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GRADD @ 50

Triumphs marked by regional cooperation

 By Jacob Dick Messenger-Inquirer

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From sewers, water plants and transportation maintenance, cities and counties have a lot of moving parts to manage just to stay afloat on a daily basis. Factor in the long-term work it takes to keep a place and its people growing along with the rest of the world, and the task both rural and urban communities have becomes daunting.

Luckily, the seven counties and 27 cities of the Green River Area Development District haven't had to go it alone. In September, GRADD celebrated 50 years of assisting the area's local governments with their needs and being a focal point for regional cooperation.

GRADD is almost like a United Nations in the seven-county area, acting as both a resource and negotiating table for its municipalities, but Jiten Shah, executive director of GRADD since 1987, said he hopes people see it as something more personal. When Shah and members of GRADD were showing representative from its sister region in the Czech Republic around Beaver Dam last week, he said he ran into some citizens who recognized their work.

"They told me they really like what we do, but they weren't talking about the millions in grant funds we bring or the advisement we give," Shah said. "They were talking about the senior meals we deliver and how our resource coordinators were able to check on what's available for their family. That's what we want, for people to think about how we can help their families."

The state General Assembly passed legislation in 1972 defining the 15 area development districts throughout the state and what their responsibilities were, but the organization that would be GRADD was already 4 years old.

Shah said economic development and large-scale civic planning was largely happening in state offices and the University of Kentucky to be handed down to local governments. It was during the late 1960s that GRADD's founder, George Russell, decided to try out his idea of shifting development to the hands of local communities working together as a region.

Russell founded GRADD in 1968, but the organization didn't have any staff for about 12 months. In those early days, the organization was an association of elected officials and Russell, who was being paid by UK, trying to make their new idea take root. In 1973, Russell brought in Shah, a fresh-faced 26-year-old straight out of his environmental engineering master's program.

"When I came in 1973, we probably had six people on staff," Shah said. "We were on the second floor of the laundromat by the (Daviness County Courthouse)."

Shah was able to award Russell with GRADD's Lifetime Achievement award at the Sept. 21 banquet celebrating the organization's anniversary.

GRADD now has its own building in Owensboro and has expanded its missions to match its communities' growing needs. In its early days, Shah said GRADD shifted itself to tackle “hot button” issues focused on by state government. In the early '70s, that meant helping communities with waste management as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency became more active with regulations and creating senior resources in the '80s as governments worried about their aging populations.

Now, Shah said GRADD's mission of giving local communities the tools to control their own destinies means it should shift to listening to what each area needs.

“Rather than waiting for the money to come to us, we need to be more aggressive to see where the needs are and get the funds,” Shah said. “We've been implementing programs and funding sources so much, we are getting away from planning. I'm hoping in the next year or so we can have focus groups in each place or county.”

In Daviess County and Owensboro, which makes up about 45 percent of the GRADD region's population, the agency's role has largely changed. GRADD used to be instrumental in doing everything from creating transportation studies about Owensboro roads to creating programs like the child care center at Owensboro Community and Technical College.

Daviess County Judge-Executive Al Mattingly said GRADD helped bring the city and county into a place where it could take care of its own planning, but it was still invaluable in lending the manpower to secure funding for projects like the neighborhood-saving sewer project currently underway at Friendly Park and Cedar Hills.

Mattingly said the organization really shines by bringing counties with similar needs together to lobby for funding from state and federal governments, an ever-increasing necessity in the current fiscal climate.

“One of the biggest things with GRADD, they are ever pushing cooperation and regionalism,” Mattingly said. “That's very important when every dollar is becoming more precious.”

The latest project GRADD assisted with was the newly christened water treatment plant designed to serve four different water districts across McLean County. Operational since March, the plant had its ribbon-cutting last week.

McLean County Judge-Executive Kelly Thurman said the project was a result of cooperation with the multiple cities and water districts in his county, but staff from GRADD helped make their efforts from 2008 a reality in 2018. Since the project committee started meeting, Thurman said Joanna Shake, community and economic development department director, helped facilitate the meetings and finish the large amounts of paperwork needed to fund the project.

When the group of leaders headed to Frankfort to meet with leadership of the Kentucky Department of Local Government, a commissioner pulled him aside to give him a message.

“He said 'in all my years, we have never seen a group of county leaders so united for one cause,' ” Thurman said. “Johanna was certainly very instrumental in keeping that together. There is a list of GRADD staff that helped make this possible. They really stepped up.”

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