

Some Rural Towns Know How to Fix It Fast

By Julie V. Kelly

Texas Department of Rural Affairs

No matter where you live, a town's not a town without streets, water and wastewater services, and other essential public infrastructure.

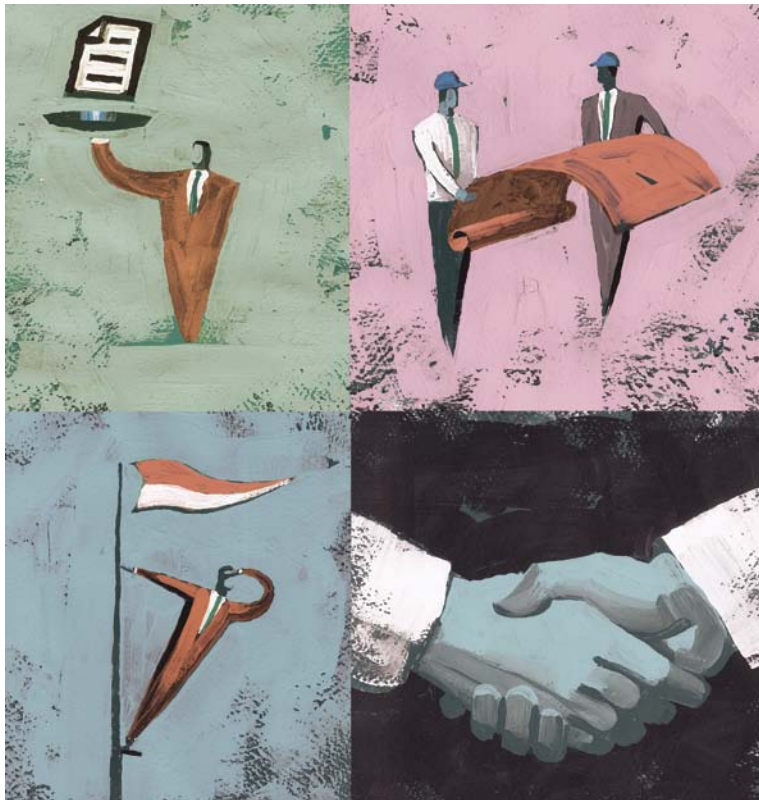
These are essentials that people and businesses look for when deciding whether to locate in rural towns or join the urban migration. Rural communities can end up stranded in the past if shaky resources and crumbling infrastructure get the better of them.

That's where the Texas Department of Rural Affairs (TDRA) comes in. The agency is one of the few providers of federal and state grants to improve public infrastructure or rebuild after a disaster in rural areas of Texas.

Eligible city or county governments can compete in a biennial grant process in which projects are often funded at 100 percent. Although matching funds are encouraged, they are not required. TDRA awarded more than 300 community development grants to rural Texas for the 2009 funding cycle of the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program.

The agency recently published its quarterly list of rural communities that completed grant-funded public infrastructure projects ahead of schedule by six months to a year. The list recognizes these communities for their hard work and motivates engineers and project consultants who work on the projects. It also ultimately will serve as a guide to help grant recipients assemble project teams with proven track records for success.

Of the 182 projects evaluated, 55 were designated as "Project Completion Stars" by the agency. Only



seven communities—Burkburnett, Crawford, Eden, Poth, Spofford, Kaufman County, and Wise County—finished a year ahead of schedule. Those numbers indicate the difficulty faced by rural cities and counties in repairing or improving their infrastructure.

What does it take to get roads paved or water systems up to snuff on a federal deadline?

Aside from good weather, success is all about strategy, and strategy should start at application time. But beware: The process leading up to construction is like a scavenger

hunt through a maze of federal red tape. You are going to need a good Sherpa to get you there. Expect paperwork.

"Completing even small projects, those under \$500,000, on time, can be very challenging for rural communities," said Charles S. (Charlie) Stone, TDRA's executive director. "They don't have the resources to throw money at the job when they are behind schedule, so they need to take steps at the beginning of the project to keep them on target."

Good Strategy Starts with the Application

Writing an accurate application that describes the project precisely and sets clear priorities is the first step. Some communities submit an application that loosely fits their project, leaving wiggle room to come up with what they really want to do. This approach can cause problems down the road when unforeseen design and environmental realities meet looming deadlines.

Writing an application that accurately reflects the community's intent will establish a clear project goal from

the start and can help communities anticipate design obstacles and apply for environmental and regulatory permits.

“An accurate project description on the application does not slow the process down,” said Mark Wyatt, director of TDRA’s community development division. “Instead it gives the project an important boost before it even starts.”

