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# Rollin' on the River



Government Effectiveness and Efficiency Series



## Land Use & Economic Development

Mahoning River Corridor  
Mahoning County, Ohio

KENT STATE  
UNIVERSITY  
**THE CENTER**  
for Public Administration and Public Policy

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## Disclaimer:

This case study describes the Mahoning River Corridor Initiative's (MRCI) "Rollin on the River" collaborative project. The story is told with the help of the researchers at the Center for Public Administration and Public Policy at Kent State University. We hope that by sharing experiences and lessons learned through this collaboration, we will help others start successful collaborations. Dan Mamula, Tom Finnerty, and Glenn Holmes contributed insights and information that made this case study possible. The case study is written in the first person plural ("we") tense -- as though the writers were present and involved in the collaboration -- to enhance readability and ease comprehension for its readers.

## Just the Facts:

Historically, the Mahoning River corridor housed a large number of highly profitable industrial businesses. In recent years, however, many of these businesses closed. With the fall of the steel industry, our region suffered a major blow economically. In addition to the jobs and tax dollars lost, these closures left our communities with a large number of abandoned 'brownfield' properties. We needed a two-fold solution; an approach that would effectively repurpose the brownfields while rebuilding our local economy. A major effort to improve the economic competitiveness of the region has roots in the work of the **Mahoning River Corridor Initiative (MRCI)**, which spawned the Mahoning River Corridor Mayors' Association (MRCMA) – a cooperative network of communities along the Mahoning River in Mahoning and Trumbull counties.

The MRCI focused on economic development along the Mahoning river corridor. As observed by Glenn Holmes, President of the Mahoning River Mayor's Association, and Mayor of McDonald, "The river was an ideal location for development, not only because of the water source, but also because the infrastructure enabled things to develop along the corridor." The piecemeal efforts of individual communities had failed in the past to generate the economic growth our communities needed. Organizers of our collaboration recognized that innovation required a new cooperative mindset, as well as effective use of the resources and expertise of neighboring communities and Youngstown State University. Through MRCI, we came together -- nine communities, five local nonprofits, and the local university -- to create a collaboration, "Rollin on the River," to collectively market and promote available brownfield properties along the Mahoning river corridor. Each of our partner communities offered matching funds to support the development and maintenance of a website for advertising available properties. Yet this support alone was not enough to make the Rollin on the River project a reality.

In Spring of 2009, MRCI submitted a proposal to the Efficient Gov Now (EGN) grant program. This proposal outlined the Rollin on the River project, complete with plans for website creation, maintenance, and updates. After submitting this proposal to the EGN program, citizens across the 16 county northeast Ohio region voted for their favorite collaborative projects. In the end, Rollin on the River was selected as one of the grant recipients.

After learning that we would receive an EGN grant, we began implementing the project, and launched the Rollin on the River website by September of 2010. The website is now available receives visitors on a regular basis, and it has led to inquiries from external visitors about economic development opportunities in the region. Through the MRCI, we also identified a number of projects for implementation relating to environment, infrastructure, economic development and ecological preservation. As of October 2011, we have remediated over 450 acres of land. Of the 11 infrastructure projects for those sites, 3 have been completed and 4 have received funding. We also worked to establish a political arm through the Mahoning River Mayors Association. The Mayors Association played a leading role in the Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium HUD grant. The Mayors Association also played a key role in representing Trumbull and Mahoning counties, drawing in roughly \$4.2 million in support for various projects, including a Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation and a community garden project which received support from the Department of Agriculture.

MRCI also testified during Castlo Community Development Corporation's application for a Job Ready Sites infrastructure improvement grant. This project received \$3.5 million for reclamation of a 60 acre brownfield site. But perhaps the most critical development in recent months is our collaboration with the Western Reserve Port Authority in the development of a Brownfield Action Program Assistance grant for Girard and Youngstown. While the grant itself is important, the relationship we are building with the Port Authority will enable more effective economic development and brownfield management in the future.

