

2010 Regional Centers of Excellence in Green Infrastructure:

Final Report

July 2011

Houston-Galveston Area Council

Houston, TX

Population: 6,087,133

Size: 12,444 square miles

www.h-gac.com

713.627.3200

Land-of-Sky Regional Council

Ashville, NC

Population: 380,000

Size: 1,858 square miles

www.landofsky.org

www.linkinglands.org

828.251.6622

Background

The [National Association of Regional Councils](http://www.narc.org) (NARC) in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service recognized the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) in Houston, TX and the Land-of-Sky Regional Council (LOSRC) in Asheville, NC as Regional Centers of Excellence to receive small grants to serve as national models of land conservation and natural resource protection in July 2010. As Regional Centers of Excellence, the organizations carried out a variety of activities promoting regional green infrastructure planning to peer regional planning organizations nearby and across the country and were featured at NARC's 45th Annual Conference and Exhibition and through Green Regions, a public awareness campaign focused on the environment. As the 2010 Regional Centers of Excellence, H-GAC and LOSRC leveraged additional resources to complete significant communications and outreach activities inside and outside of their regional planning organizations' boundaries. This report summarizes the projects carried out by H-GAC and LOSRC during their RCE project and the overall success of NARC's second RCE award.

The RCE Initiative

With support from the US Forest Service, NARC held a national call for regional planning organizations with green infrastructure programs to propose information-sharing and peer-to-peer communication projects. NARC received proposals from many well-qualified applicants, and with the assistance of its Green Infrastructure Advisory Council, selected two recipients of \$7,500 grants to carry out their proposals and serve as national models. Recipients were selected based on program quality, capacity and reach, along with geographic, demographic and ecological diversity. Once selected, the RCEs were required to attend, present and exhibit at NARC's 45th Annual Conference and Exhibition in June 2011. In addition to the conference, each RCE was charged with providing any necessary information for case studies and additional articles for NARC's Green Regions website as well as presenting or participating in region-to-region information sharing activities.

2010 RCE Projects

The two 2010 RCEs, H-GAC and LOSRC face unique green infrastructure challenges based upon their diverse population densities, climate and ecological resources. The H-GAC region is home to over six million residents, making it the sixth largest metro region in the nation; the LOSRC region

houses around 380,000 people. Located in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the LOSRC region has a wealth of natural and cultural resources including national forests and rivers and a multitude of tourist and outdoor recreation destinations. The green infrastructure within H-GAC's thirteen counties contains significant wetlands, coastal prairies, forests and waterways. Both H-GAC and LOSRC are facing significant population increases in the future and have recognized the need to balance the increased infrastructure needs with protecting the environmental ecosystems in the region. Therefore, both organizations seek to inform and influence local land use planning to protect their region's unique ecological resources.

Prior to the RCE grant, H-GAC completed an Eco-Logical project that promotes livability in the Houston-Galveston region through the integration of long-range environmental and transportation planning. Through the support of the U.S. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Galveston Bay Estuary Program and additional regional partners, H-GAC used the Eco-Logical green infrastructure project to develop a regional decision support system, an interactive geographic information systems (GIS)-based mapping tool that integrates transportation and environmental planning to identify and conserve environmental resources in the region. Through their RCE grant, H-GAC improved communications about the Eco-Logical green infrastructure project by expanding their website and user guides, hosting a series of webinars and meetings with interested stakeholders to promote the use of the Eco-Logical application. To reach the state and national audience, H-GAC presented at NARC's 45th Annual Conference and Exhibition in San Diego, CA.

LOSRC utilized the RCE grant to offer presentations and training sessions to local and regional organizations based upon their project processes and lessons learned from their Regional Green Infrastructure Network, an interconnected network of lands and waters valuable for their ecological systems and services and significant contribution to regional and local economies. LOSRC compiled data from public, private and non-profit sources and created a series of maps, GIS datasets, information and other resources that can be used to help guide local governments and land use planners make informed land use and development decisions. LOSRC also reached out to the state and national audience through multiple presentations including NARC's 45th Annual Conference and Exhibition in San Diego, CA.

