



Rural Leaders for
Economic Mobility

Mobility Action Plan

Audrain County, Mo.

RURAL LEADERS FOR ECONOMIC MOBILITY

AUDRAIN COUNTY

MISSOURI

Mobility Action Plan



County	Audrain County, Missouri
County Seat	Mexico, MO (pop. 11,047)
County Population	24,300
Primary Contact	Leslie Meyer, Associate Commissioner

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BUILDING AUDRAIN COUNTY’S WORKFORCE FROM THE GROUND UP

One county. Three strategies. A workforce pipeline from the classroom to the shop floor.

Ask an employer in Audrain County about workforce and you will hear the same refrain: “No one wants to work anymore.” Or: “Even if I paid six figures, I could not fill every spot I have open.” The frustration is real — but the problem runs deeper than motivation. Every entry-level vacancy costs a local employer between \$2,500 and \$5,500 in hard and soft costs. One Mexico manufacturer was losing 100 employees a year, a turnover bill exceeding \$250,000 annually. This is a stability problem, not a work ethic problem, and Audrain County is addressing it as such.

Audrain County is a rural community of 24,300 people anchored by agriculture, manufacturing and small business. The two largest communities are Mexico (pop. 11,047) and Vandalia (pop. 3,046). The county’s hospital closed in 2022. Affordable housing is scarce. The poverty rate stands at 15.1 percent, and the per capita income of \$28,392 falls significantly below the Missouri average of \$39,695. These are not abstractions, they are the daily conditions that make it harder for workers to show up, stay and advance, and harder for employers to plan, grow and hire.

Through the Rural Leaders for Economic Mobility (RLEM) program, Audrain County designed a three-strategy plan that addresses workforce stability at every stage of the pipeline: growing the next generation of local entrepreneurs through the schools, strengthening the financial footing of current workers, and equipping employers across the region to retain the workforce they already have. The \$50,000 RLEM subgrant has been invested across all three strategies, each of which is already producing results.

Strategy	Lead Partners	RLEM Investment	Key Result to Date
1. SAE Entrepreneur Grant Program	County Commission, 3 FFA advisors, EDF Renewables	\$24,000	Grant program launched in 3 high schools; first cohort of student entrepreneurs funded
2. Getting Ahead Financial Education	County Commission, Mexico Sustainability Project	\$11,000	Program expanded county-wide; first Vandalia-area resident graduated Dec. 2024
3. WRAP Regional Employer Training	Mexico Chamber, WRAP Director, 6-county partners	~\$15,000	165+ employers and 11,150+ employees reached across 4 regional training sessions

What We’re Asking For

Full implementation of Audrain County’s three strategies requires targeted investment in the next phase of each program. Specifically, Audrain County is requesting support from capstone partners and funders in the following areas:

- \$70,000 to expand the SAE grant program to six additional FFA chapters across Audrain County, reaching students in Centralia, Wellsville-Middletown, Paris, Mark Twain, Madison and Sturgeon
- \$30,000–\$40,000 in seed funding to establish a permanent Getting Ahead branch in Vandalia, run by a locally trained facilitator group
- \$150,000 to expand the WRAP program to smaller regional businesses that cannot afford full membership fees, converting trained employers into sustained program partners

SECTION 1

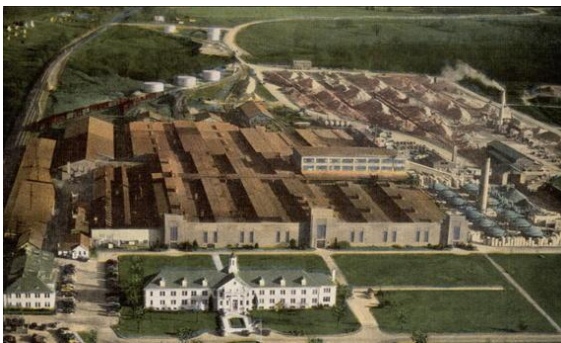
ECONOMIC MOBILITY VISION

Where we've been, where we are, and where we're going

Vision Statement

Audrain County is a place where every resident — from the youngest FFA entrepreneur to the factory floor worker supporting a family — has the skills, resources, and community behind them to build lasting economic security. We are a county that has reinvented itself before, and we are doing it again: this time by investing in our people.

