

Regional collaboration as a component of Los Alamos economic development and sustainability plans

By: Johnnie Martinez

The geographic isolation that served so well the security needs of 1943's Manhattan Project continue to make Los Alamos an economic island, a fact that's compounded by the likewise isolated northern New Mexico environment that surrounds it.

Granted, the electronic immediacy of the internet and paved highways have done much to lessen that isolation, but the fact remains that Los Alamos faces significant location-based challenges as it works to diversify its economy and become less dependent on the Laboratory that gave it birth 63 years ago.

If Los Alamos is to succeed in its quest for economic diversification and self-sustainability, a great opportunity may be to partner to a much larger extent with its regional neighbors to answer the questions posed by any business considering a new location: "Where can we operate? How can we be reached by our customers? Who can we hire? Are the resources and infrastructure available that we'll need to function?"

Los Alamos can and has provided positive answers to some of these questions—some of the time. If the prospective business doesn't require much space or immediate access to an interstate highway or large airport, or a large and readily available workforce, or significant quantities of local raw materials, this community can be a very attractive location. However, to position Los Alamos to provide positive answers more frequently, we may be well advised to partner with regional neighbors who have more available space; larger numbers of employable people; and better access to raw materials, major highways, and airports.

Los Alamos County and the Los Alamos Commerce & Development Corporation are presently involved in regional collaboration efforts that are yielding results.

A regional discussion initiated by the Los Alamos Chamber of Commerce about the need for regional transit to support workforce needs led to the Regional Development Corporation and Los Alamos County taking the lead with a collection of northern New Mexico governments to create a Regional Transportation District that will help address transportation challenges this community could not have solved on its own.

The County is a member of the Espanola Basin Regional Planning Issues Forum, which is working with other government agencies in northern New Mexico to address water and wastewater issues. A possible outcome of that effort may be the creation of shared wastewater treatment plants that address regional needs and minimize the need for individual government entities, including Los Alamos, to build and maintain many separate facilities.

The Los Alamos Commerce & Development Corporation operates the University of New Mexico-Los Alamos Small Business Development Center (SBDC) here in Los Alamos. The SBDC provides business counseling and training for both local and regional business interests. Last year, the SBDC served 166 area business counseling clients resulting in 19 business start-ups and \$11.7 million in capital formation. Three hundred ninety-eight area individuals attended 31 business workshops conducted by the SBDC during the year.

LACDC is a member of the Northern Area Workforce Development Board. Efforts during the past year have resulted in the placement of a full-time employer assistance consultant at the UNM-LA Career Center to provide no-charge training, testing, candidate sourcing, and candidate screening services to area employers. The University of New Mexico's Los Alamos branch and Espanola's Northern New Mexico College have also helped address the workforce development needs of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and could be utilized to address the workforce training needs of new businesses.

Finally, Los Alamos and northern New Mexico already share an obvious asset—the Los Alamos National Laboratory. The institution that currently provides the greatest single source of employment and economic activity for a significant part of the region has also generated an incredible reservoir of top-level scientific and technical talent. Many retirees from this unique workforce have chosen to remain in Los Alamos and elsewhere in northern New Mexico and are thus creating a potential employment pool we're only beginning to understand and quantify. Tapping that growing resource could be pivotal to businesses looking for hard-to-find technical expertise in northern New Mexico.

“Survival unit” is a social term used to describe the number of people that work together to address a threat. Generally, the greater the threat, the smaller the survival unit becomes until, under extreme circumstances, it's a matter of each person for himself or herself. Let's consider expanding our economic survival unit to include regional people and resources before we ever reach that dire point.