**"The river was an ideal location for development, not only because of the water source, but also because the infrastructure enabled things to develop along the corridor."**

**Glenn Holmes, President of the Mahoning River Mayor's Association, and Mayor of McDonald, Ohio**

**“Because of the preexisting relationship between the communities generated by MRCI, we won many of these expansions without even trying.”**

**Dan Mamula Youngstown State University**

The MRCI and the “Rollin on the River” project produced a number of unexpected benefits. The collaborative process helped to develop new relationships between political leaders. Our communication built powerful support for the initiative. And this led to a strong relationship between the Mayor’s Association and MRCI. Interestingly, we found that this relationship between MRCI and the leaders of the communities themselves limited the parochial attitudes within the communities, and eased tensions about power and control. What is more, the collaboration yielded ancillary benefits, as two of the participants in the collaboration -- Youngstown and Girard -- forged a joint economic development agreement. This agreement enabled the expansion of V&M Star, a company that is building a new pipe mill on an old industrial site near its existing Youngstown plant. Girard did a 190 acre land swap with Youngstown to make this expansion a reality. The property will have a dedication in 2012. Other instances of land exchanges emerged as well, including an exchange between Niles and Weathersville as a part of the Building Relationships Together Extrusions expansion. Project leader Dan Mamula of Youngstown State University observes: “Because of the preexisting relationship between the communities generated by MRCI, we won many of these expansions without even trying.”

The greatest lesson we learned through the Rollin on the River collaboration is a rather simple one. Collaboration can result in substantial cost savings and efficiencies, and it can build trust among participants. As communities worked together and learned that they shared many obstacles with one another, they got to know one another, laying the groundwork for trust and payoffs from future collaborations. It is important to recall that these partnerships extend beyond local governments, though. Indeed, some of the most essential partnerships are growing between MRCI itself and other government bodies, particularly the Port Authority. Through the work of project leader Dan Mamula, our mayors, and local businesses, we have highlighted the importance of individual commitment in the success of a collaboration.

# “Rollin on the River”

## The Problem

The problem of economic development in the Mahoning river valley began in the 1960s, when the first of nine steel mills closed. These industrial facilities had been the backbone of the regional economy for decades, and provided employment opportunities for a significant portion of the population. These mills were located along the Mahoning River for manufacturing reasons, resulting in a 30-mile band of economic wealth that ran through nine different communities in Trumbull and Mahoning Counties. When the mills closed, this band of wealth became a brownfield, a term often used to describe abandoned industrial sites.

There were a number of attempts to encourage the rebirth of this area. Some early efforts were made to reopen the aged facilities, while later efforts were centered on the reuse of the land for industrial development. These efforts took place in individual communities and were led by various political and community members. This resulted in economic development efforts that were community centered rather than regionally centered. This created a history, similar to that of many other regions of the nation, of intergovernmental competition rather than one of intergovernmental cooperation in economic development. Such efforts generally proved unsuccessful in the Mahoning River Corridor, and the result was continued high unemployment and a declining population.

While the lack of success was partially attributable to the atmosphere of competition, part of the problem was logistical. Economic development requires focus, organization, and the availability of needed information. A great deal of information relevant to the potential economic development opportunities in the Mahoning River region was available, but it was disorganized and not readily available to prospective investors. This was not the result of a major technical problem, but stemmed instead from a lack of information coordination. To coordinate data on economic development opportunities, communities would have to develop geo-data maps, utility maps, and information on property availability, and then present it in a common location. This data-gathering process would have been time consuming and expensive, and for nine separate river corridor communities, a project focused on bringing this kind of information together would have been almost impossible.

With this limitation in mind, leaders across the nine communities in the Mahoning River Corridor came together, and set about developing a plan to deal with these information issues. In 2007, the Mahoning River Corridor Initiative (MRCI) was created, bringing together leaders, businessmen, and community members, as well as specialists from Youngstown State University. It was within this network that leading figures such as Dan Mamula (former Mayor of Struthers and now manager of the Rollin on the River project and the MRCI at Youngstown State University’s Center for Urban and Regional Studies [CURS]) argued for a new cooperative approach to solve the region’s long-standing economic problems. This would be no small feat, however, and finding the funding and experts to drive this initiative became our first challenge.

