



HIGH COUNTRY
COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The High Country Council of Governments Strategic
Assessment
Executive Summary



Conducted by
The Southeast Regional Directors Institute
Fall 2023



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Complete Record Report
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About the High Country Council of Governments

The High Country Council of Governments (HCCOG) is designated by both state and federal governments as the official agency for the administration of various funds and programs. It provides an array of services to local governments that enhances the well-being of the region's communities. HCCOG serves 7 counties and 19 municipalities of Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yancey in North Carolina..

About the Southeast Regional Directors Institute

*The Southeast Regional Directors Institute is a professional development association for regional council executive directors and when applicable their councils and state associations in the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, **North Carolina**, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia*

Overview

At the request of the High Country Council of Governments (HCCOG) the Southeast Regional Directors Institute (SERDI) conducted a strategic assessment of the Council during the late summer and early fall of 2023.

The assessment consisted of five segments: (1) Online Surveys of the HCCOG Executive Board and High Country Municipal and County Officials (2) six focus group sessions of (a) HCCOG Executive Board (b) Planning and Resilience Leaders (c) Area Agency on Aging (d) Workforce Development Board (e) HCCOG Staff Management and (f) HCCOG professional staff. (4) HCCOG Executive Board work session and, (5) the submission of the Assessment Complete Record Report.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged throughout the assessment process and confirmed by the Executive Board at its work session:

The High Country Board of Directors must get all local governments to attend and participate in the Council's deliberations

Strategy

The HCCOG has the distinction of being possibly the only council in the United States whose governing board contains a seat for each local government in the region. The commitment to its Council is strong by those Executive Board members who attend and actively participate. The Executive Board feels it is up to them to reach out and encourage those local governments that do not regularly attend to participate so that all 26 local governments have a voice at the table on region's issues, challenges, and opportunities.

Action Steps

- The HCCOG Chair, and other officers, and possible members from bordering jurisdictions as well as the Executive Director should set up in-person meetings with each of the jurisdictions' representatives who do not participate currently in Executive Board activities. Who attends should be the call of the HCCOG Chair.
- The pitch should be made to those jurisdiction representatives that do not currently participate the importance of them being an active member of the Board and for their local government's interest being at the table.
- A quick overview of the COG, current activities, and if applicable a Return on Investment (ROI) analysis should be presented.

Responsible Parties

- The HCCOG Chair, Executive Director, and appropriate other Executive Board members.

Timetable

- As soon as possible.

There are four key challenges facing the region that HCCOG is best suited to be the convener to address.

Strategy

The challenges (1) Housing (2) Infrastructure (3) Workforce and (4) Gentrification of the region from the outside and the generational population. “Convener” can mean leading, assembling the appropriate key leaders and/or organizations, and/or HCCOG staffing support to address whatever the challenge, opportunity, or need may be. Currently only one of the challenges have program/standing committee that can take a deeper dive/regional perspective that being Workforce. Housing at all levels and the challenge of the gentrification of the region and failure of Raleigh to recognize population shifts in communities impacting government services and impact on infrastructure that is not recognized in funding formulations from the state. In addition to traditional infrastructure (water, sewer, roads, etc.) it is important to include electric utilities, broadband, in that consideration.

Action Steps

- A policy work committee for three of the four committees (Workforce exists) should be created. Each policy work committee should contain a cross-section of subject-specific professionals and local government professional and elected officials. Each policy work committee should have applicable HCCOG support staffing as deemed appropriate by the committee.
- Each policy work committee should develop an annual work program to study, address, and develop policy and action step recommendations to the HCCOG Board of Directors and the local governments in the region. Policies and action step recommendations should be developed in three categories: individual local governments, regional programs, and recommendations/requests for state support.
- Explore how the HCCOG’s afflicted 501c3 organization could be a funding conduit and/or support entity for the overall effort on challenges facing the region.

Responsible Parties

- Executive Board and Executive Director

Timetable

- To be determined.

Promotion of High Country Council of Governments.

Strategy

It is very important that the staff and the Board of Directors on behalf of the region's local governments promote the HCCOG. Those that criticize are almost always unaware of the services and initiatives that HCCOG are carrying out on behalf of them and the region as a whole.

