

HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE RIO GRANDE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

MRGDC IN THE 1970s

The Seventies can be said to have been the Middle Rio Grande Development Council's decade of organization and formation. This was the period in which the Council was first established and began to sort out the scope of its mission and the role it would play in the region. The impulse that led to its formation arose from two parallel sets of concerns on the part of the region's governmental officials: 1) the need to attract public resources to meet local service needs, and 2) the desire to effectively realize the state and federally funded programs that were already in existence and operating within the region.

With offices located in Del Rio, the forerunner to the Council, the South Texas Regional Economic Development District (STREDD), was officially dissolved and renamed the MRGDC. Officers were elected, including the first Executive Director, Richard P. Thomas, and the member counties of the Council were finalized. With their designation by the State as a clearinghouse for virtually all federal-funded projects in the area, the Council's first efforts focused on the proper planning and coordination of local public services and governmental programs. During this time South/West Planning Associates undertook regional planning for the Council. Their plan covered education, water and sewer development, economic development, health care, and regional housing, with economic development, criminal justice, and transportation being among the first areas in which the Council took action. The Criminal Justice Advisory Committee was the first of many advisory committees and councils created by the MRGDC to assure the widest possible local input into the region's law enforcement and criminal justice efforts.

In 1973, three years after its founding, the Council was designated as an Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce and embarked upon a twenty-year economic development effort. Other more focused and transient planning efforts were conducted in the areas of transportation and water resource development.

In the mid-1970s, with the advent of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and the Older Americans Act, the Council entered the arena of human resources and human services programs for the first time. It was designated as the regional sponsor and administrative overseer of the CETA program, and as the Area Agency on Aging, responsible for the delivery of Older American Act programs and services in the entire area.

In the late 1970s, the Council formed a contract with Southwest Texas Junior College to take over its Law Enforcement Training program, and it was at this time that the Council was deciding whether or not to continue with their offices in Del Rio. The Council's initial staff had grown to almost sixty, and the aggregate funding from all of its contracts had reached \$3 million per annum. Its policy-making and central administrative structure was essentially in place, and it had become a force in local affairs throughout the region.

MRGDC IN THE 1980s

In general, the Eighties can be characterized as a period of survival, consolidation and dramatic growth. The late '70s and '80s were transition periods in the life of the Council, and a period of considerable political and economic turmoil in the region and within the Council in particular. It featured the only significant rupture in the structure of the Council with the withdrawal of two of its most important local government members: the city of Del Rio and Val Verde County, and the subsequent transfer of MRGDC's headquarters from Del Rio to Carrizo Springs. By 1981, the continued existence of the Council and its designation as Council of Governments under the provisions of the Texas Local Government Code were at risk.

The period between 1982 and 1983 represented the turning point in the life of the Council. The 1983 elections saw a turnover in a majority of the members of the Board of Directors as seven of the nine counties and a majority of the region's municipalities elected new chief elected officials. Also, in 1983, the city of Del Rio and Val Verde County returned as members.

Working closely and cooperatively with each other and with Council staff, the new Board of Directors developed and implemented a new set of program policies and

processes that shifted the approach of the region from competition to cooperation. The region's communities worked together to establish a series of cooperative formulas through which available resources could be allocated throughout the region on an equitable basis, eliminating, or at least reducing, past disputes. This solution, known as the "Gentlemen's Agreement", is voluntary and provides for the equitable division of regional allocations on the basis of an established formula, thus assuring that there are projects available in every county each year.

It worked so well that in 1983 this formula allocation approach was applied to the Elderly Services programs, making these services available uniformly in eight of the region's nine counties for the first time; and in 1984 it was applied to the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program.

1984 also saw the establishment of the Middle Rio Grande Private Industry Council to oversee the implementation of the Job Training Partnership Act in the region, and for the first time the local private sector was brought into the Council's deliberations in a substantive way. The Council was designated as Grant Recipient and Administrative Entity for the JTPA program. The available resources were allocated throughout the region by the same type of formulaic approach previously applied to the Aging and CDBG programs, and the JTPA program was implemented in the region with a minimum of turmoil.

