Performance Metrics of Economic Development Districts

Information accurate as of August 2026

Executive Summary

Economic development districts across the South use a range of accountability approaches, including regional benchmarking, numerical performance indicators, implementation tracking, and comparisons with peer communities. Across the six districts reviewed, performance measurement is generally tailored to local economic conditions, but core state funding is usually formula-based or fixed rather than directly tied to economic outcomes. The strongest practices combine clear metrics, independent data, regional context, and defined responsibilities to distinguish meaningful economic progress from organizational activity alone.

Research Methods

Review of Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) of six economic development districts in the CSG South region: Northwest Arkansas Economic Development District (AR), South Delta Planning & Development District (MS), Northern Oklahoma Development Authority (OK), Santee-Lynches Regional Council of Governments (SC), Texoma Economic Development District (TX), and Mount Rogers Planning District Commission (VA).

Findings and Analysis

Economic development districts (EDDs) are often expected to produce measurable regional economic results while operating in communities with widely different populations, economic conditions, and development opportunities. EDDs assist in coordinating regional planning, infrastructure, workforce, and business development, as well as in implementing Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies. Since many EDDs receive public funding, there is a particular interest in knowing whether that funding is producing measurable economic results.

This memorandum examines six EDDs in CSG South states that use identifiable performance measures or accountability practices. Each example is evaluated using the same four questions:

1. **How does the district measure success while accounting for differences in regional size and economic opportunity?**
2. **What objective performance metrics are tied to economic outcomes?**
3. **Is state funding or another financial incentive tied to performance?**
4. **What accountability or best-practice feature is worth highlighting?**

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Arkansas - Northwest Arkansas Economic Development District

1. How does the district measure success while accounting for differences in regional size and economic opportunity?

The Northwest Arkansas Economic Development District (NWAEDD) takes a region-specific approach to measuring economic progress. The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) analyzes economic and social conditions across the nine-county district and uses those findings to identify regional advantages, disadvantages, and development priorities.[1] This approach is particularly relevant in Northwest Arkansas, where rapidly growing metropolitan communities coexist with more rural areas that face distinct workforce, housing, and infrastructure needs.

The CEDS breaks down demographic and economic indicators by county, including population, age, educational attainment, poverty, per capita income, housing characteristics, workforce conditions, and other factors.[2] That county-level analysis helps show where needs and opportunities differ within the district rather than relying only on a single regional total. The counties differ significantly. Benton and Washington counties contain about 78 percent of the region's population, while the remaining rural counties account for about 22 percent.[3] The CEDS emphasizes strategies that respond to different local circumstances. For example, it specifically calls for working with rural communities to develop marketing plans that promote them as business-ready locations.[4] At the same time, other strategies address workforce training, entrepreneurship, housing affordability, broadband, and infrastructure across the broader region.

2. What objective performance metrics are tied to economic outcomes?

Instead of approaching performance metrics through a traditional economic scorecard, NWAEDD places significant emphasis on implementation procedures. The CEDS establishes focus areas and then identifies specific action items, responsible organizations, and implementation timeframes.[5] For example, under its strategy to understand workforce training needs and assets, the district identifies seven concrete actions, including:

- Inventorying workforce training and career and technical education programs.
- Annually surveying businesses about current and future workforce needs.
- Annually surveying workers to identify skills and skills gaps.
- Incorporating soft, cognitive, and digital skills into training.
- Exploring additional or repurposed workforce training facilities.
- Building a regional workforce system that reduces barriers to employment.
- Regularly convening education, industry, workforce, and community leaders to better align worker skills with employer needs.[6]

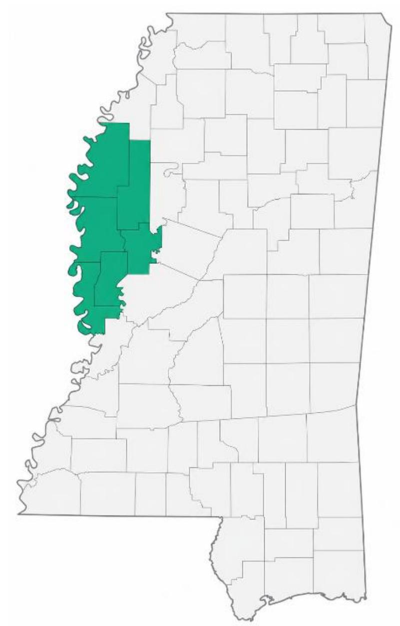
The CEDS then converts many of those actions into trackable commitments. For example, inventorying workforce programs has a one-year timeframe; business and workforce surveys are ongoing; incorporating employability skills is expected within one to five years; and exploring workforce training centers has a five-year timeframe.[7] The framework also includes broader economic indicators to monitor regional conditions. The CEDS reports measures such as population growth, poverty, per capita income, housing costs and vacancy rates, educational attainment, unemployment, and industry employment.[8]

