

Working to make KAN STEP work for you

Kansas Rural Water Association has been privileged and challenged with providing inspection services and technical assistance to all of the Kansas Department of Commerce's (Commerce) KAN STEP projects in recent years. KAN STEP is an acronym for "Kansas Small Town Environment Program." The program assists communities in funding facilities that they would oftentimes not be able to afford. Commerce awards a grant to the community to pay for professional services from engineers, architects and grant writers. The grant also pays for materials and needed specialized labor and services that

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are lacking in the community. The most challenging aspect of the project is provided through "sweat equity" of community volunteers.

How do these KAN STEP projects come to be? Who are the visionaries

with ideas and how does a community turn an idea into a project? While KAN STEP may not need an advertising campaign to attract applicants, this article will clarify a few finer points about the program.

The history of the KAN STEP program, as related by Marilyn Graham, Program Manager of the Community Development Block Grant for Commerce, included her learning about the program at a national conference. She later visited another state involved with it and was excited about the

possibility of providing communities in Kansas with the program. It was a way to meet water and/or sewer needs without the heavy debt requirements of passing huge bonds issues, raising rates beyond what the community could afford, or passing years of debt on to the younger generation. The program was introduced in

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Kansas in 2000. Formoso, Kan. became the first KAN STEP community, with the project replacing an entire water

from having to increase water rates to nearly \$50 a month, an expense determined that could not be afforded. Several other water system improvement projects followed. Because of excitement from communities wanting to build a fire station, community building, or senior center, KAN STEP was expanded to include

building structures in July of 2001. The rest is history (although still in the making). As of January 14, 2005, KAN STEP has 16



Ron Koehn and Stanley Giesel are typical of volunteer workers on KAN STEP projects. This photo shows them working on installing electricity to the city of Burns' new community center in 2003. Richard Brentzicofer, a retired electrician, also volunteered his time on the Burns' project.

distribution system, utilizing 29 volunteers, at a cost savings of \$400,000 (engineer's estimate). The donated labor by Formoso's volunteers saved the community

projects completed. There are 20 projects under contract or in progress (see table on the next page). Architectural or engineering services have been assigned to

KAN STEP PROJECTS 2000-2004

As of February 1st, 2005 KAN STEP has 16 projects completed. There are 20 projects under contract or in progress. Architectural or engineering services have been assigned to 4 additional projects. And 20 additional projects are in earlier stages of development. The total retail value of projects completed or under construction as of February 1st, 2005 is \$14,742,491. Because local people donate labor to construct the facilities, the cost has been reduced to \$8,120,085 for a 44.92% overall reduction.

Name	Project	Total Retail Cost	KAN STEP Grant
Formoso	Water System	\$609,860	\$274,000
St. Paul	Water System	\$234,336	\$96,604
Chase County	Water System	\$775,125	\$110,000
Nemaha County (RWD 1)	Water System	\$505,465	\$290,905
Formoso	Fire Station	\$334,000	\$220,400
McFarland	Fire Station	\$389,000	\$226,000
Tescott	Fire Station	\$209,112	\$131,308
Melvorn	Community Bldg.	\$523,683	\$301,266
Morris County	Community Bldg.	\$114,000	\$74,500
Russell County (Waldo)	Fire Station	\$97,737	\$61,545
Goff	Community Bldg.	\$396,308	\$250,000
Burns	Community Bldg.	\$609,640	\$338,381
Whiting	Community Bldg.	\$524,486	\$296,643
Rawlins County	Fire Station	\$250,743	\$155,432
Enterprise	Water System	\$316,682	\$141,119
Axtell	Fire Station	\$500,594	\$299,800
Saline County	Fire Station	\$534,932	\$298,609
Washington	Fire Station	\$580,754	\$347,614
Bern	Community Bldg.	\$589,560	\$350,089
Carbondale	Community Bldg.	\$575,720	\$342,339
Corning	Water System	\$498,170	\$258,135
Downs	Fire Station	\$343,632	\$206,179
Onaga	Senior Center	\$384,658	\$230,000
Lincolnvile	Community Bldg.	\$302,773	\$181,664
Arcadia	Fire Station	\$350,000	\$207,243
Selden	Community Bldg.	\$177,884	\$106,312
Belvue	Fire Station/Comm. Bldg.	\$398,531	\$229,961
Grenola	Senior Center	\$152,140	\$91,060
Hartford	Community Bldg.	\$687,664	\$398,537
Grinnell	Addition to Fire Station	\$237,854	\$142,621
Bunker Hill	Community Bldg.	\$180,683	\$108,289
Tipton	Community Bldg.	\$235,400	\$140,810
Agra	Water System	\$506,741	\$306,471
Morrill	Fire Station	\$765,046	\$399,665
White City	Fire Station	\$222,648	\$135,579
Williamsburg	Library	\$626,930	\$371,005
Totals		\$14,742,491	\$8,120,085

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Where to start

A proposal that might ultimately become a KAN STEP project begins with a vision and a lot of faith and confidence held by a few community leaders. From the first "official" project in Formoso, word trickled down that Commerce was awarding grants to build community centers and fire stations! All the community had to do was take the money, buy the materials and build the building. This all sounds good – quick and easy. The key part of the schedule is to "build the building." This concept doesn't threaten many smaller communities because that's the way neighbors live – helping each other. Whether it's a machine shed on a farm or a community center or fire station is not the issue. The issue is that volunteers are willing to step forward, pitch in and get the job done. It won't work everywhere because too many people will not or cannot donate time or they have a "fast food" mentality – meaning that it is easier to hire something done and pay for it rather than be inconvenienced to help.

