

# NIACOG NEWS

Vol. 26 No. 5

NORTH IOWA AREA COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

Aug.—Sept. 2015

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## TRANSIT DIRECTOR HONORED

Kevin Kramer, transit director of North Iowa Area Council of Governments, was recently named Iowa's Transit Manager of the Year at the Iowa Public Transportation Association's annual conference recently held in Des Moines. His Saints Shuttle service from Mason City to Iowa City was the model the Iowa DOT used to create the Transit-Cares service for IowaCare patients. Kramer was recognized as a reliable and effective transit director that Iowa DOT staff and other transit administrators can look to for information and direction according to Ryan Ward, transit programs administrator of the Iowa DOT's Office of Public Transit.



Congratulations Kevin for your outstanding work!

## RLF FUNDS AVAILABLE

The NIACOG Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) has in excess of \$200,000 available for lending. The RLF was originally established by a \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) and matched with \$60,000 from the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) as a result of the 2008 flooding disaster. NIACOG is currently in jeopardy of having approximately \$62,000 of its capital base returned to the Department of Commerce due to not having 75% or more of its portfolio loaned within an 18 month consecutive period.

The program was originally established to provide a public financing tool to enhance business assistance programs and services to businesses and communities in the NIACOG region. It is the goal of the RLF to provide job creation and retention as a result of the loan. NIACOG's RLF funding is intended to fill capital financing gaps and is to be only part of the overall business strategy for financing.

Revolving loan funds cannot be used to acquire an equity position in a private business, to subsidize interest payments on an existing loan, to provide for the borrowers' equity contribution under other Federal agencies' loan programs, to enable borrowers to acquire an interest in a business unless evidence is furnished in the loan documentation that doing so will save a business from imminent closure or will facilitate expansions with an increase in jobs, to provide funds to a borrower to invest in interest-bearing financial assets, or to refinance existing debt.

Applications are available from the NIAOCG office. All completed applications must be sponsored by their local economic development corporation, and there is a non-refundable 1.5% loan processing fee. Loans carry a 2.4375% interest rate. Applications will be reviewed by the established NIACOG Loan Review Committee (one representative from each of NIACOG's counties). For more information, please contact Dana Heimbuch at the NIACOG office.

## NICE BUS

How do you get where you need to go? Sometimes we take for granted the ability to just hop in the car and get from point A to point B. For those who have transportation challenges, the Iowa Department of Transportation is working to make more options available.

According to the Iowa Economic Development's website, Iowa's \$27.6 billion advanced manufacturing industry is the state's single largest business sector with three times the revenue of agriculture. Many of these manufacturing facilities are located in less populated areas, making the search for employees a challenge. In north central Iowa, the Region 2 Transit System partners with area manufacturing plants to provide reliable transportation for employees to and from the workplace.

Kevin Kramer, transit administrator for Region 2 Transit, a part of the North Iowa Area Council of Governments, says the commuter service, dubbed North Iowa Commuter Express (NICE), began as a pilot project in 2013. "The initial idea was to provide a 13-passenger van pool to get workers from Mason City to the Winnebago plant in Forest City," he said. "We ran into a snag with that plan because none of the employees who needed transportation were qualified drivers. We worked with a variety of state and local funding programs to provide funding for a driver. The program quickly outgrew the 13-passenger vehicle and we are now using a 33-passenger bus for the daily trips."

Each rider is charged \$5 roundtrip, or \$2.50 each way. A cost analysis shows that each of these employees could pay up to \$10,000 per year in transportation costs by commuting alone every day, 30 miles one-way in a personal vehicle, as compared to \$650 per year on the NICE bus. Kramer said, "If we fill all 33 seats each trip, the service will pay for itself. That doesn't always happen now, so we're using other funds to fill the gaps. The pool of employees we serve is somewhat transient, so we're seeing different folks come and go over time."

As the service gained popularity, other manufacturers in Forest City were included. "3M and CDI, a custom painting company, are now part of the route," said Kramer. "That increases our ridership, but also presents some additional challenges, mostly with scheduling."

He said, "For Winnebago, they build their projects to specific orders. When there are lots of

orders, workers' shifts are longer. When the orders are down, the shifts could be shorter. It takes a lot of coordination to make sure we're getting employees to work and back home at the right times."

Schedules can also cause challenges when finding qualified drivers. Kramer explained that the driver will depart downtown Mason City around 5 a.m. en route to Forrest City to ensure all workers can start their shift by 6:15 a.m. each work day. Once this trip is complete, the driver fulfills other rides around the eight-county service area.

"Most days the drivers have a break for several hours in the middle of the day," said Kramer. "Then the driver heads back to Forest City to make the return commuter route to Mason City. They are on the clock for six to eight hours a day, but the commitment is typically 12 or more hours. Finding qualified drivers to commit to that kind of time at \$10 an hour isn't easy."