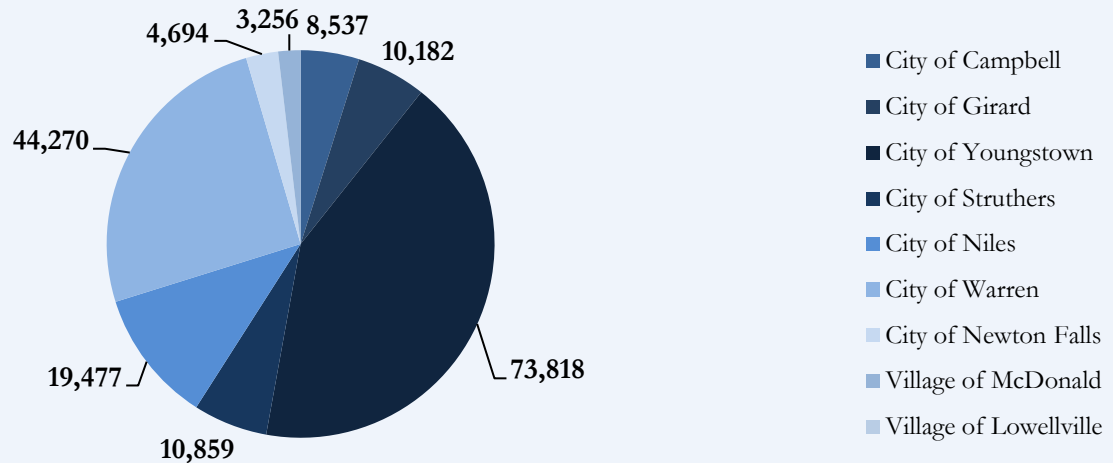
## The Opportunity

The Efficient Gov Now (EGN) program was a grant contest which ran in 2009 (and again in 2010) under the direction of a Northeast Ohio philanthropic organization, the Fund for Our Economic Future (Fund). Created to encourage local government efficiency through collaboration, EGN invited local governments to write and submit proposals for projects which involve two or more local governments working together to improve or expand government programs and services. The Fund invited citizens from across Northeast Ohio to vote on their favorite project to select the three winners. With our financial challenges in mind and our collaborative efforts already underway, this grant program presented an excellent opportunity for MRCI.

## The Plan

When the MRCI was created in 2007, six organizations were involved - four governments, Eastgate Regional Planning Organization and the CASTLO Community Improvement Corporation (CIC). In 2009, the MRCI group expanded to include the nine communities included in Figure 1 on the following page.

## Figure 1: Population of Partner Communities



We recognized that there was no single source of information on economic development opportunities, and that we would need to coordinate to provide a permanent solution to this problem. We chose to move forward with the goal of creating a coordinated system for business owners interested in economic development opportunities in the corridor communities. After coming to this decision in 2009, we went forward with our application to the EGN grant program, “Rollin on the River”, under the leadership of Dan Mamula. Our proposal focused on the development of a website to promote the river corridor and to market properties available for further development.

### The Proposal

The Rollin’ on the River project was designed to create an interactive website to enhance regional economic competitiveness and encourage efficient use of local government resources. We hoped to promote economic development in the Mahoning River Corridor by making information about vacant land, sites, and facilities readily available to potential investors interested in developing a business in the region. As proposed, Rollin on the River would fit under the larger MRCI collaboration, with the following key members:

- **Five non-profits** – YSU; CASTLO-CIC; the Mahoning River Consortium; Youngstown-Warren Regional Chamber of Commerce; and Common Wealth;
- A regional metropolitan planning organization (MPO) known as the Eastgate Regional Council of Governments (COG), and;
- The **nine communities** in the river corridor of Mahoning and Trumbull Counties are shown in Figure 1 above.

Youngstown State University’s Center for Urban and Regional Studies (YSU CURS) had a long history of collaboration with local governments and agencies in the area. Associate director Thomas Finnerty said, “Our Center collaborated with the corridor communities prior to MRCI, creating a history which made further collaboration possible.