A County That Knows How to Pivot



Audrain County does not shy away from difficult conversations. This community has faced economic crisis before and found its way forward — and that history matters to understanding why this Mobility Action Plan is built the way it is.

For generations, Audrain County was the “Fire Brick Capital of the World.” Four brick plant locations anchored the economy, providing competitive wages, outstanding benefits and even on-site healthcare. To grow up in Audrain County meant you would more than likely become part of the A.P. Green or Harbison Walker extended family. Then the industry pivoted, outsourced steel from Europe, and the plants closed. Hundreds of residents were suddenly without work,

and the economic foundation the county had relied on for decades began to crumble.

County leaders responded by going back to the roots of the community. Farmers rallied together and brought Poet to Laddonia — the county’s first ethanol plant. A second group of farmers attracted a biodiesel facility to downtown Mexico. Manufacturers expanded and new ones arrived. Spartan Light Metals grew its workforce; local entrepreneurs opened fabricating shops and trailer businesses. The county earned a new title: the “Biofuel Capital of the World.” Most recently, Western Smokehouse Partners, makers of Chomps meat sticks, opened a new Mexico facility and has been adding employees steadily ever since. The lesson of the past three decades is one Audrain County carries into this plan: when the conditions change, this community adapts.

Today, the challenge is not industry — it is workforce. Entry-level turnover is costing employers hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. Young people are leaving for larger cities. The hospital has been closed since 2022. And in pockets of the county, economic mobility has not just stalled, it is declining, especially for children and young adults in the county’s smallest communities. The county’s response is the same as it has always been: face the problem directly, build the right partnerships and invest in people.



The Hospital: Important Context

No overview of Audrain County’s economic conditions is complete without addressing the hospital. Audrain Medical Center — once the county’s largest employer — closed in 2022 after being passed between out-of-state investment groups that failed to pay staff, drew down public loans, and ultimately left the community without care. The county, city of Mexico, and public health partners have since purchased the property and are in active discussions with Boone Hospital in Columbia about a reopening. Progress is real but slow.

Until then, the practical consequences are significant: ambulance teams spend hours on non-emergency transport runs, leaving the county underserved. Residents go without colonoscopies and mammograms because they cannot get to facilities 45 minutes away. Recruiting new employers — who want a hospital nearby for their workers — is more complicated. Every strategy in this plan is designed to function in that context, and to grow stronger once healthcare is restored.



What Success Looks Like in 10 Years

Audrain County’s vision for the next decade centers on three interconnected outcomes: a self-sustaining pipeline of young entrepreneurs who stay in the county and become its next generation of employers; a workforce that is financially stable, retained and growing with their companies; and a regional identity as a model for practical, community-led economic mobility in rural Mo. The three strategies in this plan are the foundation that makes all of that possible.

ASSETS & STRENGTHS	OBSTACLES & CHALLENGES
✓ Active FFA chapters in 3 county high schools	✗ Hospital closed since 2022; nearest care 40+ min. away
✓ WRAP program with proven <5% turnover rate	✗ Poverty rate 15.1 percent; higher in Vandalia (16.7 percent)
✓ Mexico Sustainability Project / Getting Ahead curriculum	✗ Per capita income \$28,392 vs. Missouri avg. \$39,695
✓ Diversified manufacturing & biofuel cluster	✗ Affordable housing shortage; rentals \$1,000–\$1,200/mo
✓ Regional employer network across 6 counties	✗ Youth out-migration; average resident age of 40
✓ EDF Renewables as a committed 5-year funding partner	✗ Small school districts; limited teacher recruitment resources

SECTION 2			
LOCAL CONDITIONS			
<i>The data, history, and community voices that shaped this plan</i>			
Indicator	Audrain County	Missouri Average	Source
Population	24,300	—	U.S. Census ACS
Poverty Rate	15.1 percent	13.0%	U.S. Census ACS
Per Capita Income	\$28,392	\$39,695	U.S. Census ACS
Median Age	40 years	38.6 years	U.S. Census ACS
Vandalia Poverty Rate	16.7 percent	—	U.S. Census ACS
Vandalia Per Capita Income	\$22,111	—	U.S. Census ACS
Avg. cost per entry-level vacancy (employer)	\$2,500–\$5,500	—	Mexico Chamber / employer data

Workforce and Economic Instability

The numbers tell part of the story. The per capita income gap between Audrain County and the state average, more than \$11,000, reflects a workforce that is employed but not advancing. Many residents fall into what researcher Dr. Ruby Payne describes as “daily instability”: not in crisis, but one car breakdown, one missed shift, or one unexpected bill away from it. In that condition, holding a job — let alone building a career — is a daily act of navigation that most employers do not see and most workforce policies do not address.