The application also helps communities establish priorities to guide the project.

“When we did the application, we prioritized which streets were getting paved first,” said Kay Howard, grant consultant and owner of A & J HOWCO Services Inc, the company that helped the City of Eden repair 15 streets with a TDRA disaster relief grant. “We already knew our priorities and started work as soon as we were confident we would get funded. By the time the contract was signed, we were already in motion.”

Choose Your Sherpa Carefully

When applying for a grant, a community may decide to use a consulting firm to help write the application, assist with administrative work (which can be formidable), and guide the community through the paper maze that accompanies federal grants. As with any Sherpa, regional knowledge and experience are vital. TDRA’s list of Project Completion Stars can help you choose a consultant with a good record for completing projects on time or ahead of schedule.

TDRA also ranks engineers on its Project Completion list. Look for an engineer who understands how CDBG projects work and is willing to make your small project a top priority.

TDRA allows communities to begin the procurement process a little early. Communities will have to assume some risk if they incur administrative costs before their projects are funded. However, if they do receive funding—and they can be reasonably certain of their chances once TDRA publishes its preliminary list of communities slated for awards—the agency will reimburse them for costs incurred before the grant contracts were signed. This allows a community to get a head start of several months on a project.

Project Design and Environmental Review Go Hand in Hand

Start designing the project at the same time you start the federally-required environmental review. Designing the project early allows communities to plan carefully and work out any thorny permitting obstacles at the beginning of the project, when there is ample time to solve problems.

Don’t forget that TDRA provides technical assistance to communities and works closely with other state agencies, such as the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Historical Commission, to streamline the

environmental review and related permitting process. As with procurement, TDRA adjusted the 2009 contract to allow environmental permitting to begin before contracts are signed.

This approach helped the City of Poth complete its project early, according to Karen Kibbe of Raymond K. Vann & Associates, the consulting company that helped the city meet state requirements for their wastewater system.

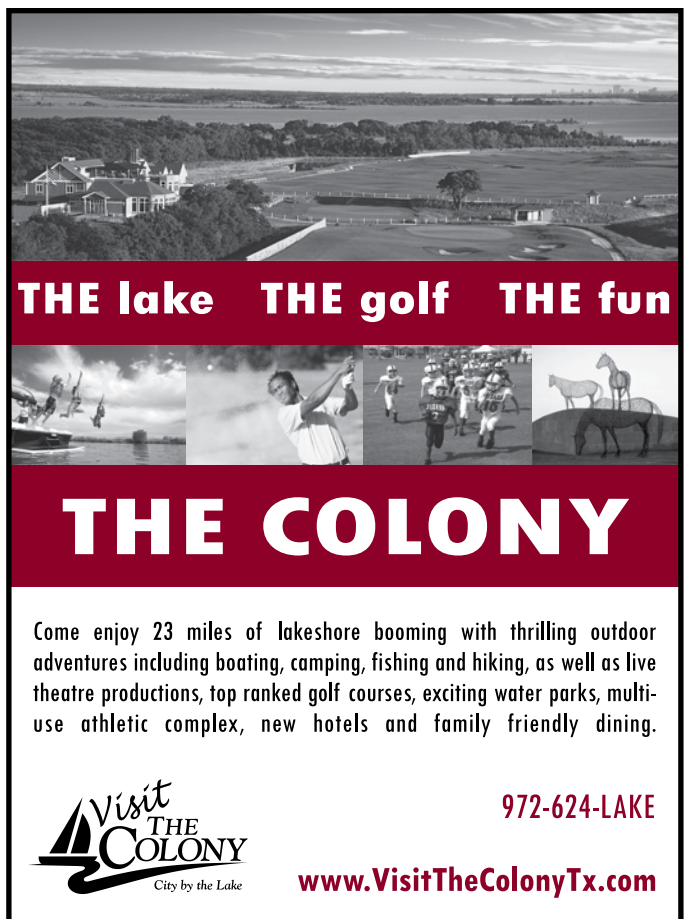
“We started the environmental review as soon as we were confident we would get funding for the project,” said Kibbe. “Poth has completed two consecutive projects, each in less than a year.”

Rewarding Star Performers

The real benefits of finishing a project six months to a year ahead of schedule go to the people in the community.

“Recognizing the program’s star performers is one way the agency can encourage prompt delivery of CDBG funds,” said Wyatt. “But most importantly it’s a means to get essential services to rural Texans as quickly as possible.”★

Project Completion Stars are posted quarterly at www.tdra.state.tx.us/index.php/Community+Development/What's+New.



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