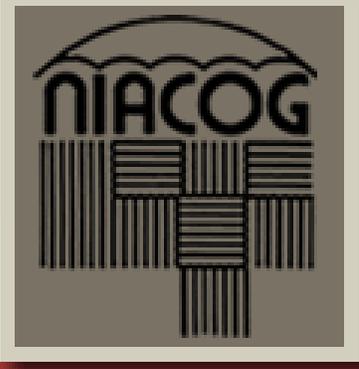
In addition to scheduling and staffing, there are some liability issues that have come to light. Kramer said, "The legal issues with the Mason City to Forest City service are pretty straightforward, but we're working to establish van pools and other services where the driver would not be one of our employees. We're talking now to a few employers about who would have liability in those cases. There doesn't seem to be a clear answer right now, but we'll keep working on it until we can find a resolution."

Kramer said that between state transit dollars and a grant from the United Way, funding for NICE is set for the next three years, but after that there is a question as to whether or not this service can continue. He said, "There are several charitable foundations in the area that may become contributors, but funding will be a juggling act because of inconsistent ridership."

One thing that is clear about the NICE service is that transportation is a necessary and complicated process. The challenges of scheduling, inconsistent ridership, hiring and retention of qualified drivers, and funding will continue, but with the tenacity of transit managers like Kevin Kramer, solutions will be found to meet the personal needs of the riders and contribute to the local economy.

For more information about the NICE bus or to schedule a ride, please contact Region 2 Transit System at 641-423-2262 or visit their website at [www.r2bus.org](http://www.r2bus.org).





## **PUBLIC NOTICE TO RECEIVE COMMENT ON THE DRAFT 2015-2035 RPA LRTP**

The Regional Planning Affiliation 2 (RPA 2) comprised of Cerro Gordo, Floyd, Franklin, Hancock, Kossuth, Mitchell, Winnebago and Worth Counties as well as all cities within the listed counties, has developed a 20 Year Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) for the Region. The LRTP covers all aspects of transportation including roads, bridges, transit, trails, air, rail, non-motorized, freight, safety, security and funding. The RPA 2 2015-2035 LRTP is a long range planning document that outlines the Region's transportation priorities. This document is not project specific.

The Draft RPA 2 2015-2035 LRTP is available for review at [www.niacog.org](http://www.niacog.org); at the NIACOG office at 525 6<sup>th</sup> St. SW, Mason City, IA 50401 or respective Board of Supervisor's offices in the above listed counties during regular business hours.

Public comment will be received for 45 days from the date of publication of this notice. All comments will be reviewed and included as appropriate. The RPA 2 2015-2035 LRTP will be discussed and considered for adoption at the October 14, 2015, Policy Board meeting.

Written or oral comments must be submitted to the North Iowa Area Council of Governments, 525 6<sup>th</sup> St. S.W., Mason City, IA 50401, or by e-mail at [cdiggins@niacog.org](mailto:cdiggins@niacog.org), or by phone at (641) 423-0491.

The RPA 2 meetings are open to all individuals regardless of disability. Any person with a disability requiring a reasonable accommodation to participate in a meeting should contact the NIACOG Office at the above number at least two business days prior to the meeting.

### **Transportation Happenings**

The RPA 2 Transportation Policy Board recently approved the FY 2016-FY2019 Transportation Improvement Program for the RPA 2/NIACOG Region. The document is the programming document for roads, bridges, trails, transit, and planning. RPA 2 over the course of its existence, has programmed nearly \$70,000,000 in Surface Transportation Program (STP) funds. These funds are typically used for roads, bridges, transit and planning projects. In addition, RPA 2 has programmed nearly \$6,000,000 in Enhancement and Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) funds. These projects have been trails, beautification and historic endeavors.



## **CDBG Fall Application Assistance for the Downtown Revitalization Program**

The CDBG Downtown Revitalization Fund provides grants to communities for a variety of projects and activities contributing to comprehensive revitalization in city centers. To date, the program has primarily funded façade improvements to privately owned buildings in downtown areas which may include tuck-pointing, painting, masonry repair, door and window replacement, entryway repairs, awning and signage upgrades, lighting improvements, and removal of false facades. Some buildings experience a radical transformation, while others are simply renovated to be more historically accurate and in top condition.



All incorporated cities and counties in the state of Iowa, except those designated as HUD entitlement areas, are eligible to apply for and receive funds under this program. The maximum grant award is \$500,000. Communities with populations less than 300 are limited to \$1,000 per capita, those with populations between 300 and 999 may receive up to \$300,000, and those with populations of 1,000 or greater may receive the maximum award of \$500,000.

Applications are evaluated on the following criteria:

- The project must meet a CDBG national objective;
- It must be eligible under the CDBG program;
- Positive impact on the community;
- Readiness to proceed with the proposed activity and likelihood that the activity can be completed in a timely fashion;
- Level of community support for a downtown revitalization effort;
- Degree to which downtown revitalization fund assistance would be leveraged by other funding sources and documentation of applicant efforts to secure the maximum amount of local support for the activity;
- Degree to which the activity meets or exceeds the minimum building and site design criteria established by IEDA to be eligible for funding;
- Level of planning completed for comprehensive downtown revitalization efforts.

Now is the time to consider an application for a potential CDBG Downtown Revitalization Project for your city. If your city is considering a Façade Project, please contact NIACOG ASAP to discuss how we can assist with the application process in the upcoming grant cycle.

