

## **Policy Academy: Aligning State and Regional Economic Development Strategies and Actions**

Final Report – Louisiana

January 26, 2024

### **Executive Summary**

From the moment the State of Louisiana embarked on the application process for selection to the Policy Academy, Louisiana Economic Development (LED) has been communicating and marketing that a change was on the horizon for the state’s economic development strategic planning process. LED understood the importance of collaboration and recognized the opportunity to revise past practices and drive new results by fostering collaboration amongst our allies, partners and stakeholders. It is at the heart of LED’s strategic approach to leverage its nine core strategies to position Louisiana for a brighter economic future. We recognize LED will be much more effective when taking into consideration the viewpoints of stakeholders in the economic development strategic planning process.

Economic development is built on trusted relationships. The Policy Academy has been the impetus behind providing an environment where these trusted relationships can be built in-state and help to further all of our missions. Seizing every opportunity to promote what we are doing in the Policy Academy is necessary. Now more than ever, this is our time to promote what we have successfully accomplished throughout this process while understanding the opportunities that remain following the Policy Academy.

### **Background and Operating Environment**

In Louisiana, strategic alignment and collaboration among state and regional organizations had traditionally been limited and often incongruent. Many economic development entities within the state were operating within silos that lacked coordination, duplicated efforts and wasted limited resources and time. For example, there was often little coordination between the state’s economic development

strategic plan and each EDA-designated Planning and Development District's (PDD) regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).

With billions being spent on economic development at the federal, state, and regional level, LED, Louisiana's PDDs, Regional Economic Development Organizations (REDOs), Universities and local Economic Development Organizations (EDOs) viewed the technical assistance through the Policy Academy as an opportunity to improve returns on investment with enhanced economic development outcomes, greater alignment and overall higher economic performance. Louisiana's proposal was submitted because we believe this technical assistance could break down silos while helping to increase coordination and cooperation among partners at the local, regional and state level.

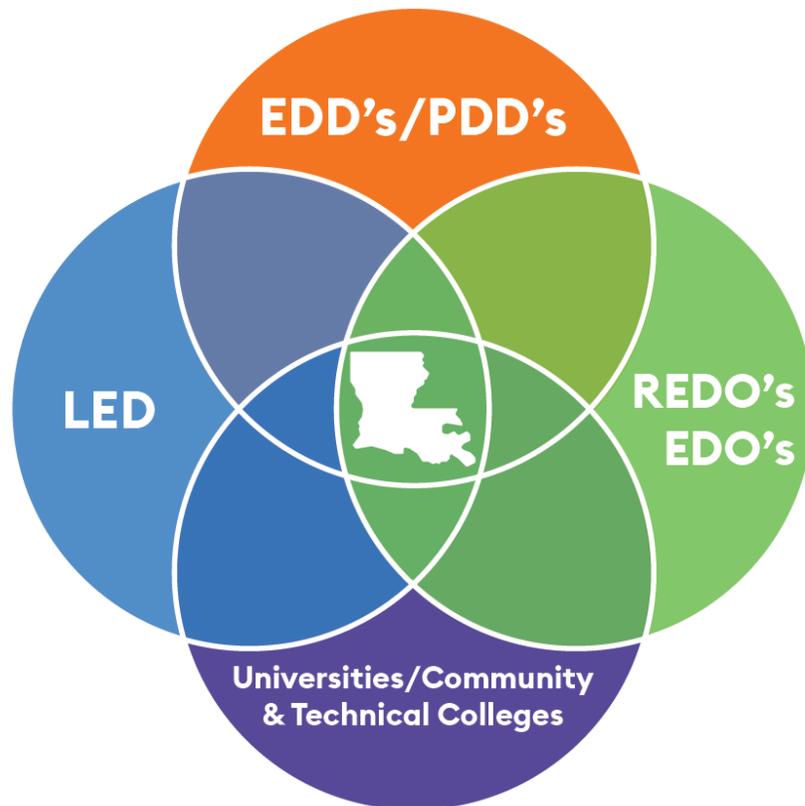
The Policy Academy was an opportunity to address a number of challenges that Louisiana faces. As such, our aim was to submit a proposal that would assist in creating a space by which diverse backgrounds on the Core and Home Team could be leveraged to build trust and confidence while working together. Collaborating as a statewide team to develop this plan through the Policy Academy has had intrinsic value and has helped to build relationships and trust among the various economic development practitioners within the Louisiana ecosystem. The original proposal development process was initiated by LED with strong support and proposal development efforts from the Acadiana Planning Commission. We also sought to build on momentum generated by the re-establishment of Louisiana's Office of State Planning, which was supported by an EDA state planning grant.

### **Team Members and Affiliation**

Core and home team members were selected to reflect institutional and geographic diversity throughout Louisiana. Leveraging the variety of skillsets and experience allowed members to recognize the collective strengths of the team that resemble those found in PDDs across the state. Specifically, Core Team members represent state-level leadership, leadership within the Louisiana Association of Planning and Development Districts, Regional Economic Development Organization participation and

University leadership. In total, the Core Team had eight members, which was the largest team of the six Policy Academy states.

