

Colorado Association of Regional Organizations, practicing what we preach.

Laura Lewis Marchino, Asst Director of Region 9 EDD of Southwest Colorado & Chair, CARO

In today's era of regionalism, Colorado's Councils of Governments and Economic Development Districts are more and more important as regional conveners and problem solvers. However, Colorado is behind other states in that as of 2005, 39 states had established state associations for their regional organizations and Colorado was not one of them. Colorado's regional governments as a rule have focused more on their internal jurisdictional boundaries and not on statewide concerns.

In early 2009, former Northwest Colorado Council of Governments executive director, Gary Severson, introduced to the 14 Planning & Management Regions the idea of forming a statewide association. This idea was met with support and the recognition that regional organizations need to be accountable as organizations to their peers and "practice what they preach". Specifically, a statewide association can help individual organizations improve the consistency, quality and delivery of services, provide best practices, and develop new partnerships, programs and funding. There was recognition that "you are branded by the lowest common denominator, not the highest performer." The group formed the Colorado Association of Regional Organizations (CARO).

Charles Unsel with the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DoLA) said that DoLA played an instrumental role in bringing the regional groups together by convening an organizational meeting, hiring a meeting facilitator, and creating a listserv because they saw regions as critical partners.

"DoLA has provided Impact funding for COGs since soon after the Impact program started and we wanted make sure we were spending grants funds strategically to support regional partners" said Unsel.

Though DoLA funding has been cut due to the state budget situation, Unsel says that having CARO has been extremely beneficial to DoLA. "When Governor Hickenlooper started the Colorado Blueprint initiative, CARO was a place for the Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT) to get input and provide information to representatives from the regions."

There are other examples including when the Colorado Department of Transportation wanted to include every town in their Transportation Planning process, and under Governor Ritter, Unsel cited the statewide New Energy Communities effort as another that needed to be done on a regional basis.

Only three years old, CARO is open to all regional organizations and has 11 dues paying members. CARO's goal is to increase uniformity, add value, and increase collaboration with government partners. At meetings held at least quarterly, CARO invites state and federal partners to provide reports to the regions, discuss programs, and give feedback. The Colorado Dept. of Local Affairs, the Economic Development Administration, USDA Rural Development, and the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade have been regular

participants at CARO meetings. Other participants have included federal and state legislative staff and the Colorado Department of Labor.

Most recently, CARO has received funds from the Economic Development Administration to complete a three year strategic plan including the potential for staff and funding. The group will also evaluate the need for formalizing CARO over the long-term. To get information about upcoming meetings, please contact Laura Lewis Marchino or Rachel Lunney at laura@scan.org or rachel@nwccog.org.