

## Heather Morgan – Project 17 - 1

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

What's your platform? No, not fancy shoes or the policy statements which are debated and adopted by the political parties every four years. I'm talking about what has been referred to as a "regional change platform." In fact, it is a grassroots network that is working to improve the lives of citizens across a multi-county region of southeast Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Project 17 is the name of this project for regional economic development and community engagement in the southeast region of the state, led by the Advanced Manufacturing Institute (AMI) within K-State's College of Engineering. Jeff Tucker is executive director of AMI. Since 2004 AMI has been working with companies, communities, and regions throughout Kansas to help cultivate rural, innovation-based economies.

Back in 2011, AMI was contacted by four senators who also went to the Governor and expressed their concerns about the seventeen-county region of southeast Kansas which they represented in the legislature. The concerns they expressed were real. Southeast Kansas has long suffered from concentrated poverty and unemployment rates which significantly exceed the state average. Most of the counties had suffered significant economic losses due to the shrinking manufacturing base. Many lacked adequate access to high speed internet for business, education, or health care use. Public health indicators were chronically among the poorest in the state.

The senators asked K-State's Advanced Manufacturing Institute to become the backbone organization to organize a response to these serious needs. In response, AMI worked with a small initial coalition of civic leaders and partner organizations to plan this response. A series of community meetings were held across the region to engage the public in a civic conversation about these challenges.

These seventeen counties go from Chautauqua County to Miami County and from Coffey County down to Cherokee County. From corner to corner, this includes lots of rural communities, from Bucyrus to Cedar Vale, population 709, and from Galena to Bushong, population 54. Now, that's rural.

To address the deep-seated issues in the region, it was clear that a different approach was needed. The result was what AMI calls a "regional change platform." Rather than a traditional top-down driven change program, this project was designed as a network-based, grass-roots supported program that enables all citizens to participate. It actively recruited volunteers and partners, focused on linking and leveraging regional assets, placed priority on strategic doing over strategic planning, and launched multiple initiatives to seed large-scale change.

Based on lots of grass-roots input, Project 17 is based on four pillars: Health, Economic Development, Education/Workforce, and Leadership. Work teams were formed and specific activities are organized under each of those pillars.

Based on the number of counties in the region, the project became known as Project 17. Heather Morgan was selected as executive director of Project 17 in 2013. From a core planning group of about 15 people, this project has mushroomed across the region to engage thousands of citizens.

Of course, resources were needed to accomplish these activities. AMI led a proposal team that was awarded a Rural Jobs and Innovation Accelerator grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration and USDA – Rural Development, with matching funds coming from the Kansas Department of Commerce and K-State.

Lots of partner organizations were engaged with these activities. The results are remarkable: More than 1,800 citizens were engaged in this work, over a thousand citizen leaders were trained, 674 jobs were created and 431 jobs retained, 194 businesses were assisted, 107 entrepreneurs were engaged, and \$25.54 million in private investments were leveraged. Wow.

For more information, see [www.twsproject17.org](http://www.twsproject17.org).

What's your platform? No, not the policy statements of the political parties. This is Project 17, which is what has been described as a regional change platform for economic and community development in southeast Kansas. We commend the Advanced Manufacturing Institute and all those involved with Project 17 for making a difference with grass-roots involvement to make their region better. They are helping to hold this platform high.

And there's more. Beyond the numbers, this program is changing lives for the better, one person at a time. We'll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.