



Southeast Kansas

Pandemic Recovery And Resiliency Plan

Addendum to the SEKRPC 2021-
2026 Comprehensive Economic
Development Strategy (CEDS)

Serving Southeast Kansas – Allen
County, Anderson County, Bourbon County,
Cherokee County, Coffey County, Crawford
County, Labette County, Linn County,
Montgomery County, Neosho County,
Wilson County, and Woodson County

Summary

In the past year, southeast Kansas has worked to recover from the health crisis, the COVID-19 Pandemic. Adaptations, innovations, collaboration, and partnerships have pushed the region through this difficult, challenging, and ever-changing time. The region has come together to build more resilient communities through the last year.

The Southeast Kansas Regional Planning Commission (SEKRPC) was awarded funds from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to help coordinate the response to the COVID-19 Pandemic impacts across the twelve-county region in which the SEKRPC serves. SEKRPC has held discussions, created a regional coalition, and has assisted in numerous funding opportunities as part of the recovery and resiliency efforts. The SEKRPC is committed to continuing our work with local businesses, cities, and counties to help with recovery and to better plan for future disasters as well as assess the needs of the region and be prepared to better respond to future disasters.

In April, SEKRPC gathered economic developers and those with like goals to meet, have discussion, and comradery. From this luncheon, the Southeast Kansas Regional Development Coalition was formed and a SEKRPC sought a Regional Coordinator to lead the group in discussions and trainings, and to provide information on recovery and resiliency programs as they are made available. During these initial discussions, the coalition made the determination of the most prominent needs and ongoing impacts from the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Coalition focused heavily on resiliency; how could our region, the most economically depressed corner of the state of Kansas, come

back better and stronger and face the path of future disasters with a better plan?

From the initial discussion with the coalition members, SEKRPC concluded that there were three main concerns within our region, all of which were determined keys to economic development within the region, and all of which were determined to make the region vulnerable to large impacts of a future disaster if not addressed. Those three primary areas include;

1. Housing
2. Workforce
3. Childcare

SEKEDC continued with quarterly meetings, email chains, and a webpage has been created to distribute information as needed or upon request. SEKEDC allows the region to work as a team to address the areas in need and further develop our region to be stronger.

“Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is a process.
Working together is success.”

– Henry Ford

Specific Input from Discussion Groups and Surveys

Surveys were distributed to SEKEDC members, business owners, and City and County employees to gather information and input on the current needs of the region. Below is summarized, detailed information on their answers.

Housing

Housing is a major issue within the region, the housing that is available for new residents is most likely well above something that a middle-class family could afford, or the housing needs countless hours and dollars worth of repair that it is not a feasible option. There are many infill lots within the region that are options for new construction but affording the new construction and being able to sell for a profit at an affordable cost are a continued issue.

Regional discussions for collaboration on creating housing for the region have been a major point in all discussions. At one point, a developer came to the SEKEDC group and presented a pitch, where they would use 3D printing technology to create cement homes which would reduce the cost, allowing the region to fill the present need.

Discussions on housing and regional collaboration to address the issues continue. The regional Economic Developers are collaborating, brainstorming, and discussing all feasible options to address the housing need in southeast Kansas.

Workforce

Trained workforce is a continued need in southeast Kansas. The availability of trained workforce prior to the pandemic was an issue, and the pandemic has only exacerbated that issue. Workforce in the region is decreasing slowly as the average age of the population is increasing. Young adults are leaving for college and not returning to the region to fill positions and young adults are not attending trade school as often, greatly reducing the number of tradesmen in the region.

The region is beginning to address these issues by creating career and technical education programs through the High Schools and partnering with local Community Colleges to increase the training available without leaving the region.

Childcare

Childcare is another issue that was heavily discussed in the meetings amongst the economic developers within the region. Childcare availability is slim in every part of the

region, childcare facilities are rare in the region and most rely on in home daycare providers for childcare. Although, in home daycare providers are few and far between in the region with most providers having a wait list, and even fewer providers who will take children under 18 months of age.

Larger childcare facilities in the region are also full most of the time, and some facilities have a cost that is drastically higher than a in home daycare. For lots of parents in the region, the cost of childcare is nearly equal to their salary, and they actually find that they save money by staying home rather than working.

Tying it all Together

Housing, Workforce, and childcare are all important items in improving communities. All three are related and directly affect one another improving, in order to allow for room for improvement in one area, we need to improve all three areas.

Housing needs to be available for the young adults, who would make up a new group of trained workforce, to come home. We cannot expect young adults to come home and fill the need for trained workforce if they do not have appropriate housing. Improvement to existing vacant housing, as well as new housing in infill lots would make a large difference in the housing market that is available in the southeast Kansas region.

Workforce needs to be able to have housing available, but also to have childcare. Americanprogress.org states that an estimated 2 million parents made career sacrifices due to issues with childcare in 2016 alone. Childcare facilities are an ideal solution to the lack of childcare in the region, mostly because they hold a larger number of children, but finding the

funds, and the workforce to create and operate a childcare facility is a true issue.

Addressing housing, workforce, and childcare within the region are major portions of recovery and resiliency that the SEKRPC will work towards solutions on in the coming years. Developing a plan, determining the method of execution of the plan, and executing the plan will be the focus of the next five years. Improvement in these three areas will encourage and allow for improvement in other areas of economic development, including expansion of businesses, creation or recruitment of new businesses to the region, and much more. All of which will result in a more resilient region.

Building Resiliency

SEKRPC has been working together with Economic Developers through the region to build resiliency. Challenges that were already present in the region, were exacerbated by

the pandemic. Southeast Kansas, prior to the pandemic, was labeled the most economically depressed corner of the state. SEKRPC has worked hard to assist in all ways possible to build resiliency through the pandemic.

Through the Coronavirus Air, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) SEKRPC received funding from the Economic Development Administration to begin the process of building back a more resilient region. Through these funds, the SEKRPC has been able to increase their assistance to the region. The following projects were created and carried out through the utilization of CARES Act grant funding:

- SEKRPC entered a partnership with the Small Business Development Center at Pittsburg State University to host workshops for small business owners within the region. These trainings are free and will aid business owners in successful recovery from the impacts of the pandemic.
- SEKRPC created the Southeast Kansas Economic Developers Coalition and the position of a Regional Coordinator with the goal that both the coalition and the regional

coordinator will allow more effort towards the research and execution of a regional initiative to become more resilient.

- SEKRPC assisted 20 counties/cities with their Community Development Block Grant Special Round CV application and administration.
- SEKRPC is assisting five counties and two cities with the administration of their American Rescue Plan Act Funds.
- SEKRPC has upgraded all technology to be able to assist virtually and communicate through telecommunication methods without interruption. SEKRPC has also created home offices for employees so that they are able to work from home in the event that it becomes necessary.
- At the time of submission of this CEDS, SEKRPC had begun creating this resiliency plan and will continue to add to it as a more strategic approach and plan come about.

Creating the Plan

SEKRPC has made strides in determining the necessary actions to address the most pressing matters within the southeast Kansas region. SEKRPC has researched and assisted with relief funding that was available to any community within the region who has requested our assistance. A coalition has been created to encourage regional discussion and effort, a regional coordinator has been hired to encourage regionalism and assist with their needs. The SEKRPC is committed to our region, the development of the region, and the ability of the region to become more resilient. SEKRPC will utilize and update this plan as actions are taken towards recovery of the impacts and the efforts to become resilient continue.