3. Is state funding or another financial incentive tied to performance?

The CEDS does not establish a mechanism by which NWAEDD's state funding increases or decreases based on the achievement of its economic or implementation measures. Some strategies identify state and federal grants or other external funding as necessary resources for implementation, meaning that successful planning and execution can affect the district's ability to pursue project funding.[9] However, that is different from a formal performance-based funding formula in which the EDD receives operating support depending on its results.

4. What accountability or best-practice feature is worth highlighting?
A notable accountability feature of NWAEDD's framework is that strategies are translated into specific actions, and those actions are assigned to named categories of responsible partners with defined timeframes. For example, workforce surveys are assigned to NWAEDD, business and industry representatives, and chambers of commerce on an ongoing basis, while development of workforce training facilities is assigned to NWAEDD and workforce training representatives with a five-year timeframe.[10] NWAEDD provides an example of process and implementation accountability that could complement economic outcome measures.

Mississippi - South Delta Planning & Development District



1. How does the district measure success while accounting for differences in regional size and economic opportunity?
The South Delta Planning & Development District (SDPDD) measures success by tracking changes in the economic conditions of its own six-county region rather than against statewide growth totals.[11] One reason for this is that the region is considered economically distressed. The district has experienced decades of population decline, with reports that its population fell by roughly 45 percent between 1960 and 2020, and several individual counties lost more than 60 percent of their population.[12]

Given these economic conditions, the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) considers performance an incremental improvement over existing regional conditions.[13] This framework is intentionally flexible, allowing priorities and goals to adjust as economic conditions change in a region where economic needs can shift substantially.[14]

2. What objective performance metrics are tied to economic outcomes?
The South Delta's CEDS identifies several indicators for evaluating whether the regional economy is improving, such as unemployment, job gains and losses, diversification of employment, population, healthcare statistics, area tax base statistics, and housing conditions.[15] Instead of counting organizational activities, these measures are primarily for regional outcomes. For example, unemployment and jobs gained or lost measure labor-market outcomes, while tax-base and housing measures provide information about broader economic and community conditions.[16]

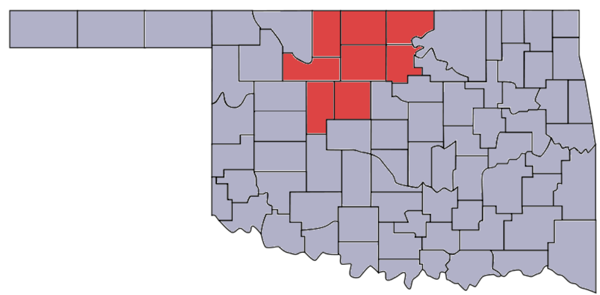
Data sources, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, are used to monitor economic indicators, providing empirical data to corroborate self-reported information.[17] Instead of establishing fixed numerical targets for each indicator, SDPDD's framework focuses on the direction and degree of improvement to evaluate, holistically, whether economic conditions are improving.[18]

3. Is state funding or another financial incentive tied to performance?
South Delta's Planning and Development District funding is not tied to achieving progress of the CEDS economic indicators.[19] However, the program does administer the Delta Workforce Development Area, and federal grant requests require demonstrating gains in employment and credential attainment in the region.[20] Similarly, service providers' contract renewals with SDPDD may depend on positive performance outcomes in the last program year.[21]

Furthermore, SDPDD receives state funding for the Mississippi Career Coaching Initiative through AccelerateMS. During the 2024-2025 school year, South Delta received $1.66 million to support 24 career coaches.[22] Despite these examples of programs with performance-based funding, core SDPDD funding is not tied to economic advancement.