To promote inclusiveness, the remaining economic development organizations from across the state were asked to participate in the Home Team. While far exceeding the suggested twelve-member team, we believed it was in the best interest of the State of Louisiana to maximize participation in our strategic alignment efforts. Members consist of a combination of top-level leadership from among state and regional organizations including seven REDO executives, five top-level State Employees and five Regional PDD Executives. We also received support from then-Governor John Bel Edwards, which was expressed through a letter of support enclosed in the original application. With this large and diverse team in place, we were able to bring together all of the state's key economic development partners to do collaborative planning for the first time in our recent history.



## **Strategic Elements, Outcomes and Deliverables**

Our team's vision was to develop an inclusive state economic development strategic plan, and formalize and institutionalize our collaborative regional and state planning processes. To further this vision, our team worked together to identify and undertake four specific goals:

- 1) Increase coordination and alignment among all economic development planning efforts
- 2) Increase collaboration across community and economic development planning efforts
- 3) Enhance state planning efforts to support new quality of life-related initiatives
- 4) Create a new and expanded statewide resilience program

Each goal had a sub-team that developed strategies, actions and assigned champions. Over the past 9 months, these sub-teams have been meeting regularly and reporting on activities, outcomes and deliverables. One important feature we recognized in our first in-person meeting in July 2023 was the concept of having a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and how that could become a key tool each organization could utilize to formalize and institutionalize collaboration and alignment.

The first goal we identified was to increase the level of coordination in planning efforts and aligning planning processes. To start, a survey was sent to all Core and Home Team members which provided insight into where participants stood with their planning and overall involvement with other stakeholders. Increasing the coordination and development of an action plan to facilitate greater collaboration and communication was a key piece of the first goal. Each member of the team continued to communicate the activities being accomplished through this process. For example, LED took several opportunities to discuss and highlight the Policy Academy with state legislators in committee meetings during the 2023 Legislative Session. This was done in an effort to continue to drive our message and show support for collaboration within the economic development ecosystem. Additional strategies within our first goal included building relationships and trust among the various economic development

organizations in Louisiana, improving regular lines of communication, and developing an inventory of risk assessments from other state agencies in partnership with the State's Office of Planning.

The second goal encouraged closer collaboration between community development and economic development programming. The strategies outlined under this goal included: Identifying current programs and evaluating potential regional collaborative efforts; Generating local, regional and state collaboration models and policy innovations that can be replicated across the economic development ecosystem; and Increasing contact between team members to drive conversations in other areas of programming (or policy) related to Economic Development and Community Development. The various organizations participating in this process can be assets in furthering each other's mission by sharing resources and opportunities, and supporting closer collaboration in the development of new and innovative ideas.

The third goal leveraged existing state level policies and programs to support local quality of life and community development programming. The three strategies outlined in this goal included: Exploring the Claiborne Cultural Innovation District development project in the New Orleans Region as a broader statewide model for development in other communities; Leveraging LED's current community programs such as the Louisiana Development Ready Communities (LDRC) and Community Competitiveness Initiative (CCI) to support quality of life and local competitiveness; and Evaluating opportunities to revitalize state-supported local asset marketing programs along with litter abatement programs. Overall, this goal has been effective in helping organizations better understand how each participant supports community development, which resources are available, and how we can work together effectively to make communities more competitive.

The fourth and final goal created a statewide resilience initiative to capture federal funding. The first step for the sub-group was to develop an inventory of federal funds awarded in Louisiana over the past three years. This list included awards that were recently submitted or currently being developed. Importantly, a number of these projects featured sub-team partners that were able to work together on

an application to strengthen their proposal. To sustain this work, there will be recurring conference calls between partners to discuss available funding opportunities and identify avenues for better collaboration. Additionally, economic resilience was a key aspect of the fourth goal. To support this effort, Louisiana's Chief Resilience Officer was invited to speak and participate in our Core and Home Team meeting in October 2023. Three elements were identified that underscored the importance of economic resiliency in Louisiana: Exploring opportunities to have representatives from LED, Universities, REDOs and PDDs participate in the State Resiliency Commission or relevant task force; Ensure that the Louisiana Business Emergency Operations Center is included in planning with the State Resiliency Commission; and Develop a repository of all organizations that play a resiliency role in Louisiana and have the list housed in the Office of Resiliency.

#### **Timeline of Team's Activity and Accomplishments**

The EDA State Policy Academy Team held on July 19, 2023, our first in-person work session that included project core team and home team members. The meeting engaged partners from across the state, including representatives from LED, PDDs, REDOs, Universities and local EDOs. Our work session, held at LED in Baton Rouge, sought to build on earlier team activity, including a June virtual work session and ongoing work by the project's Core Team members. The session began with a welcome and call to action from LED Secretary Don Pierson, and the project team lead, LED Undersecretary, Anne Villa. In addition, the CREC/EntreWorks Consulting team shared results of a team survey examining current planning practices and needs. The survey identified trends related to strategic development perspectives on the State's economic development priorities, and effective partnerships with economic development partners. The responses related to organizational partnerships indicate many positive experiences to draw upon, but the extent and effectiveness of those partnerships vary widely across the state.