The employer experience confirms this. For seven years, the Mexico Area Chamber of Commerce and county commission have heard the same frustrations from local businesses: “No one wants to work anymore,” “I can’t fill all the openings we have,” “I would add a third shift if I could find the workers.” These are not employers who lack jobs to offer. They are employers dealing with the downstream effects of housing instability, transportation gaps, financial stress, and a workforce that needs more than a paycheck to stay rooted.

For those living in Audrain County’s smallest communities, the picture is even starker. Rush Hill and Benton City do not have a single business within their city limits. Martinsburg (pop. 386) has lost its farmers’ elevator. Laddonia and Farber have seen stagnation for years. These communities are not failing for lack of people who want to work — they are failing because the infrastructure for economic mobility simply does not reach them.



Education and the Youth Pipeline

The average age of an Audrain County resident is 40. That number reflects a steady pattern: young people grow up here, graduate, and leave — drawn to Columbia, Moberly, or Kansas City by higher wages, more entertainment, and better healthcare access. The county’s school districts reflect the realities of rural education: limited budgets, teacher recruitment challenges, and heavy reliance on Missouri’s A+ scholarship program, which covers two-year community college or technical school for qualifying graduates. Mexico hosts a Moberly Area Community College satellite campus, which serves students who want a credential without the cost or distance of a four-year university.

FFA membership is strong across all three county high school districts and the quality of student SAE projects points to a generation of potential entrepreneurs who simply need early investment to stay rooted in the county. This year’s cohort includes a bakery-on-demand business, a catfish farming operation, artisan vanilla extract, a swine entrepreneurship enterprise and a student-run auction service — the early seeds of what could become the county’s next wave of small businesses. The goal of the SAE grant program is to water those seeds before they have a chance to leave.

Housing

Affordable housing is one of the county’s most pressing structural gaps. Single-family rental homes average \$1,000–\$1,200 per month. Apartment complexes outside of public housing are rare, and Section 8 housing, while available, leaves a significant gap for working families who earn too much to qualify but not enough to comfortably afford market-rate rentals. Mexico has an opportunity zone that county and city officials are working to leverage for a 40-unit workforce housing development, a project that would meaningfully expand options for working families caught in that gap.

Agriculture

Agriculture is the backbone of Audrain County’s economy and identity, but farming is under sustained pressure. Input costs have increased dramatically in recent years while grain prices have remained flat. The average age of a Missouri farmer is now 55; the financial barrier to entry, often exceeding \$1 million in the first year, means the next generation is not buying into the profession. In Audrain County, established farm families are increasingly finding no one to pass the land to, and some are leasing ground to solar and data center projects as a result. The SAE grant program is one direct response to this trend: investing in the next generation of agricultural entrepreneurs while they are still in the county and still in school.



SECTION 3

MOBILITY PATHWAY

How the three strategies connect to lasting economic change

Audrain County’s three strategies are not independent programs — they are interlocking investments in the same workforce at three different points in time. The SAE grant program reaches people before they enter the workforce, giving them the tools to become employers rather than simply employees. The Getting Ahead program reaches people who are in the workforce but struggling, giving them the financial skills to stabilize and advance. The WRAP training reaches the employers themselves, giving them the tools to retain workers who might otherwise leave. Together, they form a complete pipeline.