4. What accountability or best-practice feature is worth highlighting?
A notable accountability practice of SDPDD is evaluating progress against the entire region's actual starting conditions. South Delta's approach recognizes that conventional economic-development metrics can disadvantage a persistently distressed region.[23] Its evaluation framework, therefore, examines several dimensions of regional health, such as employment, economic diversification, and population, and determines if those conditions are moving in a positive direction.[24] Additionally, the SDPDD model recognizes the multidimensional nature of economic development, emphasizing the need to evaluate the quality of place and population alongside traditional economic development indicators.[25]

Oklahoma - Northern Oklahoma Development Authority (NODA)



1. How does the district measure success while accounting for differences in regional size and economic opportunity?
The Northern Oklahoma Development Authority (NODA) Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) focuses its scope on the region.[26] It serves eight counties in north-central Oklahoma, and participants from each county helped develop the plan to more accurately reflect local economic conditions rather than a generalized statewide plan. The CEDS includes a detailed analysis of the region's economic conditions, including population, workforce, industry clusters, housing, transportation, broadband, healthcare, and other factors that shape local economic opportunity.[27]

Instead of evaluating economic success by raw totals, several of NODA's performance measures use rates or percentages, such as the business retention rate and year-over-year sales tax growth.[28] These measures can make comparisons more meaningful across communities with different population sizes and economic bases. The ability to make these comparisons is important because the NODA region is not economically uniform. Garfield and Kay counties contain the district's largest urban centers, while all eight counties have significant rural populations.[29]

2. What objective performance metrics are tied to economic outcomes?
The NODA uses a numerical key performance indicator (KPI) framework to assess regional performance, including net new jobs created per year, number of new business licenses issued, business retention rate, number of new housing units built, sales tax revenue growth, average property value increase, and labor force participation rate.[30] One limitation is that the CEDS identifies the KPI itself but does not appear to assign a specific numerical target to each measure.[31]

The CEDS also establishes an ongoing review process. NODA staff gather and analyze economic information and progress indicators, while the NODA Board of Directors, CEDS Committee, industry representatives, educators, and other partners review progress benchmarks.[32]

3. Is state funding or another financial incentive tied to performance?
Oklahoma's state funding for planning districts is evenly distributed among the 11 recognized units, rather than based on economic performance.[33] The state imposes accountability by requiring each district to submit an annual work plan

describing how state funds will be used.[34] Later, the districts must submit a progress report summarizing the activities they engaged in and their impact.[35]

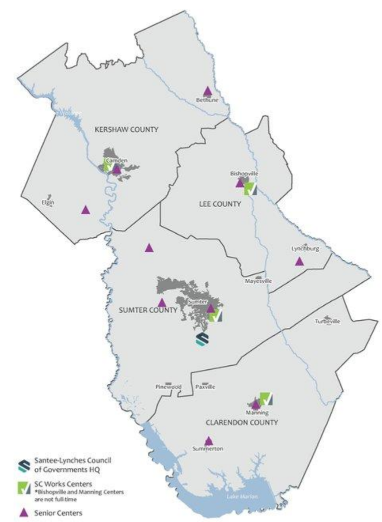
Additionally, continued access to state funding is based on compliance. Funding contracts will not be executed until the prior contract has been officially closed.[36] As such, the districts are monitored annually for program management and financial compliance.

4. What accountability or best-practice feature is worth highlighting?

A notable accountability practice at NODA is the use of a small set of clear KPIs to evaluate economic performance and growth.[37] Instead of tracking dozens of technical indicators, the NODA framework focuses on seven measures that elected officials and the public can easily understand. Additionally, the measures also span several dimensions of economic development, with jobs and business formation capturing direct economic activity, sales-tax and property-value growth reflecting fiscal and asset-based changes, housing measuring community capacity, and labor-force participation reflecting the availability and engagement of the regional workforce.[38]

The Northern Oklahoma Development Authority also pairs these KPIs with an ongoing review process involving its board, CEDS committee, and community and industry partners, providing a mechanism for regularly assessing whether regional conditions are moving in the desired direction.[39]

South Carolina - Santee-Lynches Regional Council of Governments



1. How does the district measure success while accounting for differences in regional size and economic opportunity?

The Santee-Lynches Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) measures progress within its own four-county region rather than relying only on statewide totals.[40] The CEDS establishes regional baselines and then measures improvement from those starting points, allowing evaluation of whether conditions are improving relative to where the region began, rather than comparisons with larger regions of South Carolina.[41] The regional context is important because Santee-Lynches includes both urban and rural communities. Sumter is the region’s principal urban center, while other portions of the district remain more agricultural.[42]

The performance framework includes measures that reflect not only direct economic outcomes but also the underlying conditions that can affect a region’s ability to grow, such as income, poverty, workforce participation, educational attainment, apprenticeships, infrastructure, and other indicators of regional capacity.[43]

2. What objective performance metrics are tied to economic outcomes?

The Santee-Lynches has a clear, target-based performance evaluation framework that identifies a baseline for progress indicators, a future objective, and a data source for individual measures. Some of the economic development measures include per-capita income, median household income, labor force participation, poverty rate, industry employment projections, register apprenticeship opportunities, high-tech employment, educational attainment, and degrees awarded by regional colleges.[44]

