October 2017

Engagement: Project 17 Revitalizing Southeast Kansas

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Project 17 revitalizing southeast Kansas

By Beth Bohn


With these challenges and more facing a 17-county region in southeast Kansas, state lawmakers and community leaders and members have turned to Kansas State University for solutions. The result is an award-winning economic development effort.

Project 17 is an innovation-based economic development initiative spearheaded by K-State’s Advanced Manufacturing Institute. The project seeks to improve the economic vitality and quality of life for those who live, work and play in Allen, Anderson, Bourbon, Chautauqua, Cherokee, Coffey, Crawford, Elk, Franklin, Greenwood, Labette, Linn, Miami, Montgomery, Neosho, Wilson and Woodson counties in Kansas.

“We have engaged more than 2,500 people in projects that address economic development, health, leadership and workforce development issues. These four areas are the pillars of Project 17,” Morgan said. "We've encouraged investment in broadband internet infrastructure, pulled people together to change the narrative of the region from poverty to innovation, launched multiple anti-poverty programs, created and retained hundreds of jobs, and provided tools and resources to help many businesses grow.”

Along with leadership, K-State’s contributions to Project 17 include assessing area resources through asset mapping, cluster analysis and network analysis; technology development; connections to other parts of the state; access to national best practices; K-State student engagement in the region; and much more.

Students and faculty from six K-State colleges and the Staley School of Leadership Studies have been involved with Project 17 through various activities and hands-on help. For example, grant funding is supporting the work of K-State agricultural marketing and agricultural communications students who are working directly with businesses in the region on new websites, e-commerce, logos and social media strategies to help them grow.

The project also has partnerships with two federal and four state agencies, three other Kansas universities, six Kansas community colleges, the Casey Family Foundation and more than 100 partner organizations.

Primary funding for Project 17 has come through the U.S. departments of Agriculture and Commerce and the Kansas Department of Commerce.

Some of Project 17’s successes:

• The Advanced Manufacturing Institute helped lead efforts to secure multiple grants for Project 17, including a three-year Rural Jobs and Innovation Accelerator Challenge Grant from the U.S. Commerce and Agriculture departments, with matching funds from the Kansas Department of Commerce; a federal grant for developing a networked manufacturing reshoring strategy for the region; and funding for anti-poverty programs to assist rural businesses with websites and e-commerce and to help agricultural producers aggregate and sell their products.

• A grant from a national foundation helped launch an anti-poverty program in three Project 17 communities. The small investment allowed anti-poverty programs to expand to four additional communities; two more communities are exploring starting programs. Using K-State resources, the programs are helping people find and keep jobs, improve family relationships and finances, and learn healthy habits and life skills.

• In partnership with the Kansas Leadership Center, more than 1,000 citizens have been trained on adaptive leadership strategies to improve civic leadership.

• The Kansas Fiber Network, a Kansas company that has worked closely with Project 17, is making a multimillion dollar regional investment in broadband trunk lines in the region.

• K-State, along with Project 17, is earning recognition for its engagement work. K-State was recently designated an Innovation and Economic Prosperity University by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. The designation recognizes universities that are leaders in spurring and promoting regional economic development. Work from Project 17 was highlighted in the university’s application for the designation. Project 17 also received K-State’s Excellence in Engagement Award in 2016.

Various activities and the places of Project 17. Photos courtesy of Jeff Tuttle/The Journal, Kansas Leadership Center.
Kansas State University
Project 17
A Change Platform for Large-Scale Regional Economic Development & Community Engagement

Pillar 1 - Economic Development
Promote Local Business
Promote the Rural Opportunity Zone program and assets of the region.

Improve Broadband
Improve access, speed, and affordability to allow for business expansion, e-commerce, and location of high tech businesses.

Increase Support Entrepreneurship
Provide the Ice House Entrepreneurship education program & create entrepreneurship networks.

Pillar 2 - Education / Workforce
Promote Quality of Life
Involve youth to see the value and opportunities in the region.

Link Education to Business Needs
Convene education and business leadership to ensure business needs are met through available education and training programs in the region.

Regional Cooperative Marketing
Aggregate regional resources to promote the region.

Regional Entrepreneurship
Promote SB 155’s free technical credentials and encourage STEM education and careers in region.

Pillar 3 - Health
Generational Poverty
Start Circles Programs to Strengthen Families with the goal of getting 10 percent of the region’s children out of poverty in 10 years.

Preventative Health
Increase physical activity, healthy food consumption, and tobacco cessation to create healthier communities and workforce.

Substance Abuse Prevention & Intervention
Address workforce related substance abuse issues and improve the access and affordability of treatment.

Pillar 4 - Leadership
Civic Leadership Training (Kansas Leadership Center)
Increase civic leadership capacity across region.

Youth Leadership
Develop opportunities for youth to gain leadership skills and see the value of living in the region.

Connecting Local Leadership Programs
Network leaders across the region for a stronger Southeast Kansas

Leadership connects and underpins every initiative.

Project 17 addresses systemic issues in four interrelated pillars and their respective task teams to create a platform of change using grassroots activity and engaged university support.

Engaged more than 2,500 Kansans.
Trained more than 1,000 leaders.
Leveraged more than $15 million in private investment.
Assisted more than 200 businesses.
Created and retained hundreds of jobs — with more in the pipeline — for an expected total of more than 1,000 jobs created or retained in the region.