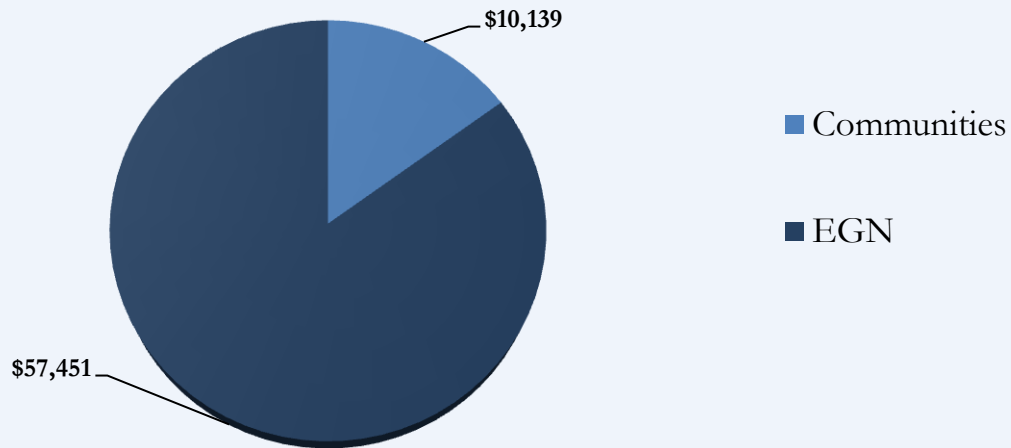
**“Our Center collaborated with the corridor communities prior to MRCI, creating a history which made further collaboration possible.”**

**Thomas Finnerty  
Associate Director of the Center  
for Urban and Regional Studies,  
Youngstown State University.**

YSU CURS worked together with Youngstown on a land use plan in 2005. It also helped other communities develop and implement neighborhood plans, experiences that led to the development of CURS’ Real Property Information System. This system provided the blueprint for the Rollin on the River property information system, and offered a critical basis for the project. YSU CURS also brought technical expertise to the project, in terms of geo-data management and mapping services. This expertise and history of collaboration proved critical to our project’s success.

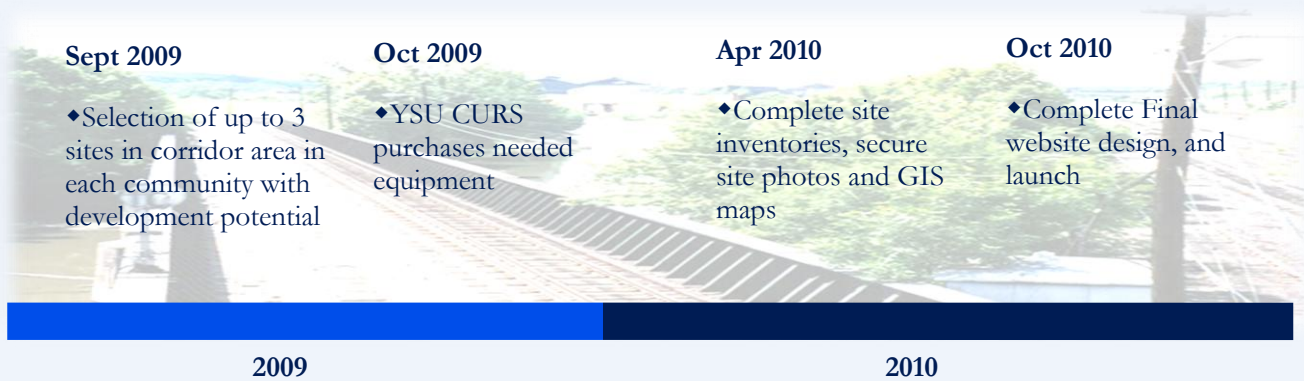
Our early efforts were enhanced by funds the City of Youngstown secured through a 2008 local government collaboration grant from the Ohio Department of Development to support the region’s economic development efforts. In addition to the Ohio Department of Defense grant funds, our partner communities also committed financial resources to support the Rollin on the River effort, and Youngstown State University Center for Urban and Regional Study (YSU CURS) agreed to provide housing and in-kind financial support. Several non-profit groups -- the Mahoning River Consortium, CASTLO-CIC and Common Wealth also provided financial assistance. The one-time contributions from partner communities were relatively small, and were therefore pooled together when projecting key contributions in the proposal, shown in **Figure 2** below.

**Figure 2: Proposed Contributions**



The proposed timeline for completing the collaborative project is included below in **Figure 3**.