Strategy	Inputs	Key Outputs	Long-Term Mobility Impact
1. SAE Entrepreneur Grants	\$24,000 RLEM; \$1,000/school EDF Renewables (5-yr pledge); FFA alumni chapter fundraising	Grants of \$200–\$500 per student; 3 FFA chapters funded year one; cross-district peer judging model established; EDF 5-year partnership secured	Students build businesses before graduation, establish customer bases, and return to the county as employers — reversing the youth out-migration trend one entrepreneur at a time
2. Getting Ahead Classes	\$11,000 RLEM; MSP infrastructure and volunteer facilitators; county commission coordination	Program opened to all county residents for first time; first Vandalia graduate Dec. 2024; Vandalia nonprofit training to become self-sustaining local facilitators	Residents gain practical financial skills, reduce reliance on predatory lenders, and build savings — creating the stability that makes long-term employment possible
3. WRAP Regional Training	RLEM remainder (~\$15,000); WRAP Director Darlene Shopher; 6-county commission partnerships; Mark Twain Regional COG; neighboring chambers	4 free regional sessions; 165+ employers and 11,150+ employees across Bowling Green, Mexico, Perry, and Moberly; each participant received Dr. Payne textbook and direct instruction	Employers implement retention strategies grounded in economic class research; workers receive workplace support rather than termination; turnover costs decline across the region

“I am never going to leave my job because my employer invests in me.”

— Employee at a Mexico-area WRAP partner business — a company that went from 100 resignations per year to two

SECTION 4

STRATEGIC ACTIONS & IMPLEMENTATION

What we're doing, how we're doing it, and what we're asking for

Strategy 1: Audrain County SAE Entrepreneur Grant Program



In rural communities across the country, and across Audrain County, the storefronts that once anchored small towns sit empty. Chains and online retail have replaced the hardware store, the local diner, the feed supply shop. Audrain County is no exception: several of its municipalities have little to no business activity within their city limits. The county’s response is not to recruit from the outside, but to grow the next generation of business owners from within.

The FFA’s Supervised Agriculture Experience program is the mechanism. Every FFA student completes an SAE, a self-directed business or career exploration project, beginning in their freshman year. The county already has proof that this investment pays off across decades. John Graham started a greenhouse SAE as a freshman at a neighboring district, kept the business running through a college internship at Disney’s horticulture department, and returned home to build Callaway Fields into a regional destination. He has since opened J. Marshall’s, a home goods store on the Mexico square, employing a full-time staff. All of it started with a high school project and a small investment. Gavin Spoor’s popcorn SAE became Spoor Farms Popcorn, a multi-state operation with national press coverage and a TikTok following as “the Popping Farmer.” The county has seen SAEs turn into beef production operations, beekeeping businesses, landscaping companies, pumpkin farms, and auction services. The pattern is clear: when

students are supported early, they stay.

In spring 2025, Associate Commissioner Leslie Meyer convened the FFA advisors from all three county high school districts — Stacy French at Community R6, Claire Lavy and Micah Bailey at Van-Far, and Christina Terry at Mexico — to design a formal local grant program. The process was built for integrity: applications open each October, students submit a budget, business plan, and community impact statement, and grants are judged by advisors from other districts to eliminate any conflict of interest. Winners are announced in December, with funds distributed in January, timed to support state FFA degree applications in the spring.

Two districts, Mexico and Community R6, award \$500 grants. Van-Far uses a tiered model of \$200, \$300, and \$500 grants based on the strength of the application. Each chapter’s alumni association has pledged annual fundraiser proceeds, EDF Renewables has committed \$1,000 per school for five years, and community service fundraisers, like the R6 chapter’s Trunk or Treat, contribute to the ongoing fund. The county commission recognizes all grant winners publicly at its May awards banquet.

RLEM Investment	\$24,000 (\$8,000 per school)
Lead	Commissioner Meyer + FFA advisors at Community R6, Van-Far, and Mexico
Partners	EDF Renewables, FFA alumni chapters, school districts, private donors
Accountability	Students report outcomes to FFA advisors and County Commission each April/May
Timeline	Annual: Sept. recruitment → Oct. applications → Dec. awards → Jan. distribution → May reporting
Additional Funding Needed	\$70,000 to launch grants in 6 additional FFA chapters across the county

Strategy 2: “Getting Ahead” Financial Education

Poverty in Audrain County stands at 15.1%. In Vandalia, it reaches 16.7 percent, with a per capita income of just \$22,111. For residents living in daily economic instability, predatory payday and title loan companies, legal in Missouri at interest rates of up to 600 percent, are often the only accessible financial safety net. The skills to avoid that trap, to budget, to save, and to plan, are not part of any school curriculum and not widely available in rural communities.