Santee-Lynches assigns specific numerical objectives to indicate positive economic development. Some of these include raising the per-capita income from $24,477 to $28,147, increasing labor force participation from 55.1 percent to 56.6

percent, and reducing poverty from 18.3 percent to 17.5 percent.[45] The evaluation framework also identifies a source for each economic measure, enabling independent verification and reducing reliance on self-reported data.[46]

3. Is state funding or another financial incentive tied to performance?

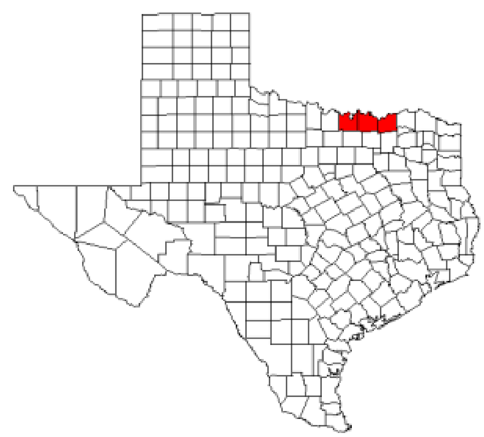
South Carolina's state funding for planning districts is formula-based instead of performance-based.[47] State law requires that 50 percent of the annual appropriation for regional councils of governments (COGs) be divided equally among the 10 districts, with the remaining 50 percent distributed according to each district's population.[48] South Carolina imposes accountability requirements on COGs, requiring them to submit a spending plan to the Executive Budget Office before receiving funding. The COGs must also submit financial audits of the appropriate funds within 90 days after the end of the fiscal year.[49]

4. What accountability or best-practice feature is worth highlighting?

A notable accountability practice at Santee-Lynches is establishing baseline figures, numerical targets, and independent data sources for each economic indicator. This structure makes it easier to determine whether regional conditions improved during the CEDS period and provides stronger accountability than simply reporting organizational activities.[50]

The model is also useful for differently situated regions because targets are established from the region's own baseline.[51] A smaller or more distressed district does not necessarily need to produce the same raw number of jobs or investment dollars as a major metropolitan region. Instead, policymakers can evaluate whether it has made measurable progress from its own starting point.

Texas - Texoma Economic Development District



1. How does the district measure success while accounting for differences in regional size and economic opportunity?

The Texoma Economic Development District evaluates economic conditions within its own three-county region of Cooke, Fannin, and Grayson counties rather than relying solely on statewide measures.[52] Its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) examines regional workforce characteristics, employment, wages and income, poverty, cost of living, and other socioeconomic conditions that shape local economic opportunity.[53] The CEDS also recognizes that conditions differ within the region, with Grayson County accounting for roughly 64 percent of the regional workforce, compared with 19 percent in Cooke County and 17 percent in Fannin County.[54]

Texoma places its regional conditions in a broader context by comparing indicators such as median household income, per capita income, and poverty with those of Texas, the United States, and nearby Dallas County. For example, the CEDS found that the three-county region's average median household income was below the averages for Texas, the nation, and Dallas County.[55] At the same time, the CEDS was developed with input from local elected officials, economic development organizations, higher education, workforce organizations, small-business representatives, and other regional stakeholders, allowing economic-development priorities to reflect conditions and needs within Texoma.[56]

2. What objective performance metrics are tied to economic outcomes?

Texoma's CEDS evaluation framework states that the Council of Governments (COG) will report on CEDS performance measures through the federal Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) process.[57] Some economic and employment measures include the number of jobs created, total employment, and jobs retained resulting from federal, state, and local investments.[58] Furthermore, investment and business development measures include U.S. Economic

Development Administration (EDA)- sponsored investments and business formations or expansions.[59] Likewise, workforce and organizational measures include the number of people receiving job training and the number of requests for assistance with regional data collection and analysis.[60]

The evaluation framework also tracks changes in the broader economic environment, including changes to taxes and fees and the creation of new incentive programs.[61]

3. Is state funding or another financial incentive tied to performance?

Texoma EDD's funding is not adjusted based on performance measures. Instead, the connection between funding and accountability is more notable through the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). In May 2024, EDA awarded the Texoma Council of Governments $210,000 to support the development and implementation of the CEDS for Cooke, Fannin, and Grayson counties.[62] The CEDS itself was also prepared with EDA assistance and funding. Texoma's evaluation framework states that its CEDS performance measures will be reported through the federal GPRA process and made available through the organization's economic development program.[63]