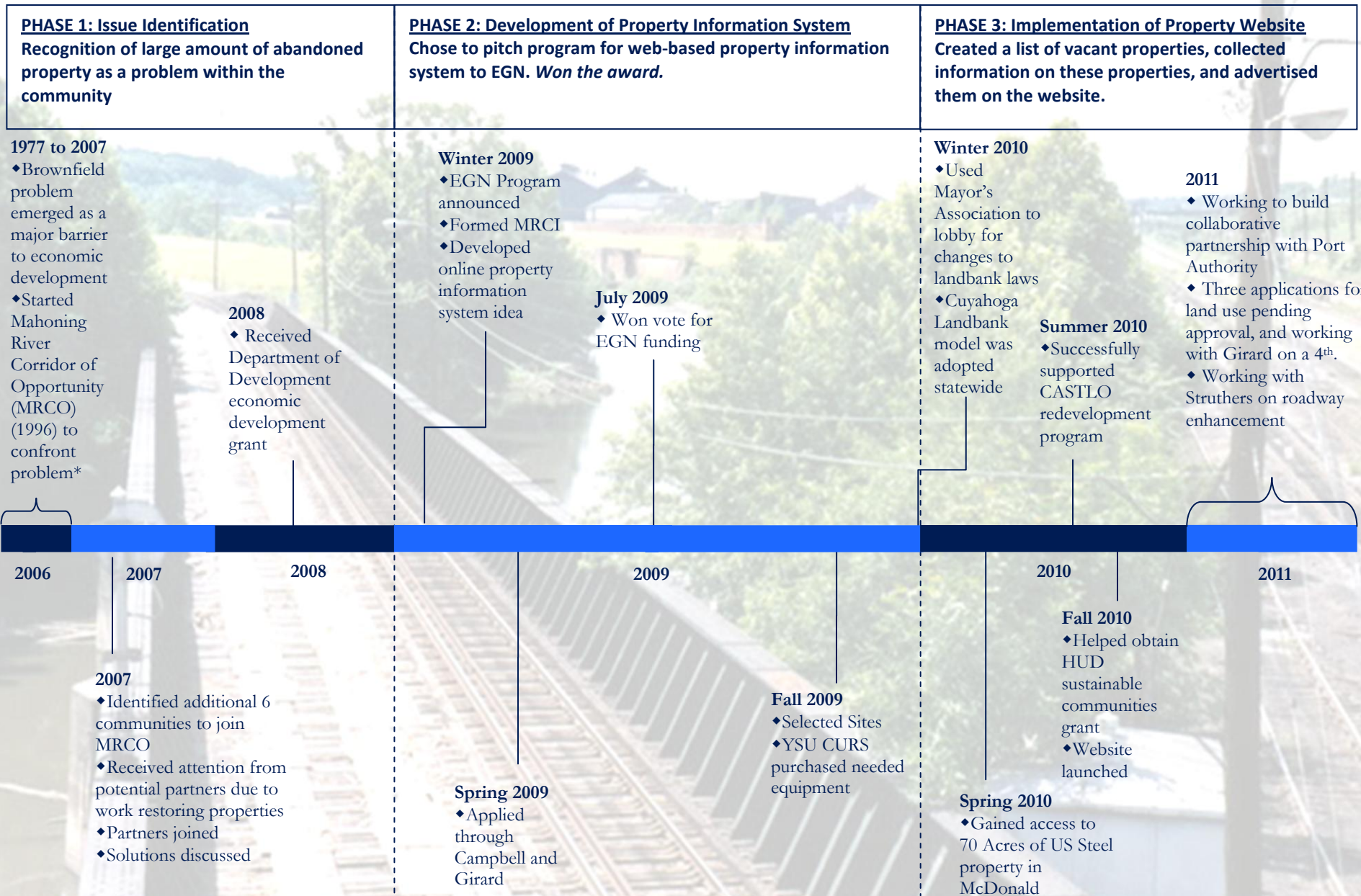
**Figure 3: Original Timeline for Implementation**



