**ICMA – Community Partnership Award**

**Population < 10,000**

**Nominee: Edward Lowe, City Manager, City of Oneonta, Alabama**

***Overview***

The City of Oneonta is a small municipality (population 6,615), located in Blount County at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains in Central Alabama. Conveniently situated between Alabama’s two largest metropolitan areas, Birmingham and Huntsville, this area represents a growing market for new businesses and industry. Despite its potential, however, due to its rural nature, preparing Oneonta and Blount County for this growth has been challenging because of a lack of critical services and infrastructure.

In order to provide necessary programs and assistance to both the local citizenry and to the growing business and industry sectors, in late 2014 Ed Lowe, the City Manager for the City of Oneonta, in conjunction with other city officials, began to explore the possibility of a partnership to provide local opportunities for post-secondary academic, technical and workforce education. Out of the four community colleges contacted, Wallace State Community College was the only one to express any interest in expanding their area of instruction. However, due to the nature of the Alabama 2-year college system, numerous challenges would have to be overcome before such partnership could be possible. Ultimately, the process would require an entire network of local and regional partners working in conjunction with the State 2-year college system to negotiate a service area agreement between Wallace State Community College and the existing 2-year system provider to move this project forward.

Mr. Lowe’s commitment and strident efforts were invaluable to the establishment of the relationships necessary to bring a project of this magnitude together. As is common in so many areas, communication between municipal and county officials was historically nearly non-existent. Past associations had been marred by opposing viewpoints and loyalties and change on both sides was traditionally met with resistance. Led by the persistent efforts of Mr. Lowe, a rare cooperative agreement was secured at the 2-year college level in early January 2016. More importantly, however, out of this process a successful, working partnership was created between the City of Oneonta, the Blount County Commission, the Blount County Economic Development Council, Wallace State Community College, Hometown Bank and the 6 State Representatives and Senators representing the Blount County area.

**Problem Assessment:**

The City of Oneonta and Blount County faced immense challenges to economic and community growth due to the lack of critical services in the immediate area. Without the networks and programs in place to support workforce development and business training, the retention of living wage jobs and recruitment of industrial prospects was difficult, if not impossible. Further, qualifying for state resources to improve local industrial parks and infrastructure was virtually unattainable due to lack of cooperation between the affected parties.

This stalemate within the collective community, prohibited a large portion of the population from receiving services necessary to improve their socioeconomic status and quality of life, which is critical considering that the median household income is 40% below the national average and almost 54% of the total population of Blount County live below the poverty line. Compounding the issue was the fact that while seventy-five (75) percent of Blount County’s population is over 18 years of age, less than 23% of those have post-secondary education and 20% do not have a high school diploma or equivalency. Moreover, the City of Oneonta needed a way to revitalize the downtown area and to increase the foot traffic so business owners and developers would invest in the existing building and recreate a vibrant downtown.

Correction of these issues would require creative planning on the part of the City Manager and Council and the cooperation of numerous entities which historically had difficulty working together due to differing viewpoints, loyalties and resistance to change. The challenge was to create an efficient and harmonious network of partners to plan, fund and implement solutions that would further the economic growth and progress of rural Oneonta and Blount County, Alabama for the betterment of the citizenry and region.

***Program implementation and costs:***

After months of negotiations and meetings with local partners and numerous trips to the state capital to meet with legislators and the two-year college system, a cooperative agreement was put in place in early January, 2016. Under an agreement with Hometown Bank, the City of Oneonta was able to purchase a foreclosed building and proceed immediately with renovations to allow the campus to be opened by the Summer 2016 semester. While the intent was for this facility to be used temporarily, until a more suitable building could be constructed, enrollment has far exceeded expectations and this facility is now under permanent use as the technical center for WSCC-Oneonta. At present, this Phase One facility provides 18,000 sq. ft of renovated space, which includes seven (7) classrooms, one large computer lab, one welding lab and classroom, seven offices, one conference room, a large common area, virtual library area, open registration area, storage, ample number of restroom facilities, and a fully equipped kitchen.

A fully functional Commercial Driver License Instructional Training facility was also provided by the city in the Industrial Park area. The lot encompasses 5 acres of space and includes an open air classroom or shelter for students, instructors, and equipment. This facility is utilized to provide CDL instruction, testing, and licensing for industry, utility service, school system, private business, or individuals seeking the necessary credentials to provide commercial transportation.

Total costs of this project to date are $1,125,000 (including property purchase and remodel).

***Tangible results or measurable outcomes of the program:***

The Oneonta Center provides multiple benefits to the citizens of Blount County. Students are finally given access to an affordable education without the cost of travel, the local economy benefits reciprocally—through both the college’s direct investment and through a better trained and higher-skilled local workforce, and the college is able to provide a bridge to even higher levels of education and training for the county’s residents. Locally, numerous meetings have taken place with Blount County Chamber of Commerce staff, economic development officers, K-12 educators, and other community stakeholders, and support for the new campus has been overwhelming. *The most tangible manifestation of this program has been the commitment by the newly created cooperative partnership to implement the infrastructure, facilities and programs necessary to support economic growth and provide the local services with which to transform lives and communities.*

***Lessons learned during planning, implementation, and analysis of the program:***

A partnership is a word commonly used to define cooperation of effort between two entities. It would be best to describe the greatest lesson learned in this project has been the definition of a true ‘working partnership’. The strength of commitment necessary to bring this project to completion is rare. Each one at the table holds a vital piece of the project and must be willing to render transparency, cooperation, and intra-management in order to meet deadlines, financial responsibilities, and collective goals. It has been a very unique experience to watch a city manager, city council, county government officials, local bank, economic development agency, and a community college work together as one cooperation in order to build a college for the people of Oneonta.

***How the program raises awareness of the contributions of Local Government Managers:***

The uniqueness of this project alone brought a tremendous awareness of the importance of the Local Government Mangers. Daily responsibilities of the manger became apparent to the outside partners, legislative partners, and city employees as the project progressed from planning to completion. It is the strength of the local mangers that contributed greatly to the quality of work completed as well as the sustainability of the entire project. In order to undertake a project of this magnitude, years of planning and negotiations must take place to establish a solid foundation of support in which to utilize and draw from going forward.

It takes years of experience with city development, economic development, financial management, and community growth to embark upon building a foundational piece such as a college to stimulate growth in an otherwise desolate, rural downtown area. The realization of that experience has visited each partner working within the framework of this project. Collectively as a group we have all attended numerous planning, economic development, city, county, and civic meetings and events as a means to communicate the importance of this project and the impact it will have upon the city both educationally and economically. It is the city management who is a constant presence and remains steadfast to the goals of the project.