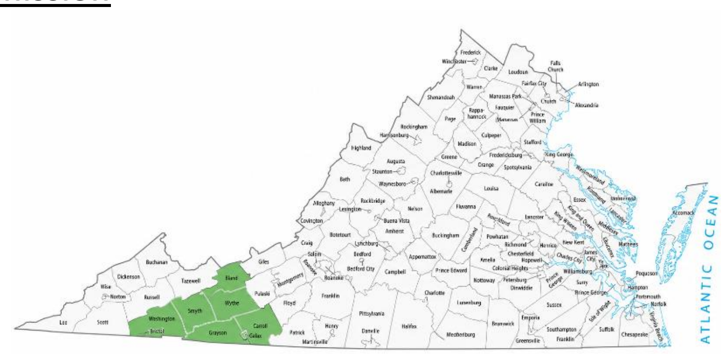
EDA may terminate an area's designation as an Economic Development District if the district organization fails to implement its CEDS in accordance with the development, implementation, and performance measures outlined in the strategy.[64]

4. What accountability or best-practice feature is worth highlighting?

A notable accountability practice at Texoma is the separation of economic outcomes from organizational outputs. Texoma's evaluation framework measures whether economic conditions have changed and whether the services provided by the EDD have changed.[65] This distinction holds that organizational activity does not necessarily equate to economic success. An EDD could provide extensive training and technical assistance without producing immediate job or investment growth, while broader economic gains could also occur for reasons unrelated to the EDD's work.[66] Tracking both categories may give policymakers a more complete accountability framework.

<u>Virginia - Mount Rogers Planning District Commission</u>

1. How does the district measure success while accounting for differences in regional size and economic opportunity?



The Mount Rogers Planning District Commission recognizes that its region has different geographic and social advantages and disadvantages from other parts of Virginia.[67] Rather than evaluating performance against a single statewide benchmark, the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) calls for comparing the district across multiple geographic scales, including surrounding planning districts, Virginia, and other municipalities nationwide with similar characteristics.[68]

The Mount Rogers region faces structural challenges that can limit economic growth, including its mountainous topography, which increases development costs.[69] The CEDS also links population trends to economic performance, noting that population growth has been slow and that jurisdictions experiencing the greatest population losses have often experienced significant job losses.[70]

2. What objective performance metrics are tied to economic outcomes?

The Mount Rogers CEDS contains a dedicated performance-measures section organized into four areas: population comparisons, labor force and unemployment, income and wages, and industry and local projects.[71] Population measures include changes in population by job type.[72] Labor market measures include unemployment rate, social service measures, and substance abuse measures.[73] Income measures include per-capita income, household income, and wage comparisons by industry.[74] Industry performance measures include industry cluster analyses and job and wage growth within targeted industries.[75]

Mount Rogers includes a direct measure of project execution by establishing methods to prioritize projects and monitoring the completion time of prioritized projects.[76] Population, employment, income, and wages indicate whether regional conditions are changing, while project-completion measures evaluate whether the Commission and its partners are advancing the initiatives identified in the CEDS.

3. Is state funding or another financial incentive tied to performance?

Virginia provides Mount Rogers with a fixed state appropriation rather than according to economic performance. Virginia's adopted FY2027–FY2028 budget provides $114,971 per year to the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission. Most of the state's other planning district commissions receive the same $114,971 base amount, while a few larger commissions receive more.[77]

Virginia uses a different model for competitive regional economic development funding, separate from the Mount Rogers annual operating budget, particularly through GO Virginia. Applicants must explain the economic opportunity presented by a project, demonstrate how it supports regional traded-sector industries, identify expected outcomes and deliverables, and explain how quantitative results will be tracked and reported.[78] Applicants must also provide an economic impact analysis estimating the expected fiscal return to the Commonwealth.[79]

4. What accountability or best-practice feature is worth highlighting?

A notable accountability practice at Mount Rogers is the comparison with peer programs and regional starting conditions. Mount Rogers directly acknowledges that geographic and social advantages and disadvantages differ among regions.[80] Its CEDS recommends comparison with surrounding planning districts, the state, the nation, and communities with similar characteristics.[81] This approach addresses the fact that a smaller, rural, or economically distressed region may never produce the same raw number of jobs or investment dollars as a more populous region.

Additionally, project-completion measures may also help separate factors the Commission can more directly influence from broader economic forces outside its control.[82] A national recession may affect employment or investment, but policymakers can still assess whether priority infrastructure and economic development projects were advanced in a timely manner.

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