in single parent households, inadequate social support, and violent crime.

We are requesting technical for the area of South Kelso. The impacts of the challenges mentioned above are evident across our region, but are especially manifested in the South Kelso neighborhood. This area has a well-established residential core bounded by features of citywide and regional significance, including Downtown Kelso to the west; Southwest Washington Regional Airport, Three Rivers Mall and Talley Way Industrial Area to the southeast; and county/city civic infrastructure within the northern commercial district.

South Kelso is a community of 5,856 persons living within 2,264 households and is home to about half of the city population. The neighborhood has a preponderance of young family households in a county that is dominated by an aging “boomer” population. This community is relatively rich in racial and ethnic diversity (17%) with a strong share of Hispanic residents (12.6%).

The neighborhood of South Kelso experiences widespread poverty and disinvestment. In addition to the lack of healthful community attributes, the residents of South Kelso face challenging living conditions – a high concentration of run down, vacant and boarded up homes, high volumes of rail and truck traffic, industrial pollution, and high crime rates – all of which contribute to poor health outcomes. Residents disproportionately experience poorer health outcomes with obesity, respiratory illnesses, cancer, and heart disease in comparison to other counties in Washington.

Role of EPA-led Team

Our region struggles to generate interest in redevelopment and infill to serve regional economic goals while addressing social equity. Greenfield development is the path of least resistance, but results in the discontinuity one finds with sprawling development patterns in our region. CWCOC received “Building Blocks” technical assistance from EPA in July 2012 relating to our region’s “Economic Vitality & Fiscal Health”. This two-day workshop helped many local government officials clearly understand—most, for the first time—the financial argument that can be made for promoting compact development through infill and redevelopment. That EPA-led “Building Block” workshop has sparked several formal and informal conversations since, the most common theme being: *“What are the tools that we need to make this happen?”*

Toward this end, CWCOC staff assisted the City of Kelso in securing a team of masters-level candidates in urban planning from Portland State University to identify specific concerns and priorities of the South Kelso neighborhood in order to target revitalization efforts to meet local needs. This work will be completed by June 2013, and will create a stepping stone toward development of a new city comprehensive plan. This team is using community health and social equity as a focusing lens to develop a five-year neighborhood action plan that will have several elements, including a focus on:

- ✓ Community design - promoting active, healthy lifestyles with links to recreation; promoting compact development and active lifestyles with a walkable, bikeable neighborhood connected to shopping and services
- ✓ Links to economic opportunity - a regional mall struggling for viability; vitality of the adjacent Downtown core; publicly-owned land connecting the airport and nearby industrial area on Talley Way.

Our region needs a cohesive policy toolkit addressing land use, transportation, health and economic/workforce development policy that will help economically diverse business and industry to existing communities through infill and redevelopment. We need a set of strategies that will translate these policies into initiatives that can be implemented in a cohesive fashion.

Technical assistance will help link opportunities that face our region. Specifically, the EPA-led consulting team would hold workshops aimed at local elected officials and key agency staff to inform them of available policy choices and implementation tools. The consulting team would assist in developing a policy and strategy “toolkit” that would:

- Link the South Kelso Revitalization Plan to diversify economic opportunities for residents by examining policies and strategies to promote infill, redevelopment, and multi-modal transportation infrastructure in the Tally Way Industrial Area;
- Utilize the Talley Way Industrial Area as a “development lab” to promote private sector growth in specialized manufacturing, advanced logistics and distribution, and professional/technical services, and identifying the public policy and strategy choices that would help make that happen through infill and redevelopment;
- Identify strategies to engage private sector activity in redevelopment and infill, including streamlining of permitting and coordination of development requirements;
- Enhance current work to integrate health policy into land use, transportation and economic development planning; and,
- Identify strategies to connect or give focus to what is currently a confusing array of workforce development initiatives that will generate forward momentum to meet workforce needs of a diversified economy with skills to replace retiring workers.

The consulting team would also provide the following assistance:

- Conduct research and economic analysis to determine the tools and approaches that are appropriate for our situation
- Conduct educational workshops for local officials, staff and the public
- Recommend land use, transportation, economic development and community health policies which improve economic vitality and social equity concerns

- Develop a strategy to unify and focus our regional workforce development efforts

CWCOG staff would be available to collect any existing plans and data that the consulting team might need to develop meaningful, highly targeted workshops to local officials and key staff, and support development of our “toolkit”.

Potential Impact of the Project

The goals for this technical assistance project include:

1. Evaluation of opportunities and development of policy and strategies to promote infill and redevelopment in the Talley Way Industrial Area that will help meet the economic diversification goals of the Turning Point strategic plan;
2. Enhancement of meaningful diverse economic opportunities for South Kelso residents
3. Identification of “smart growth” design and development guidelines that should be incorporated into the Talley Way Industrial Area to support improvements to social equity, community health, and quality of place.
4. Develop a strategy to align various workforce improvement initiatives in support of the Turning Point plan and to help meet the goals of the South Kelso Revitalization Plan.

The work and deliverables required to meet these goals will form a “toolkit” that is replicable and relevant to jurisdictions with struggling economies, disparate poor health outcomes, and social inequities.