2010 RCE Project Impacts

With small \$7,500 grants, each region was able to leverage additional resources to complete significant communication and outreach activities. H-GAC conducted several outreach presentations, distributed approximately 95 brochures and 5 reports and reached out to approximately 200 stakeholders at H-GAC's Annual Dinner, FHWA/Volpe Center's webinar, the American Planning Association Annual Conference, and the Houston Property Rights Association meeting. At NARC's 45th Annual Conference and Exhibition, H-GAC presented on the development of a regional decision support system and their GIS based mapping tool to over 35 people. In addition, H-GAC coordinated improvements to the Ecological website, which has received almost 400 hits since September 2010.

With their grant funds, LOSRC developed training materials for a set of workshops to provide a deeper understanding of the maps, data and methodologies from their Regional Green Infrastructure Network. They have delivered this training material to multiple groups of federal and state officials, including the Chattanooga Office of Sustainability, the Buncombe County Land Conservation Advisory Board and the Warren Wilson College. Through a total of 65 presentations, they have reached out to approximately 1,960 people. Through their presentation at NARC's 45th Annual Conference and Exhibition, LOSRC detailed how

they used their green infrastructure project as an opportunity to bring together a diverse set of local governments, non-profit organizations and provide businesses from around the region to explore the values of green infrastructure.

Overall, H-GAC and LOSRC directly reached over 2,000 stakeholders throughout the project period, including local and nationally elected officials, environmental organizations, regional planners and many others. NARC facilitated and expanded upon these efforts by showcasing the RCEs work at their Annual Conference, featuring the RCEs on the NARC website and the Green Regions Campaign website, and providing information to NARC membership, partners, federal agencies and the public through its electronic newsletter, eRegions, press releases and meetings, among other efforts.

The full effects of the RCE project on the H-GAC and LOSRC region, the stakeholders and their communities will be visible for years after the 2010 RCE project's completion and extend far beyond its initial boundaries, as green infrastructure priorities are incorporated into local land use plans, long-range transportation and environmental plans, zoning changes and other programs at the regional and local level. For additional information on H-GAC and LOSRC's individual RCE projects, please see the two-page summary for each project.

About the National Association of Regional Councils

The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) serves as the national voice for regionalism by advocating for regional cooperation as the most effective way to address a variety of community planning and development opportunities and issues. NARC's member organizations are composed of multiple local governments that work together to serve American communities – large and small, urban and rural. In 2008, NARC launched the first of four public awareness campaigns – Green Regions, Mobile Regions, Build Regions and Secure Regions. For additional information, please visit www.NARC.org or www.GreenRegions.org.

About the Houston-Galveston Area Council

The H-GAC region is home to over six million residents, making it the sixth largest metro region in the nation. The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) is the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the 8-county Transportation Management Area (TMA) as well as the designated Council of Government (COG) for the 13-county region. H-GAC is also the state designated water quality planning agency. For additional information, please visit www.h-gac.com.

About the Land-of-Sky Regional Council

Land-of-Sky's four-county region is located in western North Carolina, in the Southern Appalachian mountains. The City of Asheville is at the center of our region and is the largest city in western North Carolina, with a current population of about 70,000. The region's population was about 200,000 in 1960, 380,000 in 2008 and is expected to approach 500,000 in 2030. Land-of-Sky Regional Council (LOSRC) is a Council of Governments (COG) that staffs the French Broad River MPO and the Land-of-Sky RPO. It is also a Local Development District (LDD) for the ARC and an Economic Development District (EDD) for EDA. For additional information, please visit www.landofsky.org.

About the U.S. Forest Service

The U.S. Forest Service manages over 193 million acres of National Forests, has the world's largest forestry research organization, and facilitates the conservation of state and privately owned forest land across the country. The Forest Service promotes the use of Green Infrastructure and Landcare to help conserve and manage public and private forest land that spans the urban to rural continuum. For more information on the U.S. Forest Service, please visit www.fs.fed.us.

About Green Infrastructure and Landcare

Green infrastructure is the network of natural lands, working landscapes and other open spaces that are strategically planned and managed to conserve their ecological functions while also providing associated benefits to human populations. Green infrastructure includes woods, meadows, forests, wetlands, farmland, animal habitat, etc., and plays an important role in reducing air pollution, filtering stormwater, maintaining ecological balance, and increasing the effectiveness of traditional infrastructure. Landcare, the community-based practice of holistic, cooperative and sustainable land management techniques is an integral aspect of maintaining green infrastructure.

The National Association of Regional Councils

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