

Stronger Economies Together

Texas 2013 FAQs

Rev 8/21/13

What is SET?

The SET program is a grassroots, asset-based planning process to help rural regions achieve stronger economic development. SET was launched because many small towns and cities in rural areas struggle in today's global economy. Tom Vilsack, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, made this statement about the increasing need for communities and counties to work together regionally in order to remain economically healthy in the future: "I have reached the conclusion that we must overhaul our approach to economic development in rural America. The framework of the new effort recognizes that the rural economy of tomorrow will be a regional economy. No one community will prosper in isolation."

What will SET accomplish?

The SET program will assist regions in developing and implementing action plans based on community input and regional assets. At the close of the program, regional relationships will be strengthened, regions will be able to function interdependently on shared initiatives, and assets will be more effectively employed. The 40 hours of technical assistance after the SET program will enable the regions to implement and further refine their goals.

When will the program occur?

The SET program will begin in Winter/Spring 2014. The sessions include nine modules spanning a year. Facilitated sessions will be scheduled to fit the needs of the region. Many sessions will cover more than one module. In-person sessions are designed to maximize group communication and hands-on planning. Some background work as well as conference/web calls among team members and facilitators will occur between in-person sessions.

How do I organize a viable SET region?

Each region must meet one of the definitions of "rural" set out in the application instructions. Data to evaluate these definitions, including the land area definition, are available at <http://communities.tamu.edu/stronger-economies-together-set/>. Consult with the leaders of nearby counties to determine their interest in participating.

Who is eligible?

SET is open to partnerships of citizens from three or more counties. Entire counties need not be represented. For example, a city in County A could participate with partners from two other counties to form a set region. Still, the territory encompassed should be a practical economic region. Many SET team members will represent governmental or quasi-governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, cooperatives or business interests; these organizations often have the contacts to facilitate regional alliances. However, individual citizens are welcome and encouraged to participate.

SET focuses on rural regions, but my county is metropolitan. Does my county qualify?

Metropolitan counties often have a great deal of rural space, including both small communities and open space, such as farm or ranch land. The overall region must have either (1) at least 51% of the population living in rural areas (i.e., cities and towns with fewer than 50,000 residents or outside of city limits) OR (2) 75% of the region's land area must be located in rural areas of that region. Those requirements refer to the region as a whole, not the individual counties. An Excel spreadsheet with rural population and land area data is available at <http://communities.tamu.edu/stronger-economies-together-set/>.

Remember that a region may include counties that do not individually meet either rural requirement as long as the entire region meets at least one of the requirements. In fact, economic success is more likely to be achieved when rural and metro counties work together.

Why do we need at least three counties in our SET region?

The three-county minimum is in place to promote regionalism. In the global economy, a single rural county often does not have the critical mass to achieve competitiveness. A multi-county region provides that critical mass by leveraging a greater asset base.

Why should our region (and I) participate in SET?

Many areas already have a strategic plan. The SET program goes beyond a strategic plan; SET helps communities to identify their regional assets and goals and to follow through in implementing their action plans. In addition to the 25 hours of facilitated regional planning during workshops, SET provides up to 40 hours of technical assistance after the workshop modules have been completed. This assistance will help the region start to realize its goals. Working at the regional level, rather than the county or city level, provides a stronger asset base and greater opportunities for economic synergies. Individuals and organizations participating in SET will have a role in determining the future of their region. They will also strengthen regional relationships and gain skills that will enable them to better serve their communities as leaders and as economic developers.

How do we apply?

An application and instructions are available at <http://communities.tamu.edu/stronger-economies-together-set/> or by contacting Leon Carey, USDA Rural Development Area #1 Director, Leon.Carey@tx.usda.gov or (806) 468-8600; or Rebekka Dudensing, Extension Economist - Community Economic Development, rmdudensing@tamu.edu or (979) 845-1719. The application should be submitted to Rebekka Dudensing at the same e-mail address by **Tuesday, October 1, 2013; 11:59 p.m. local time.**

Who should be included on our regional team?

The regional team should include key representatives from local governments, organizations, schools, utilities, and other groups that have an interest in long-term sustainable community development across the region. These team members will form the core of the regional partnership, and they will be asked to sign a letter of commitment available at <http://communities.tamu.edu/stronger-economies-together-set/>.

Who should be the main contact for a region's application?

The region's main contact should be someone who is available for regular communication with regional and state team members. This person or his/her staff will need to coordinate the application and workshop scheduling with the teams.

How many members should a team have?

The average team nationally has about 25 members. There is no lower or upper limit, but the team should be large enough to gain momentum. It is recommended that a team have at least two members per county.

Can team members be added after the application deadline?

Absolutely. Team members can and should be added between the time the application is submitted and when the workshops begin. A flyer is available to recruit team members for workshop participation.

What if a team member cannot attend every workshop?

Team members are strongly encouraged to attend all workshops because each module is part of a larger process that builds on previous modules. However, community leaders are busy people. When possible, it is desirable to have an alternate designated from an organization. If both the team member and the alternative are available to attend a workshop, both are welcome.

What is the cost?

There is no cost either for individual team members or for the counties, regions, and partnering organizations to participate in SET. However, regions should be prepared to provide logistical support for workshops if selected to participate in the program. For example, the SET sessions will be held in local facilities, which should be identified by the regional team members, although facilities need not be identified on the application.

When will we know if our region has been selected?

The regions selected for participation will be announced by December and the first meeting will be held after the first of the year.

How will workshops be conducted? Will there be a consistent contact for the region?

A variety of facilitators will present workshops of interest to individual regions and facilitate various aspects of the planning process. Facilitators will travel to the region to present the workshops at facilities identified by the regional team. Each region will have a member of the state team who communicates with regional team members on a regular basis. This contact will also consistently participate in the regional workshops.

Other Questions?

If you have any questions, please contact one of the following individuals:

Leon Carey	(806) 468-8600	Leon.Carey@tx.usda.gov
Rebekka Dudensing	(979) 845-1719	rmdudensing@tamu.edu