**The Reality and the Progress**

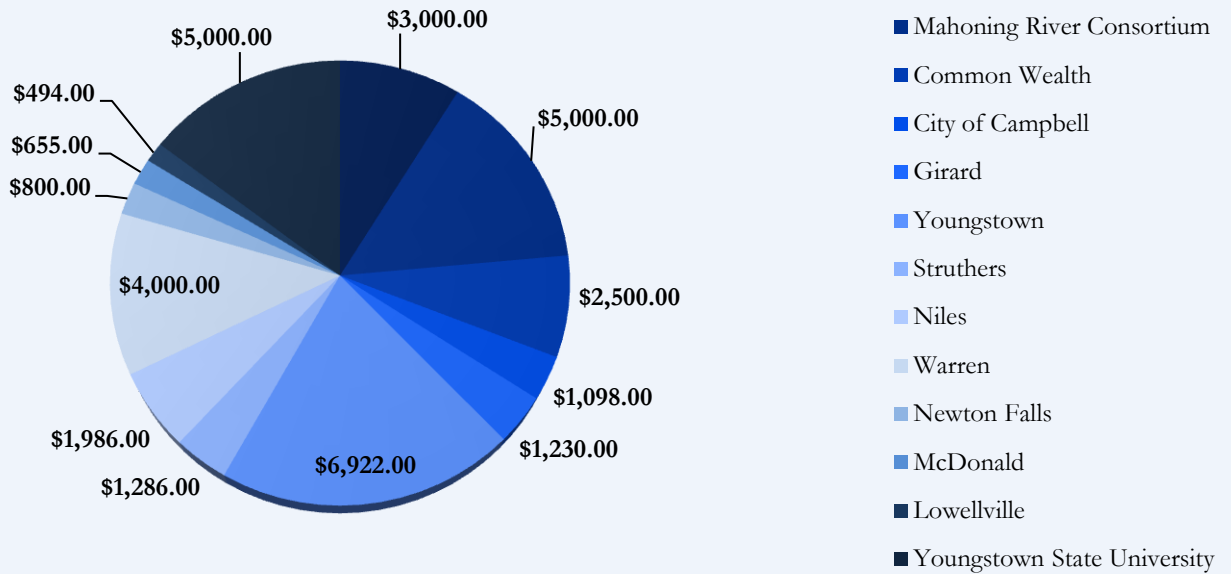
In July of 2009, the citizens of northeast Ohio voted, and selected our collaboration as one of three winners of EGN funding. A timeline for the overall development of the project is included on the following page in **Figure 4**. After we received the grant, we began implementing the project, and in September of 2010, we launched the Rollin on the River website. While the assistance from the EGN grant was instrumental in making the website a reality, we had to find the resources to maintain the website after the funding period ended. After considerable discussion, we settled on a low per-capita rate of contribution from each partner community. **Figure 5** outlines the annual contributions for maintenance of the Rollin on the River Website.

Figure 4: Complete Timeline of Property Information System



\*Original MRCO members included:  
 Struthers, Campbell, Youngstown

## Figure 5: Ongoing Contributions



With the assistance of MRCI, we also identified a broad range of additional projects for implementation in ecological preservation, economic development, environment and infrastructure. We have successfully remediated over 450 acres of land. Of the 11 infrastructure projects currently underway, 3 have been completed and 4 more have received funding. Throughout this process, we worked to establish a political arm through the Mahoning River Mayors Association, and with their support, we successfully lobbied for statewide policies regarding landbanks. The Mayors Association also provided leadership for a successful bid by Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium for a HUD Sustainable Communities grant.

### The Outcomes

This project produced a number of outcomes. The Rollin on the River website receives about 40 hits a month, with 55-60% of the hits coming from first time visitors. We hope to continue to build the number of hits our website receives by promoting the site broadly. Because of the website, we have had 6 requests for information on 6 specific sites. In comparison to what websites would have cost if they were funded individually for each community, each member community saved about \$24,000 the first year, with an additional \$5,500 in savings projected for each community annually.

In addition to these savings, the relationships the collaboration built across member communities contributed to progress in other projects. Between MRCI and the Mayor's Association, we have brought in roughly \$4.2 million in support for various projects along the Mahoning river corridor and throughout the northeast Ohio region. This support, which is critical to the long-term economic growth of the region, continues to this day. At this time, we have yet another grant proposal in process. In addition to activities carried out directly by MRCI, we have offered support for other community initiatives such as the CASTLO Community Development Corporation's application for a JRS infrastructure grant. This project brought an additional \$3.5 Million in funds to the area to redevelop a 60 acre brownfield site.

