



WATER FINANCE EXCHANGE
NO COMMUNITY LEFT BEHIND

COMMUNITY WORKSHOP REPORT



East Texas Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Opportunities

Lufkin, Texas

The January 9th East Texas workshop was a unique gathering of community leaders, water sector leaders, and academic and economic development leaders focused on meeting immediate needs for East Texas water infrastructure. The goal all participants shared is building sustainable pathways to collaborate and engage water and other sectors toward economic growth and positive quality of life improvements in East Texas.

This workshop was planned in partnership with the T.L.L. Temple Foundation, Communities Unlimited, and the Angelina & Neches River Authority to discuss opportunities to support communities in need of financial and technical assistance for water and wastewater infrastructure. Building on the excellent discussion in February 2023 led by T.L.L. Temple Foundation and USDA Rural Development, the focus at Lufkin was on building on the issues and needs identified at that event, moving toward real partnerships with willing communities and building a results-focused strategic approach to regional collaboration for the benefit of the East Texas region.

Water Finance Exchange (WFX) and RSAH2O would like to thank the panelists and presenters, including Representative Trent Ashby, as well as leadership from the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB), Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA), Texas Wellspring Fund, Stephen F. Austin University's Center for Applied Research and Rural Innovation, Communities Unlimited, Texas Rural Water Association, Deep East Texas Council of Governments, Texas Public Utilities Commission, Texas AWWA Small Systems, Southwest Environmental Finance Center at the University of New Mexico, and United States Department of Agriculture-Rural Development (USDA-RD).

The goal of the Workshop was to show what can be accomplished by weaving financial and technical assistance resources more tightly together and building a foundation of sustainable drinking water and wastewater infrastructure which-- along with broadband, power, and workforce development-- can fuel significant economic growth and quality of life.

More than 70 leaders across the state attended the workshop, including representatives from more than 15 rural communities.

Generous support for the workshop was provided by the T.L.L. Temple Foundation and WFX's efforts in Texas as further supported by Lyda Hill Philanthropies, George and Cynthia Mitchell Foundation, Meadows Foundation, the Still Water Foundation, CoBank, and the Water Foundation.

Outcomes and Next Steps

Following the workshop, WFX and its partners are committed to working in East Texas to support communities to implement sustainable infrastructure solutions. WFX will be working to:

- Capture input regarding community needs and systematically build a knowledge base with accessible data about communities in the Region. Include success stories and templates for successful partnerships.
- Coordinate with technical assistance providers to provide direct support to East Texas communities to develop, fund, and implement infrastructure solutions. Provide user-friendly avenues for communities to seek assistance.
- Build an East Texas Steering Committee to identify targets of opportunity and linkages among economic development institutions in the area including workforce, broadband, and water.
- Develop direct connections among technical assistance providers enabling more direct support for communities to identify which technical assistance providers can meet their needs
- Work with partners including Angelina & Neches River Authority and T.L.L. Temple Foundation to host a follow-up event in 2024 to help communities work directly with needed expertise including engineers, financial experts, and funding agency representatives to begin application processes for project development and financing.

Summary of Workshop Proceedings

The workshop Keynote Speakers, T.L.L. Temple Foundation President Dr. Wynn Rosser and Representative Trent Ashby, Texas' 9th District, highlighted East Texas as a region rich in resources and potential including strategic geographic location, natural resource base, and the strength and character of its people. They also noted that the region faces significant challenges in basic infrastructure, workforce, and economic growth. One function of the character of its people is that their toughness and pride often lead them not to ask for help. The conversations throughout the workshop included highlights on the following topics:

Funding Water and Wastewater Systems

The first panel of experts focused on the range of financial resources available to communities and what steps are necessary for East Texas communities to access funding and to be able to deploy it in a way that is affordable and sustainable. In addition, funders talked about the new Texas Water Fund established by Proposition 6, which provides another set of opportunities for East Texas. As is the case around the USA, there is not enough grant (or principal forgiveness) funding to fully fund communities' projects. Texas, as one of the largest and most populous states in the country, has immense funding needs and agencies such as USDA Rural Development are advocating for additional funding for Texas communities.

Because of the competitive nature of this funding, talking to the funders is the first step to financing infrastructure solutions. Funding agencies are adapting to make application processes easier for communities to navigate but it's best to talk with the agency first before tackling the long checklist for funding applications, such as financial documents, engineering plans, and administrative capacity expertise. Additionally, those communities that can work directly with technical assistance providers that can more effectively navigate these processes and create a long-term strategic plan to manage their current challenges while identifying sustainable solutions.

Regional Opportunities

Regionalization can entail everything from sharing services to the consolidation of several small systems, and it can help to address a variety of challenges.

For example, many communities are facing a shortage of trained water operators. By sharing an operator, communities can make the most of the regional workforce. Regional collaboration can also be an opportunity for more affordable and accessible funding. For communities wanting to start thinking regionally, it can help to extend an olive branch and start collaborating such as making joint purchases, sharing equipment, or taking a trip to a lab together. WFX will work with East Texas partners to establish an East Texas Steering Committee to identify needs and develop partnership solutions to help ensure that basic infrastructure in East Texas is affordable, sustainable, and attractive to residents and sources of economic investment.



Breakout groups allow for community leaders to share their story, discuss common challenges, innovative solutions, and learn from state agency representatives and other organizations.

Water and Economic Development

Water is vital for economic development and growth and East Texas Resources and Stephen F. Austin Center for Applied Research and Rural Innovation (CARRI) can provide services to support economic and community development planning. Mary Ann Rojas, Director of the CARRI, provided a luncheon presentation on how water infrastructure is one essential requirement in decisions to locate new economic activity. Communities can prepare for economic development opportunities, including assessments of infrastructure, human resources, and other assets. Regionalized systems can take advantage of pooled resources, which can help improve capacity to attract new development. Water is a cornerstone of this, but it needs to be connected to initiatives related to resilience, workforce development, and Broadband.

Community Sustainability

The second panel of the workshop illustrated how sustainable systems can be prepared for the opportunities and challenges of the future. This requires a constant investment in maintenance so systems can look towards the future. This panel described potential paths forward and the elements of partnerships that could be engaged sooner rather than later to begin to generate results for the region. Key components of success include financing tools for sustainable and affordable funding and governance structures that create economies of scale and make the most of the talents of the people in East Texas. Systems can be more successful at planning when they are not afraid to ask for help and can take advantage of available resources and expert support.



Panelists discuss state and federal funding opportunities available to communities. From left to right: Rogelio Rodriguez, Lillian Salerno, Scott Galaway, Chloe Lieberknecht, Suzanne Barnard, Dorothy Young.

Technical Assistance Support

Technical Assistance providers can provide the necessary capacity and expertise to help communities advance sustainable infrastructure solutions. More collaboration is needed between technical assistance providers to ensure coordination and effective support for communities.

In East Texas, there are multiple technical assistance providers available for support including AWWA Small Systems, Communities Unlimited, Southwest Environmental Finance Center, Texas Rural Water Association, and the Water Finance Exchange.

These technical assistance providers can assist communities pursue active funding opportunities, such as the Texas Water Development Board's open funding for 2025 State Revolving Funds.

Path Forward

After the high-energy conversations in Lufkin, participants and communities in East Texas can expect follow-up including invitations to submit inquiries related to any of the above, updates on water development projects underway in the region, and dates for follow-up gatherings.

This workshop was planned in partnership with