Most of the work session involved a facilitated review of our ideas, and preliminary planning on how to best advance our goals. We engaged in several exercises designed to identify opportunities and

challenges related to each goal, as well as pathways to successful implementation. Preliminary working groups around each primary goal were also developed. These groups began meeting (virtually and in-person when possible) over the next few weeks to help further refine our ideas and plans.

A second in-person work session was held on October 23, 2023 in Lafayette. We welcomed two keynote speakers as part of the workshop. Speaking first was the State's Chief Resilience Officer, Charles Sutcliffe, who provided a presentation on current activities within the Office of Resiliency and ways to build resilience in our strategic plan. Our second keynote speaker, Carolina Munguia, with Shift, LLC gave a marketing presentation on change management. In addition, the sub-groups provided updates on the progress made on their specific goals, and all were able to network with other members, both prior to the workshop and gathering with team members during the workshop to work on specific goals.

Finally, on November 5, 2023, the Core Team traveled to Cleveland, OH for an update meeting with EDA, CREC and five other participating states. This meeting gave us the opportunity to highlight our many successes while learning best practices from other states. We used outcomes from this meeting to sustain our momentum as we moved into the final months of the Policy Academy.

### **Obstacles and Challenges**

Louisiana is going through a transition to a new governor – we did not know who that would be when the academy was launched. What we did know was that we had an opportunity to embrace change in economic development strategic planning. We set out to be very inclusive with our stakeholders in an effort to better support the transition team, keep them informed on our collaboration and remove incongruences that might have previously existed. We believe that our inclusive and deliberate approach will improve collaboration in our strategic planning process.

An additional challenge identified in our working groups was finding a way to align the timing of each PDD's CEDS. Members of the working group expressed value in having them done at the same time. Therefore, we will work with the EDA Austin Regional Office to further evaluate opportunities for alignment in the CEDS process.

## **Lessons Learned**

There have been many lessons learned throughout the Policy Academy process. Importantly, we learned that you have to be intentional about change. Throughout this process, we communicated the vision and goals of the Academy to all stakeholders, built a coalition of support for the change, created a sense of urgency and momentum for the change, and provided resources and support for those affected by the change. It is also important that we continue to voice our wins and tell our story. If we do not tell our story, someone else will and it may not be the story you want told. As such, we intend to have members from the CREC team come to Louisiana following the Policy Academy, to vocalize the progress that has been made over the past year and describe how silos have been broken down in economic development strategic planning.

We seek to make this collaboration a regular process since the Policy Academy has helped us create a “safe space” for these partnerships to build trust and shared experiences. We have been able to identify “pain” or “conflict” points that prevented effective communication, collaboration, and coordination and developed a strategy to address these bottlenecks. This helped to address previously identified threats and maximize our resources so that we can effectively act on new economic opportunities.

We’ve seen firsthand the positive effects of alignment and collaboration. Announced in August 2023 First Solar, the largest solar energy manufacturer in the Western Hemisphere, announced the site of its fifth American manufacturing facility located in Louisiana’s Acadiana Region. The company announced investment of up to \$1.1 billion and expected creation of more than 700 new direct jobs. This project is believed to be the largest single capital investment in the area’s history. It is also believed to be the first time higher education, an airport, industrial development foundation, local officials, a local EDO, PDD, REDO and the State coordinated on a project that also involved pulling down federal grant dollars. This win highlights the importance of driving new results by fostering collaboration

amongst allies, partners and stakeholders. Great work can be done individually, but when we approach a project collectively, we can achieve so much more.

It is critical that we continue to be intentional about change, voice our wins, establish new relationships and support shared relationships with partners across the economic development ecosystem. In doing so, we have learned that we can continue to build upon our wins and find success in developing our state through a more diverse and inclusive strategic planning process.

### **Sustainability**

Sustaining collaboration beyond the Policy Academy will be critical after the Academy officially ends. The increased level of contact between team members has developed higher sustained levels of working relationships, which will transcend the initial pilot project, catalyze conversation in other areas of program and policy collaboration, and address equity challenges. We will continue to maintain the forms of communication that have been implemented by each of the sub-teams over the past 9 months. The four sub-team leaders have committed to continuing this work beyond our February 8, 2024 presentation. Institutionalizing the goals and strategies developed in our action plan will improve the shared priorities among members of the Core and Home Teams. These shared priorities will help to inform future decision-making at the state level and help to better align regional CEDS plans with LED's strategic plan.

Along the same lines of maintaining our communication framework, an additional strategy will be to increase communication related to economic development policies and programs during legislative sessions in Louisiana. This work will be sustained through pre-session and post-session working groups tied to economic development topics. These working groups will help to ensure we work together and communicate effectively regarding programming, policies and any changes that might be implemented or become law.

## Conclusion

Moving forward, we will build upon our relationships, celebrate wins, and continue to develop our state in a more diverse manner and promote inclusiveness in our state strategic planning process. The Policy Academy provided a significant opportunity to foster powerful partnerships and better align state, regional and local strategies. Implementing the goals and strategies developed through the Policy Academy will support sustainable collaboration, improved alignment and greater resilience and equity in Louisiana's economy.