The latter half of the Eighties was devoted to the growth of the Council's available service mix, and the expansion of its service offerings. GED preparation and adult and youth educational remediation were added to the JTPA scope of services, and direct economic and industrial development services were incorporated into the planning and economic development efforts. JTPA Service and Education Centers were established in every county in the region. Finally, in 1988-89, the Council entered the fields of solid waste management and 911 emergency response services.

By the end of this eventful decade, the Council's staff had grown, and its aggregate contract resource base had increased to almost \$7 million. It had operations and offices in each of the nine counties, its headquarters remained in Carrizo Springs, and it had developed a large and sophisticated planning and program development effort in Uvalde.

MRGDC IN THE 1990s

If the themes of the Eighties were considered turmoil and growth, those of the Nineties were consolidation and diversification. The general cooperative approach to decision making remained the same, but this decade saw a concentrated effort on the Council's part to diversify its resource base, and to broaden the range of programs it managed and services it delivered to the governments and citizens of the region.

It entered the direct business service arena, establishing a Small Business Development Center with operations in Del Rio, Eagle Pass and Uvalde. It extended its 911 effort into the mapping and addressing of every residence, government and business location in the region through the use of GIS mapping technologies. The Middle Rio Grande Development Foundation was created as a separate 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization to serve the needs of the Council's goals aimed at benefiting all the region's elderly service centers and to its only Native American tribe, the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas.

In the area of Job Training, the Nineties saw the development of an extensive network of partnerships with local school districts for the provision of remedial education and GED preparation services to the region's "at risk" youth. By the mid-Nineties, the region saw the creation of the Middle Rio Grande Workforce Board (MRGWB), which became the recipient of all "workforce" funding for the Middle Rio Grande Region. Prior to the creation of the MRGWB the Council had been the recipient of all JTPA funding. The MRGWB was now the Governor's designated administrative entity for the region. The Council was later designated as the Fiscal Agent for the MRGWDB, but found itself having to respond to a Request for Proposal released by the MRGWDB for essentially the same services it had been providing to area residents within the region for over 20 years. In May 1998, through a competitive process, the Council was awarded the bid as "Operator" for all workforce programs to be sub-contracted by the MRGWDB. At the end of 1998 the council had 98 employees.

As a result of the aforementioned "Gentlemen's Agreement" approach to community development funds disbursement, in the eight years leading up to 2000, the region's local governments have laid more than 15 miles of water lines and 18 miles of

sewer lines, built 8 community and elderly nutrition centers, 2 fire stations and 4 EMS stations, and paved almost 100 miles of county roads. It has enabled an almost complete transformation of the region's system of public infrastructure. Over the past ten years, the Council's staff has administered over \$10 million in CDBG funds, and will continue to do so working closely with local communities, chambers of commerce, and industrial foundations to help support and sustain local development and marketing efforts.

Another notable accomplishment by the leadership of the Council during 1998 was their assistance in coordinating the development of the Middle Rio Grande (FUTURO) Empowerment Zone application that included several census tracts and developable sites in the counties of Dimmit, La Salle, Maverick, Uvalde and Zavala. The FUTURO project application was awarded a rural designation as a Federal Enterprise Community in January 1999 by the Clinton Administration.

In a larger sense, the Council has come to be one of the primary representatives of the region and its interests in state and national administrative, regulatory and legislative forums. It consistently and effectively represents the region in legislative and congressional sessions by aggressively providing information to State Representatives and Congressional Legislators on the needs and interests of the region's communities and citizens, particularly in the fields of workforce, transportation, health, education and criminal justice.

THE FUTURE

The future of the Council, like that of the region, is not yet set. The political and governmental revolutions that are currently under way in Austin and Washington, the economic revolution associated with the North American Free Trade Agreement that is currently under way in all of North America and particularly here along the U.S./Mexico Border, represent challenges that both pose problems and offer opportunities for the region and for the Council.

The future of both depend, as they have since the Council's inception in 1970, upon the continuing wisdom and leadership of the region's elected officials, acting through the MRGDC Board of Directors, and upon the vision and efforts of the Council's staff, under the direction of the Executive Director.