

EDD-Tribal Collaboration: Building the Blueprint in Southwest Colorado

Introduction

Economic Development Districts (EDDs) and Tribal Governments in the regions they serve have significant overlapping interests in promoting regional economic development and resilience. Despite this, many EDDs have inconsistent or underdeveloped relationships with Tribes. Many EDDs are uncertain about the economic interests or collaborative opportunities available with Tribal Governments, lack capacity or organizational structures for relationship management, or are uncertain about culturally respectful outreach and engagement.

This case study highlights the success that the [Region 9 Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado \(Region 9\)](#) has had in building its relationship with the [Ute Mountain Ute Tribe](#) and [Southern Ute Indian Tribe](#). These are relationships built on trust, mutual respect, and a shared vision for regional progress. Region 9's efforts have created the impetus for several successful partnerships and helped to foster an active ecosystem of regional cooperation on development issues. Insights from this work can serve as a model for other EDDs to build and sustain meaningful, respectful, and impactful collaborations with Tribal Governments.

Background

Region 9 Development District of Southwest Colorado

Region 9 serves a 6,600 square mile region in the southwest corner of Colorado. Its five counties and two Tribal Reservations are collectively home to 100,000 people, four national monuments, and some of the most beautiful landscapes in the country. The region has seen [consistent population growth](#) in the 21st century driven by its natural beauty, tourism assets, diverse economic base, and high quality of life.

The EDD's core development objectives emphasize economic resilience and diversification across its counties and Tribal Reservations. Specific strategies include promoting sustainable job creation, enhancing workforce development, and expanding broadband access to meet the needs of both urban and rural communities. Region 9 prioritizes specific sectors such as tourism, agriculture, healthcare, and technology, aiming to build a diverse economy and establish collaborations across the region. Preservation of the region's environmental and cultural assets remains a key consideration within these development efforts.

The two federally recognized Tribes within Region 9's service area are the Southern Utes, located near Durango, and the Ute Mountain Utes, located in the Four Corners area. This case study particularly concerns Region 9's work with the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe.

Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, a domestic sovereign nation, maintains territorial sovereignty over approximately 600,000 acres across Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah, with its administrative center in Towaoc, Colorado. Tribal enterprises contribute to a diverse local economy, including agricultural production via the Ute Mountain Farm and Ranch Enterprise, significant involvement in energy resource development, particularly oil and gas extraction agreements with external contractors, and gaming operations through the Ute Mountain Casino Hotel complex.

As a major cultural institution within the Four Corners region and southwest Colorado, the Tribe maintains traditional ceremonial practices and focuses on the health and well-being of members of its community. Its economic development programs have built connections to the region's vibrant ecosystem of partnerships among local governments to foster broader growth. One recent initiative of note is a partnership with the [Colorado Tourism Office](#), which will deliver dozens of hours of Technical Assistance to the Tribal Government on programs to strengthen tourism promotion and the visitor experience.

EDD-Tribal Partnerships: Potential and Limitations

With shared interests in regional economic development, and particularly in economic diversification, housing programs, agricultural development, and tourism promotion, Region 9 and the Ute Mountain Ute have long had strong potential areas of cooperation. But in a world of limited resources and staff capacity, complex federal, local, state, and Tribal governance processes and requirements, and no natural forcing mechanisms for cooperation, EDDs sometimes find that they are unable to move from potential to actual partners. Moreover, with any region, Tribal Government or EDD, there are both limits to the cooperative potential and idiosyncrasies of governance and purpose that can make establishing and maintaining partnerships particularly difficult. The recent NADO Research Foundation brief [Tribal Engagement 101](#) discusses these opportunities and challenges in detail.

Formal Ties -> Informal Ties -> Formal Ties ->

There can be something of a chicken-and-egg problem for EDDs looking to build relationships with entities like Tribal Governments. Do you start with formal ties through discrete programs or positions, and then build informal connections out of that to strengthen the relationship, or do you start with informal ties and use the trust they foster to build up to formal partnership? In Region 9's case it was both—Ute Mountain Ute has long had a seat on Region 9's Board of Directors and participated in Tribal planning processes, but recent efforts at informal network building have strengthened and extended ties in new ways.

Formal

Formal ties begin with representation in Region 9's governance model. Both the region's Tribes, the Ute Mountain Ute and the Southern Ute, sit on their Board of Directors. Heather Otter, Project Manager at Region 9, highlights impartial governance as key to their approach: "Our job is to serve all of our governments in the region ... we serve their government or their Tribal Councils just like we serve our other county governments and municipalities," she notes. The arrangement not only upholds mutual respect but also strengthens collaboration by embedding Tribal perspectives directly into regional decision-making and policy discussions. Moreover, it facilitates regular, structured discussions between organizational leadership; fostering trust, knowledge, and, of course, informal relationship development.

Both the Ute Mountain Utes and the Southern Utes also maintain seats on the EDD's CEDS committee, the core function of its economic development program. So successful has this arrangement been that the Southern Ute Tribe has invited Region 9 to reciprocate the relationship, offering a seat on the Tribal CEDS committee. While representation on the Board of Directors

ensures the Tribes have a voice in the programmatic and management choices of the EDD, sitting on the CEDS committee ensures that long-range economic development planning is built on a shared vision for the region's collective future.