## **CDBG HAPPENINGS**

Congratulations to the City of Swea City on the award of \$300,000 in Community Development Block Grant Funds for a water improvement project.

Several other CDBG projects are wrapping up their projects as you read this. The cities of Marble Rock and Stacyville are nearly complete with their respective projects and Thornton is about half way complete with the lagoon dredging and relining project.

The City of Nora Springs is just beginning a sewer line and manhole lining project they are undertaking and the Floyd County Beaver Creek Watershed CDBG project is currently out for bids.

Speaking of the Beaver Creek Watershed project, this has been a unique project from the start. This is a pilot project that utilizes CDBG Disaster funding to construct flood control improvements in chosen watersheds to see what impact watershed conservation practices will have on downstream flooding. NIACOG staff, as the grant administrator, has worked with two county Boards of Supervisors, the Army Corps of Engineers (jurisdictional wetland issues) an Archeological Resources consultant, the typical CDBG environmental review, SHPO and landowners to coordinate the project to the point where the engineer has put the project out for bids. While it has been challenging so far, it will be good to finally see some dirt moved as the project progresses.



## SEARCH Grants Available Through USDA

The Special Evaluation Assistance for Rural Communities and Households (SEARCH) program funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Development agency targets rural communities with populations less than 2,500. The grants help pay for feasibility studies plus design and technical assistance for water, wastewater and storm water projects.

Grants up to \$30,000 are awarded based on financial need. Unlike many programs, no match is required for these grants. There is no application deadline, but there are limited funds for the program that targets lower median-household income communities. Eligible areas must have a median household income below the poverty line or less than 80% of the statewide non-metropolitan median household income based on the latest Census data.

These grants are designed to help get projects started. Recipients obtain the technical assistance they need to identify key problem areas so they can move ahead with improvements to water and waste water treatment facilities that serve local households and businesses.

For more information on the program or to make application, please contact your local USDA Rural Development Office. For additional assistance, please feel free to contact the NIACOG office.

## Iowa's Minimum Housing Rehabilitation Standards Under Revision

The Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) is putting together a workgroup to review updates to Iowa's Minimum Housing Rehabilitation Standards (IMHRS) for the CDBG Housing rehabilitation program in Iowa.



Iowa's Minimum Housing Rehabilitation Standards, last revised in 2008, explain the minimum acceptable standards for existing single household dwelling units rehabilitated in whole or in part with CDBG funds.

These standards apply to all communities with populations of less than 15,000 in Iowa that do not have locally adopted and enforced codes and are not intended to reduce or exclude the requirements of any local or state building or housing codes, standards, or ordinances that may apply.

These standards were implemented to assist in achieving consistency throughout the state for CDBG single-family rehabilitation activities and were designed to include and to expand on the requirements of HUD's Section 8 Housing Quality Standards and HUD's Minimum Property Standards (MPS). As a result, many of the IMHRS requirements exceed those of the HUD Section 8 Housing Quality Standards and/or MPS.

However, due to the rising cost of meeting the current requirements of IMHRS, and in consideration of the \$24,999 maximum rehab assistance level for each home rehabilitated with CDBG funds, IEDA is proposing the scaling back of the requirements of IMHRS. This would be done to achieve a more basic set of expectations. These expectations would move closer to the current health/safety/standards of HUD Section 8 and/or MPS. Even though the requirements may be lowered, IEDA is considering the implementation of "best practices" where more than the basic expectations may be exceeded for any given home being rehabilitated. The use of "best practices" would be at discretion of each City that is awarded the CDBG grant funds.

Another proposed addition to the Iowa Minimum Housing Rehabilitation Standards may be radon testing and mitigation. Radon is a colorless, odorless, tasteless gas, and according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the entire state of Iowa is considered at high risk for radon gas in homes. Therefore, this may be a new area of focus when updating the Iowa Minimum Rehabilitation Standards.

Please watch future newsletters for more information concerning the recommended revisions to IMHRS presented by the IEDA workgroup. Steve Wendt of the NIACOG staff will be a participant in the workgroup.



## Calendar

### August

10<sup>th</sup> - NIACOG Executive Committee  
NIACOG Office, 12:00 pm

### September

7<sup>th</sup> - Labor Day, NIACOG Office Closed

14<sup>th</sup> - NIACOG Board Mtg  
Bennigan's Grill, Clear Lake,  
7:00 pm

18<sup>th</sup> - City Clerk's Meeting  
NIACOG Office, 9:30 am

## REAP Grants Due August 15

Resource Enhancement and Protection grants are due August 15 to Iowa DNR. NIACOG regularly prepares applications for its member governments for trails, parks, acquisition and other projects. If you have a project in mind, please call Chris Diggins at the NIACOG office.

## Rural Fire Department Grants

Grant money is available to Iowa's rural fire departments for equipment to help battle wildfires. The Volunteer Fire Assistance Grant provides 50 percent reimbursement with a maximum grant of \$3,500 per department. Departments that actively return Wildland Fire Reports receive priority points in the grant application scoring process. Grant applications are due October 15th. Complete details are available at [www.iowdnr.gov/fire](http://www.iowdnr.gov/fire).