The Mexico Sustainability Project has been changing that in Mexico since the early 2010s. What began as the Chamber’s “Bright Futures” youth program, which addressed immediate needs like food and clothing for struggling students, and paired community leaders with children experiencing challenges through a “Lunch Buddy” mentorship program, evolved into the Mexico Sustainability Project and the “Getting Ahead” curriculum for adults.

The 16-week program walks participants through the causes of poverty, the hidden rules of economic class, and eleven resources that define financial stability. Participants are asked to examine their own lives honestly and build a real plan. To make sure that life’s logistics don’t get in the way, every participant receives dinner, childcare, transportation support and course materials at no cost.

Until this grant, the program was available only to residents of Mexico. With \$11,000 in RLEM funding, the county purchased seats in the courses for residents throughout Audrain — true county residents who had never had access. The first Vandalia-area graduate completed the program in December 2024. More participants from outside Mexico are enrolled in the upcoming session.



“It was just me, three kids and a family depending on me, standing in a moment where something had to change. I realized why not me — why shouldn’t I be the one to rise, why shouldn’t I be the one to break patterns and find stability and step into spaces I thought weren’t meant for me and my family. This class opened doors to things I didn’t know I needed.”

— Elizabeth, Getting Ahead graduate — now off food stamps, serving on the Audrain County Housing Authority Board

The program’s next milestone is the establishment of a permanent Vandalia branch. A local nonprofit group has approached the Mexico Sustainability Project about becoming certified facilitators and hosting the courses on the eastern side of the county — a development that would make the program self-sustaining in Vandalia and create a model replicable in neighboring counties like Pike and Ralls. Long-term goals include bringing the curriculum inside the Vandalia Eastern Correctional Center, preparing incarcerated women for financial stability before re-entry.

RLEM Investment	\$11,000 (reserved seats for county-wide residents)
Lead	Audrain County Commission + Mexico Sustainability Project board
Partners	Vandalia nonprofit facilitator group (in training)
Accountability	Commission monitors enrollment, graduation and outcome data by cohort
Timeline	Ongoing 16–18 week cohorts; Vandalia branch launch target: 2026
Additional Funding Needed	\$30,000–\$40,000 for Vandalia branch: facilitator certification, building rental, participant support



Strategy 3: WRAP Regional Employer Training

The Workforce Resource Assistance Program began five years ago in Mexico with a \$40,000 grant, the hire of Director Darlene Shopper, and five employer members willing to try something different. Today, six manufacturers and both of the county’s school districts participate, representing more than 1,200 employees. One charter member reduced annual turnover from 100 employees to two, a cost savings exceeding \$240,000 per year. The

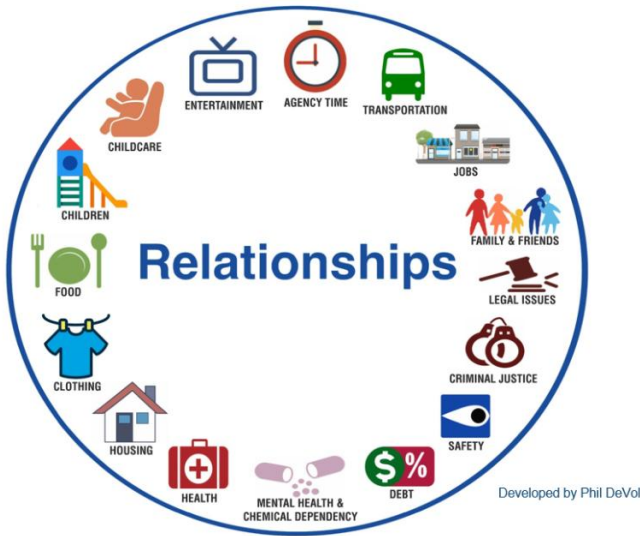
model works.

WRAP is grounded in Dr. Ruby Payne’s “Bridges Out of Poverty” framework, which gives employers a research-based lens for understanding workers across economic classes. People living in daily instability prioritize relationships and immediate needs; people in daily stability prioritize achievement and planning; people with generational wealth prioritize connections and legacy. Each group operates by different “hidden rules” in the workplace — rules around time, communication, conflict, and trust that most managers have never been taught to see. WRAP teaches employers to understand those dynamics and design workplaces that retain workers rather than inadvertently losing them.