The timing of this technical assistance will help link with other local initiatives or planning efforts that are currently underway, or soon to be underway. These include:

- Sustainable Communities– CWCOG has “Preferred Partner Status” with HUD Sustainable Communities Initiative.
- Active Community Environments for All Ages – CWCOG partnership with the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund to integrate health and planning policy that will create Active Community Environments for All Ages.
- Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) – CWCOG partnership with Oregon Public Health Institute to promote community health planning efforts.
- Community Health Improvement Plan – county-wide strategic plan led by Cowlitz County Public Health Department.
- [Transportation Systems Plan \(TSP\)](#) – “Complete Streets” plan completed and moving towards implementation for the Kelso-Longview Urban Area.
- 2014 Longview-Kelso Consolidated Community Development and Housing Plan.
- The City of Kelso Comprehensive Plan.

Leveraging Other Federal Investments.

Smart Growth Livability Principles offer a framework and foundation for this project. The development of this “toolkit” will provide policy options for local officials when making investment and long-range planning decisions regarding land use, transportation, housing and economic investment. Increased multi-modal opportunities may provide increased value to the surrounding neighborhoods. Residents may improve health outcomes through use of bicycle and pedestrian paths for recreation or for access to work and conveniences. Expanding opportunities within employment centers and targeting workforce improvement efforts more strategically will decrease barriers to employment and self-sufficiency for community residents, and offer pathways for advancement in new economic sectors.

Linking the South Kelso neighborhood to new opportunities in the Talley Way employment center supports Kelso’s existing communities. Most of the population base is within a 0.5 to 1.0 mile radius (walking and/or transit). By investing in walkable, safe and healthy neighborhoods close to employment centers, existing investments in public services and utilities are leveraged to gain a stronger tax base, resulting in improved fiscal health for the community.

CWCOG applied for the HUD Sustainable Communities grant in 2011 under the Cowlitz- Lewis Economic Development District (CLEDD) that was supported by the counties, cities, ports and other

agencies within Cowlitz and Lewis Counties. The grant focused in on five key issues that hamper regional economic prosperity: workforce readiness, business support, impact of regulation, quality of place, and uncertainty in the regional and global marketplaces.

CWCOG hosted an event in July 2012 with EPA as part of the Building Blocks program, receiving technical assistance for Cowlitz and Lewis counties. The report along with community feedback from meetings with CWCOG and CLEDD boards, established regional priorities. The consultants provided some next steps including short term and long term actions. Below are the priorities ranked highest to lowest by the CWCOG/CLEDD Board members as developed through the Building Blocks forum and follow up meetings with members.

- Pursue solutions to address major infrastructure issues such as transportation, flooding and other needs.
- Streamline the permitting process by coordinating development standards.
- Develop a regional approach to workforce training and re-training in order to address the loss of the experienced workforce due to baby boomer retirements and economic diversification.

Some of the implementation tools we have available include federal investments in transportation through our Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), the Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) and the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) through EDA. These programs are administered by the Council of Governments.

Community Need and Engagement

Health equity refers to the distribution of community resources and burdens. South Kelso experiences more than their fair share of burdens (e.g. barriers to healthy living, vacant/abandoned lots) and a lack of access to health-promoting resources (e.g. an environment that promotes walking and biking, safe neighborhood). These inequities are further enhanced by high rates of poverty, unemployment, and disinvestment. The technical assistance will improve access to economic opportunity and safe, healthy living environments by providing the appropriate tools to diversify the economic base through infill and redevelopment that is supported by land use and transportation policy.

The student planning team working on the South Kelso Revitalization Plan is conducting extensive outreach and engagement to under-represented groups, including English Language Learners, youth, foreign born, and elderly, to gather their identified challenges, assets, and needs within the community. CWCOG contracts with the county to plan and implement the county's strategic plan to end homelessness. Through this work, we are able to connect and engage with key organizations and community leaders that work with underserved and underrepresented populations. We will partner with them to engage with their constituents and address the concerns and needs of these populations throughout this process.

Political and Public Support.

The CWCOG and CLEDD boards are supportive of the efforts throughout the last two years as staff has pursued assistance to address the concerns of the region. This includes the elected officials of the Cowlitz, Lewis and Wahkiakum counties, city councils, port commissions, the economic development council, school districts, workforce development councils and two community colleges. A full list of the two boards is provided in the supplemental materials. In addition, there are numerous public and community supported organizations in support of this effort including Family Health Center, Dian Cooper, Director (dcooper@cfamhc.org), Ethnic Support Council Bill Reade (bill@ethnicsupportcouncil.org), Grounds for Opportunity & Lower Columbia Community Action Program Ilona Kerby, Executive Director of Lower Columbia CAP – owner/operator of GFO and director of CAP (ilonak@lowercolumbiacap.org), Michael Johnson, Administrator of the Kelso Community Service Office, WA Department of Social and Health Services (johmsmc@dshs.wa.gov), and two local coalitions: Cowlitz Housing First! Coalition and the Cowlitz Regional Housing Advisory Committee.