Action Steps

- If possible, it would be great to add another administrative officer to the staff. This would enable the Executive Director and Communication Officer the ability to increase their promotion activities.
- HCCOG staff need to attend as many local government commission and council meetings as possible.
- HCCOG Executive Board need to update their governing bodies on the last deliberations of the COG and bring back any feedback to the Board.
- A communication strategy needs to be implemented to connect with the region's local governments on a weekly basis. What is going on in the region, new funding opportunities, highlighting current projects, ROI angles, explanations such as dues increases...why necessary, what it covers, the benefit to the region, COG, and their local government.
- Further develop the HCCOG brand and corresponding branding materials to be used by all staff to promote the variety of programs and support provided by the HCCOG. This could possibly include a baseline PowerPoint presentation as well as specific templates as needed to enhance the ability to tell the broader COG story. This would be developed with the assistance of COG's website designer and a link to the website should be placed on each of the region's local governments' websites.

Responsible Parties

- Executive Director, Communication Officer, Executive Board, and the Website Designer

Timetable

- As soon as possible.

Having More of a Regional Focus

Strategy

In addition to the traditional grant writing/technical assistance services provided by HCCOG to the local governments of the region, there should be more importance put on a regional focus. Approaching opportunities, issues, and challenges in a regional way. It gets to a convening role...if it means leading, if it means supporting, if it means coordinating, etc. it is an important role.

Action Steps

- Specifically, Housing and the Gentrification of the Region were mentioned as regional challenges that should be addressed by HCCOG convening the region's leaders and interests to address.
- Each year the Executive Board working with the Executive Director should identify a portion of the annual work program to address regional opportunities, challenges, and issues that HCCOG should help the region's local governments address.
- It should be the Executive Director's responsibility to work with the Executive Board to identify external partners at the region and if applicable, the state level that will be key to work with HCCOG in the regional efforts.
- The Executive Director needs to work with the website designer to add a "Regional Endorsement" place for individual local governments to share initiatives they are undertaking and to learn of other local initiatives going on elsewhere that might be an initiative worth duplicating in their own community.

Responsible Parties

- Executive Director and Executive Board.

Timetable

- As soon as possible.

Enhance / expand the HC Workforce Development Board's role as regional convener

Strategy

While the HCWDB has a history as a focal point in workforce issues in the region, and with the exception of some recent funding from ARPA to address specific issues, stakeholders agreed that there is a need for more. The workforce issues inherent in the region's current (and future) economy require a broader and more direct involvement by those same stakeholders. As noted frequently in the assessment process, the convener role does not place the WDB in a leadership role, it may assume other roles given the expertise or interest of other workforce/educational entities.

Action Steps

- While the WDB does develop and implement comprehensive four-year plans and a program year workforce development plan in accordance with WIOA, the Board should explore and pursue the development of its own "Strategic Plan" using external resources (via procurement). The WDB is a key component of the COG's CEDS process, they will have experience in this process.
- One desired outcome would be the identification of necessary need-specific summits, task force development and supportive funding streams for said activities.
- Continue outreach sessions throughout the region on workforce specific topics (expungement, skill shortages, underemployment, assimilating Latinos, etc.) and develop a network of interested stakeholders to support said strategic planning and convening for the region on critical issues.

Responsible Parties

- Executive Director and Workforce Staff and identification of appropriate partners.

Timetable

- Immediate...as soon as feasible.

“Revisit” HCCOG’s legislative outreach effort

Strategy

The HCCOG’s Legislative Committee of 10 Executive Board members should increase its engagement with the region’s legislative delegation. Participants in several focus groups think there is a need to delineate High Country’s issues from those similar but different challenges found in the Asheville metro region.

Action Steps

- Consideration should be given to use the Board meeting prior to the Legislative Session for the delegation to share with the Board their thoughts on the upcoming session overall and regarding their work with their committees.
- Time should be set aside at the Board meeting for the Board and Executive Director to share with the delegation the accomplishments of the COG during the past year and key regional initiatives that are or are being considered in the upcoming months/year.
- Ensure that all Board members have a ‘hip pocket’ narrative that outlines how any local project has a regional impact of some kind and can include that in discussions regarding local projects and needs with their specific legislator.
- A discussion should take place to consider a quarterly communication between the HCCOG and the legislative delegation for updates on initiatives and actions in both directions.

Responsible Parties

- HCCOG’s Legislative Committee, Executive Board, Executive Director.

Timetable

- In place to enact prior to next session of the Legislature.