We have also seen a number of additional unexpected benefits because of this project. The collaborative process helped to develop new relationships among political leaders, and the lines of communication built by these new relationships created powerful support for the initiative.

Over time, we developed a strong relationship between the Mayor's Association and MRCI. Interestingly, we found that this relationship, between MRCI and the leaders of the communities themselves, limited the parochial attitudes within the communities, and eased tensions about power and control. What is more, the collaboration yielded ancillary benefits, as two of the participants in the collaboration -- Youngstown and Girard -- forced a joint economic development agreement that resulted in the expansion of V&M Star, a company that is building a new pipe mill on an old industrial site near its existing Youngstown plant. Girard did a 190 acre land swap with Youngstown to make this expansion a reality. This property will be dedicated in 2012. Other instances of land exchanges emerged as well, including an exchange between Niles and Weathersville as a part of the Building Relationships Together Extrusions expansion, adding two new shifts and more than doubling its workforce.

But perhaps the most exciting development in recent months is our collaboration with the Western Reserve Port Authority in the development of a Brownfield Action Program Assistance grant for Girard and Youngstown. While the grant itself is important, the relationship we are building with the Port Authority is critical, given its authority to carry out new kinds of financing efforts to stimulate economic development. This partnership will enable far more effective economic development and brownfield management in the future.

### The Lessons

This project taught us a number of important lessons. First and foremost, we learned that relationships which build trust among partners can provide a foundation of success for ongoing collaborations. The development of MRCO into MRCI, along with the creation of the Rollin on the River website, offers clear evidence that collaboration can build upon itself to yield ongoing successful results.

Second, we discovered that a foundational institution or organization can enable the recognition and trust needed to earn the support of other partners. In this case, the YSU CURS program served in this role. When institutions of this kind exist, it is vital to take advantage of their standing in the community and build relationships with them.

Third, we found that institutions with authorities needed to complete a project efficiently and effectively are important potential partners, and should be pursued. As noted above, we are in the process of solidifying a relationship with the Western Reserve Port Authority for this very reason. By engaging with organizations that have the political and legal means to carry a project forward, partners can build dynamic and effective collaborations.

Fourth, we discovered that persistence in the face of uncertainty is critical to collaborative success. After the EGN grant ended, we were not certain where the financial resources needed to maintain the website would come from. But after careful discussion with our partners, each community and a number of our other partner organizations came forward to contribute the resources necessary to keep this economic development tool available for continuing use. In the words of Thomas Finnerty, Associate Director of the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at YSU, “The thing that we learned is, if you dig hard enough, you can find a way to keep going.”

Our fifth and final lesson was vital. For a collaboration to succeed, partners must be personally committed to the project, and this commitment can be reinforced by a leader, or “spark plug”, who is dedicated to the collaboration’s success. In this case, Daniel Mamula, former Mayor of Struthers and now MRCI Manager with YSU’s CURS has played this role. His commitment to collaboration and economic development in the Mahoning Valley region helped us keep the collaborative spirit in the Mahoning Valley alive as the project grew.

**“The thing that we learned is, if you dig hard enough, you can find a way to keep it going.”**

**Thomas Finnerty  
Associate Director of the  
Center for Urban and  
Regional Studies,  
Youngstown State  
University.**

# For More Information...

## PROJECT SPECIFIC CONTACTS

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**Glenn Holmes - President of the Mahoning River Mayor's Association, Mayor of McDonald**

Phone: (330) 530-5472

Web: <http://www.mcdonaldvillage.com/>

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION CONTACTS

**Center for Public Administration and Public Policy**

Phone: 330-672-7148

Web: <http://www.kent.edu/cpapp/collaboration/index.cfm>

**The Civic Commons**

Phone: 800-530-8507

Web: <http://theciviccommons.com/>

**Fund for Our Economic Future**

Phone: 216-456-9800

Web: <http://www.futurefundneo.org/>

**Ohio Auditor of State**

Phone: 614-466-4514

Web: <http://www.auditor.state.oh.us/>