Beyond employer training, the WRAP program offers its member businesses a set of practical tools that address the real-life barriers workers face. WRAP has established an emergency loan program through three Mexico banks, giving qualifying employees access to a small loan that is repaid through payroll deductions, and once paid off, converted into a personal savings deposit. Darlene works directly with employees to navigate social services, child support systems and court scheduling. She helped the Audrain Circuit Court begin placing WRAP-connected employees at the top of its docket so they can attend a hearing and return to work the same day rather than losing a full day of pay.

With RLEM funding, the county brought this model regional, hosting four free employer training sessions across six counties. Each session included lunch, a copy of Dr. Payne’s textbook, and direct instruction from Darlene on proven retention strategies and workplace tools.

Mental Model for Instability:



Mental Model for Stability



Session	Location & Partners	Employers Reached	Employee Pool
Economic Development Summit	Mark Twain Regional COG — 16-county region; state departments, municipalities and area businesses	65	750
Mexico Regional Training	Audrain, Callaway and Lee counties; manufacturers, state offices, ag businesses	55	7,600
Moberly Regional Training	Randolph County + multi-state participants including Iowa	25	2,000
Bowling Green Training	Pike County Commission + Illinois partners; corporate leaders, economic development and nonprofits	20	800
TOTAL		165+	11,150+
RLEM Investment	~\$15,000 (remainder of grant, including textbooks, venue and materials)		
Lead	Chamber Director Dana Keller + WRAP Director Darlene Shopher		
Partners	6 county commissions, Mark Twain Regional COG, neighboring chambers of commerce		
Accountability	Chamber tracks employer participation; WRAP tracks membership conversion and turnover outcomes		
Timeline	Training complete; 2025 goal — convert 2+ trained employers to full WRAP membership		
Additional Funding Needed	\$150,000 to subsidize WRAP membership for smaller businesses across the region		



Hidden Rules of Economic Class

	DAILY INSTABILITY	DAILY STABILITY	LONG-TERM STABILITY
POSSESSIONS	People.	Things.	One-of-a-kind objects, legacies, pedigrees.
MONEY	To be used, spent.	To be managed.	To be conserved, invested.
PERSONALITY	Is for entertainment. Sense of humor is highly valued.	Is for acquisition and stability. Achievement is highly valued.	Is for connections. Financial, political, and social connections are highly valued.
SOCIAL EMPHASIS	Social inclusion of the people they like.	Emphasis is on self-governance and self-sufficiency.	Emphasis is on social exclusion.
FOOD	Key question: Did you have enough? Quantity important.	Key question: Did you like it? Quality important.	Key question: Was it presented well? Presentation important.
CLOTHING	Clothing valued for individual style and expression of personality.	Clothing valued for its quality and acceptance into the norms of middle class. Label important.	Clothing valued for its artistic sense and expression. Designer important.
TIME	Present most important. Decisions made for the moment based on feelings or survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Traditions and <u>past history</u> most important. Decisions made partially on basis of tradition/decorum.

Hidden Rules of Economic Class (continued)

	DAILY INSTABILITY	DAILY STABILITY	LONG-TERM STABILITY
EDUCATION	Valued and revered as abstract but not as reality. Education is about facts.	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money.	Necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections.
DESTINY	Believes in fate. Cannot do much to mitigate chance.	Believes in choice. Can change future with good choices now.	<i>Noblesse oblige.</i>
LANGUAGE	Casual register. Language is about survival.	Formal register. Language is about negotiation.	Formal register. Language is about connection.
FAMILY STRUCTURE	Tends to be matriarchal.	Tends to be patriarchal.	Depends on who has/controls money.
WORLDVIEW	Sees world in terms of local setting.	Sees world in terms of national setting.	Sees world in terms of an international view.
LOVE	Love and acceptance conditional, based on whether individual is liked.	Love and acceptance conditional, based largely on achievement.	Love and acceptance conditional, related to social standing and connections.
DRIVING FORCES	Survival, relationships, and entertainment.	Work and achievement.	Financial, political, and social connections.

Source: Payne, R. K., DeVoi, P. E., & Dreussi-Smith, T. (2009). *Bridges out of poverty* (4th rev. ed.). Highlands, TX: ahal Process.