This "real" process starts with a meeting at the local level. A meeting is needed to bring citizens together to receive information

and have questions answered. Are volunteers really available? If the KAN STEP program is selected as one that could be used to construct the project, it must be clear that it is a self-help program and that everyone will need to volunteer in

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whatever way they can. No, outsiders are not going to come in and complete the work so community volunteers must have a clear understanding that the community will have to stick it out from the beginning to the end. Volunteerism is the most important criteria for KAN STEP. The old adage about "getting something for nothing" is no more

If there's enthusiasm and labor capability, leaders to serve as "sparkplugs" and willing volunteers, then the next step is to contact Commerce.

The first item Commerce will ask for is a list of the volunteers

who have signed up to assure the interest is there, plus a short, two-page pre-application, which can be found on the Commerce Web site or can be received by fax or mail. Commerce will also want to know whether the community or district is qualified for a grant. This means, will at least 51 percent of the people who will benefit from the project be considered low or



New values and some new water mains kept the volunteers on the city of Enterprise KAN STEP project moving around town. Here Ralph Thomas and recently deceased, Gus Stangle, work to start a saw to cut another opening in the asphalt while Clell Reschke begins chipping away concrete under asphalt with a jackhammer. Gus donated more than 300 hours to the project and Clell, at age 78, donated more than 400 hours of labor to the Enterprise project. Clell says that running that jackhammer kept his joints limber.

prevalent in today's society than in the KAN STEP program. A community will get a new building or utility, but it won't be without a lot of sweat and effort.

moderate income? This is one of the basic requirements of the CDBG program. The only way to determine this figure is by 2000

census results or by conducting a survey. Commerce will help the caller through this. The survey may take some time, depending on how quickly the caller responds – and how quickly the community wants to proceed. Once this is accomplished, a meeting will be set up where the State can meet with the leaders and volunteers to hear about the plans and dreams.

Becky Kester recently assumed the position of KAN STEP Manager at Commerce. Becky meets with local officials and explains the program procedures. If Commerce believes the community meets the criteria of having the leaders, volunteers and enthusiasm, an architect or engineer is assigned to the project to begin the planning of the structure or water system. The consultant needs to develop cost estimates of the entire project, complete pre-plan drawings, check codes, etc. KAN STEP projects are required to demonstrate a 40% real cost savings over retail. If that is demonstrated and accepted by Commerce, the community will be advised to obtain services of a grant writer to submit an application for the actual grant. All the other preliminary work needs to be completed first.

Bubbling enthusiasm

“It feels like we’re dragging our feet,” was a comment stated to me on one current KAN STEP project that just recently started the construction phase of the project. My reply was that for a while, it may seem that progress is slow. That is no different than in any commercial construction. In KAN STEP, many jurisdictions are asked to perform a lot – and often for people who have never been party to a project of this nature. But before long, the community will be asked to finalize plans and complete any legal matters such as land acquisition. Before people realize, three months may pass and a

hammer has yet to be swung, or a ditch dug. This is a frustrating time, but it passes quickly and volunteers will soon be busy with site preparation and work coordination.

Inspectors, workers

KRWA has enjoyed and hopes to continue to provide quality inspection and technical assistance to KAN STEP projects. KRWA’s staff does not resemble most other “inspectors.” KRWA staffers pitch in with the work. KRWA’s purpose on these projects is to make sure the project is completed without cutting corners and helping ensure that all volunteers will have fingers and toes intact to enjoy the new community center, fire station, or water system.

It is not an easy task to construct a building or install a new water system. In fact, anyone who has tried building a garage or small storage shed knows how difficult it can be. KAN STEP projects are large and require cooperation.

“We’re not slapping together a birdhouse here; we’re constructing a usable facility that is designed to withstand the tests of time and benefit future generations,” says Jane Pigorsch, sparkplug and city clerk, City of Lincolnville.

Once paperwork is completed and approved construction can begin. It starts with site preparation, continues with concrete placement, framing, roofing, siding, interior utilities and concludes with the finish detail work. After months of squinting at the paperwork, months of sweating over lumber and steel or digging ditches, a new facility or water system is up or running, providing service. A new sense of pride and community spirit accompanies the dedication of the new facility. Many times it is a community feeling never experienced by the volunteers. It is with pride in assisting communities that I say, “That my friends, is what KAN STEP is all about.”

Marilyn Graham was honored by KRWA several years ago for her leadership and support in establishing KAN STEP and other programs in Kansas. As a state agency representative, she placed her trust and confidence in a program that challenges a community’s residents to do something for themselves. As a result of her commitment and vision, Kansas is the only state that is constructing buildings through a program like KAN STEP. Marilyn had an idea, looked for ways to improve what was already there, called people and resources together and came up with a program that is totally unique. These communities are getting ideas, researching ways to improve their already available options, holding meetings, sharing those ideas and coming up with new and exciting facilities. KRWA hopes that this program stands the tests of time and continues to allow communities to construct the facilities they need. A little ‘sweat equity’ is just what the doctor ordered to help sustain communities in Kansas.

The KRWA conference is just around the corner. KAN STEP will be discussed two times. First Marilyn Graham and Becky Kester will provide a review of this program to the Attorneys’ Forum, which is open only to attorneys representing members of KRWA. But you can learn more about KAN STEP by attending the session on Thursday, March 31 at 10:45 a.m., “KAN STEP: A True Kansas Success Story” to be presented by Becky Kester. I would also encourage you to stop by the Commerce booth in EXPO Hall. You’ll find Commerce in Booth #36 near the entrance.