The structured, ongoing connection between Region 9 and its Tribal partners runs through the [Community Development Action Plan \(CDAP\)](#) process. CDAPs are short range, Tribe and county scale project lists amalgamated by Region 9 to demonstrate regional prioritization to potential state and federal grant funders. Both Tribes submit a CDAP to Region 9 every two years.

Informal

Region 9 has three key tools for managing informal economic development relationships with its partners, including Tribes: its "open-door" philosophy, a quarterly discussion group (eco-devo meetups), and a comprehensive communications strategy (Grants newsletter). Together, these create constant reminders of Region 9's presence and capabilities and create an open environment of information sharing.

Open door

An "open-door" philosophy—to ideas, requests, and discussions—keeps Region 9 staff committed to accessibility and transparency. As Heather explains, "The relationship with the Tribes is built on mutual trust... We keep an open door, share information whenever possible, and make sure they know what's going on so they can be involved if they choose to."

Eco-devo Meetups

The economic development discussion group, which Heather has taken to calling "eco-devo meetups," originated from a regional resiliency initiative Region 9 completed several years ago. These quarterly meetups were designed to build connections across the region and facilitate knowledge sharing among economic development professionals. As she describes it, "The purpose of these is to get all of our staff across the region that are economic developers and grant writers together in person. We rotate the meeting locations, and it's become this really lovely community."

By bringing together a range of stakeholders, including Tribal representatives, these sessions provide a structured setting for ongoing collaboration, which has spun off a variety of synergistic projects and created a broader framework for understanding shared interests among the various organizations that attend. Rotating the location of the meetups has another advantage as well—it gives attendees an on-the-ground look at what their partner communities and organizational cultures are like.

Grants newsletter

Region 9 also maintains a comprehensive communications strategy that includes a monthly grants newsletter covering topics such as housing, broadband, education, emergency management, energy, and infrastructure. The newsletter, also available on their website, ensures that all partners, including Tribal Governments, stay informed about funding opportunities and program developments, relieving a key burden on agencies with limited staff capacity to seek out updates and information on their own.

Outcomes

The strategies outlined above have helped to contribute to a strong and growing spirit of collaboration between economic development partners throughout the region. “Our collaboration has created a network of people across the region, including Tribal representatives, who now know each other, share resources, and support one another. It’s a community of practice that builds trust and strengthens our shared goals,” notes Heather.

The collaboration between Region 9 and the Ute Mountain Ute has been a catalyst for a recent project of enormous significance to both the Tribe and region. The Reservation has for many years had limited shopping options; the nearest supermarket is 20 miles from Towaoc, leaving residents with limited access to affordable fresh food. A 2018 [planning effort](#) between the Tribe’s Planning Department and regional partners helped to build consensus to attract a market to town. With assistance from a \$2.9 million U.S. Economic Development Administration [Indigenous Community Program grant](#), the Tribe is now building a [co-op grocery](#) and [workforce training center](#). Regional cooperation, consensus-building, and project prioritization work in the Region 9 CEDS helped to build support for the development, which will positively impact the region for decades to come.

Challenges

Building relationships is not without challenges, particularly when sensitive cultural or political issues may arise. The Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribes represent more than administrative entities; they are sovereign partners whose distinct governmental structures demand carefully calibrated engagement. Historical tensions have long stymied intergovernmental collaboration, creating an environment where trust must be constructed. Region 9 addresses this challenge through deliberate practices: consulting Tribal leadership on strategic documents, seeking explicit approvals, and ensuring Tribal perspectives are not merely acknowledged but integrated throughout the process.

Sharable Insights:

1. Simple interactions build trust

“I just say it’s always worth a cup of coffee,” recommends Heather, reflecting on the value of in person relationship building. “We’re in a world of email, and electronic communication, and Zoom meetings, but I think reaching out and extending your hand as just a fellow human being and community member is the best way to start.”

2. Network-building is a core power of EDDs

By their nature and through their programs, EDDs have access to a large network of organizations working on a variety of issues throughout their regions. By fostering relationships between local, Tribal, and regional entities, EDDs can pool resources, align priorities, and implement strategies that address complex, cross-jurisdictional challenges. The grocery project in Towaoc is a perfect example of this approach: partnerships rooted in trust were built out of collaboration on an earlier project, which formed the basis of direct and indirect support that was needed to get the project built. When it opens in 2025, the grocery store will not just be a place where communities can

purchase affordable food, it will stand as a testament to the collaborative spirit of Region 9 and its partners.

3. Formal relationships breed informal relationships that breed formal relationships

In Region 9, formal and informal relationships with Tribal Governments create a reinforcing cycle that deepens collaboration and drives tangible outcomes. Formal representation—such as Tribal seats on Region 9’s Board of Directors and participation in the CEDS process—ensures that Tribal perspectives are embedded in governance and long-term planning. These structured ties build trust and provide a platform for informal relationship-building, whether through open communication channels, quarterly "eco-devo meetups," or accessible resources like the region’s grants newsletter. In turn, the trust and shared understanding fostered through these informal interactions lead to expanded formal collaborations, such as the Southern Ute Tribe inviting Region 9 to join its CEDS committee. By integrating formal and informal ties in this way, Region 9 demonstrates how EDDs and Tribal Governments can establish durable partnerships that align priorities and strengthen regional development.