SECTION 5

GOVERNANCE & PARTNERSHIPS

The team leading Audrain County's Mobility Action Plan

The Audrain County Commission leads and provides overall governance for the Mobility Action Plan. Day-to-day implementation is managed at the strategy level by the Mexico Area Chamber of Commerce and partner organizations. The Commission monitors plan-wide progress and reports results annually to the community and to RLEM. Strategy leads report to the Commission quarterly. Program-level decisions are made collaboratively by the lead and partners for each strategy.



Leslie Meyer — *Associate Commissioner, Audrain County — MAP Lead*

Leslie Meyer joined the Audrain Commission in 2021, appointed by Governor Mike Parson, and is now in her second elected term. She has led the RLEM program for two years and brings a background in journalism, radio sales management and social media marketing, alongside her work as a 1,500-acre row crop and beef cattle farmer in eastern Audrain County. She serves as vice-chair of the NACo Agriculture Steering Committee, has testified before both chambers of the Missouri legislature, and is a graduate of the NACo Professional Leadership Academy.



Tracy R. Graham — *Associate Commissioner, Audrain County*

Tracy R. Graham serves as Associate Commissioner for Audrain County and was recently re-elected to his third term in office. Before joining county government, he spent nearly three decades in the information technology field, including 22 years as the owner of Innovative Technology Services, where he provided network installation, managed services, and technology support to businesses, schools, healthcare providers, and local governments across central Missouri. Graham brings deep expertise in technology and public systems, paired with a longstanding commitment to civic leadership. He is active in numerous state and national county associations, including the National Association of Counties, where he serves on multiple telecommunications and technology committees.



Alan Winders — *Presiding Commissioner, Audrain County*

Alan Winders has served as Presiding Commissioner of Audrain County since 2017. Prior to joining the Commission, he spent more than three decades in local government, serving as a city manager in communities across Missouri and Iowa after beginning his career in regional planning in 1984. He holds a degree in Political Science from Truman State University and has dedicated his professional life to public service and community development. Raised on a small farm in Audrain County, Winders remains deeply connected to the county's agricultural roots, where his family continues to live, farm, and raise cattle.



Dana Keller — Executive Director, Mexico Area Chamber of Commerce — WRAP & MSP Lead

Dana Keller has served as Executive Director of the Mexico Area Chamber of Commerce since 2009, leading workforce and community development initiatives across Audrain County for more than 15 years. Her work has focused on strengthening workforce stability, supporting employee retention, and building collaborative solutions that address barriers facing working families. As chair of the Mexico Sustainability Project, she helped secure funding to launch innovative employer-based financial wellness and workforce support programs. Keller is certified in Workplace Stability and Bridges Out of Poverty and is widely recognized for her commitment to youth success, community service, and long-term economic resilience.



Darlene Shopper — Executive Director, Workforce Resource Assistance Program

Darlene Shopper joined the Mexico Area Chamber of Commerce in 2021 following a longtime career in human services and education, including work as a mental health professional and middle school counselor. She now leads the Workplace Resource Advocate Program (WRAP), helping employees navigate personal and family challenges that may impact workplace success and retention. Her background in counseling and student support has made her a strong advocate for practical, relationship-based workforce solutions. Shopper and her husband operate a small farm in Mexico, Missouri, and she remains deeply invested in the well-being of rural families and communities.

Stacy French — FFA Advisor, Community R6 High School

Stacy French grew up on a cattle and horse operation in Callaway County and has taught agricultural education for 16 years, 13 of them at Community R6. She holds a master’s degree in Agricultural Education from the University of Missouri and serves on the state board of the Missouri Vocational Agricultural Teachers Association and the national NAAE finance committee.

Micah Bailey — FFA Advisors, Van-Far High School



Micah Bailey grew up on a cattle operation in Pike County, where he developed a strong passion for agriculture and education. He earned his undergraduate degree in Agricultural Education Leadership from the University of Missouri and has dedicated the past 2 years to teaching high school agricultural education at Van-Far High School.

Committed to his local community, he assists on his family’s beef cattle operation, contributes to serving the local community through various roles in his church.

Claire Lavy — FFA Advisors, Van-Far High School



Silex, Missouri native Claire Lavy was raised on a dairy farm and a Missouri-licensed dog breeding facility. She attended Silex High School before earning her bachelor’s degree in Agricultural Education, along with her teaching certification, from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Claire began her professional career in Windsor, Missouri and has served as the agriculture teacher at Van-Far High School for the past two years.

SECTION 6

SUSTAINABILITY & FUNDING STRATEGY

How the work continues beyond the RLEM grant

Audrain County designed each of its three strategies with sustainability in mind from the start. The RLEM subgrant was never intended to be the permanent funding source; it was the catalyst. Each program has a different sustainability model, and each has a different gap that external partners can help close.

SAE Entrepreneur Grant Program

The three-school program has built-in sustainability from launch: EDF Renewables has committed \$1,000 per school annually for five years, FFA alumni chapters have pledged proceeds from their labor auctions, and individual chapters are directing community fundraiser revenues to the grant fund. The county commission will continue to steward the program and recognize grant winners publicly. The model is designed to grow through additional private donors and benefactors over time.

Expanding to the county’s six remaining FFA chapters — Centralia, Wellsville-Middletown, Paris, Mark Twain, Madison and Sturgeon — requires \$70,000 in start-up capital to establish the initial grant fund at each school. Once the programs are seeded, the same alumni chapter and fundraising model used in the three existing schools will sustain them forward. Future enhancements include financial coaching and marketing mentorship for student grant recipients.

Getting Ahead Financial Education

The Mexico program is financially stable with established MSP infrastructure and a trained volunteer facilitator base. The Vandalia branch is the next priority: \$30,000–\$40,000 is needed to cover facilitator certification costs, building rental and the participant support expenses, transportation, childcare, meals and course materials, that make the program accessible to those who need it most. Once certified, the Vandalia facilitators will operate as an independent MSP extension, creating a replicable model for rural counties throughout the region. A long-term priority is securing access to the Vandalia Eastern Correctional Center to extend the program to women preparing for re-entry from incarceration.

WRAP Program

The core Mexico WRAP program is self-sustaining through annual employer membership fees of \$7,500–\$10,000. That sustainability model works for established manufacturers with large workforces — the return on retention savings justifies the cost. It does not work as easily for smaller businesses in outlying communities that want the program but cannot afford the full membership fee. A grant of \$150,000 would allow the county to subsidize reduced-cost membership for qualifying small employers across the region, converting the employers who received training through the RLEM grant into sustained program partners with access to Darlene’s ongoing support.

Program Area	Funding Status	Additional Need
SAE Grants — 3 existing schools	Secured: EDF 5-yr pledge + alumni chapters + chapter fundraising	None — sustainable
SAE Grants — 6 expansion schools	Pending	\$70,000 start-up fund
Getting Ahead — Mexico program	Secured: MSP operating budget + volunteer facilitators	None — sustainable
Getting Ahead — Vandalia branch	Pending	\$30,000–\$40,000 seed funding
WRAP — Mexico member businesses	Secured: annual membership fees (self-sustaining)	None — sustainable
WRAP — Regional small business expansion	Pending	\$150,000 small-employer subsidy grant

SECTION 7

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contacts for funding, partnerships, planning, and implementation

Area of Interest	Contact	Organization
MAP overview, RLEM program, funding partnerships	Leslie Meyer, Associate Commissioner	Audrain County Commission
WRAP program, employer membership and training	Darlene Shopper, Executive Director	Workforce Resource Assistance Program
Getting Ahead classes, Mexico Sustainability Project	Dana Keller, Executive Director	Mexico Area Chamber of Commerce
SAE Grant Program	Stacy French (Community R6) Micah Bailey / Claire Lavy (Van-Far) Christina Terry (Mexico)	FFA Chapters — Audrain County Schools

ABOUT RURAL LEADERS FOR ECONOMIC MOBILITY (RLEM)

Rural Leaders for Economic Mobility (RLEM) was a 22-month peer-learning initiative that supported rural county leaders in advancing equitable economic mobility. The initiative brought together leaders from 10 rural counties to strengthen local systems that expand opportunity for residents, particularly in communities facing persistent workforce, education and infrastructure challenges. NACo continues to share RLEM experiences with rural counties across the United States.

Mobility Action Plans

The central outcome of the RLEM initiative is the development of a Mobility Action Plan (MAP) in each participating county. These locally informed roadmaps help counties move from learning to action by identifying priority economic mobility challenges, target populations and practical short- and long-term implementation strategies.