



Rural Leaders for
Economic Mobility

JIM WELLS COUNTY COURT HOUSE

Mobility Action Plan

Jim Wells County, Texas

RURAL LEADERS FOR ECONOMIC MOBILITY

JIM WELLS COUNTY

TEXAS

Mobility Action Plan



County	Jim Wells County, Texas
County Seat	Alice, Texas (pop. 18,516)
County Population	38,399
RLEM Subgrant	\$50,000 Total Project: \$650,000
Primary Contact	Hon. Pedro "Pete" Trevino, Jr., Jim Wells County judge
Contact Info	Pedro.trevino@co.jimwells.tx.us (361) 668-5706

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BUILDING THE NEXT ECONOMY IN JIM WELLS COUNTY

A four-story downtown building. A regional workforce and entrepreneurship hub. A community's bet on itself.

Jim Wells County has seen this story before. For decades, the county's economy ran on oil and gas — fueling jobs, tax revenue and community identity across South Texas. When the industry contracted, the losses were not abstract. Between 2019 and 2024, Jim Wells County lost 7.1 percent of its jobs while the national economy grew by 3.9 percent. The county's population declined by 5.4 percent in the same period and is projected to shrink further. For a resident in Alice trying to build a stable life, the message from the job market has been clear: the old pathways are closing.

Jim Wells County is building new ones. Through the Rural Leaders for Economic Mobility (RLEM) program, the county designed a three-strategy plan anchored by one transformative investment: the Jim Wells County Nexus Center for Innovation and Growth — a four-story building in downtown Alice acquired by the county and now being converted into a regional hub for business incubation, workforce training and degree-based education. The total investment of \$650,000 — \$500,000 from the USDA Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) program, \$100,000 in county match and \$50,000 from the NACo subgrant — will build a facility that serves recent graduates, workers looking to upskill and entrepreneurs ready to launch.

Strategy	Lead Partners	Investment	Key Result
1. Establish the Nexus Center for Innovation and Growth	Jim Wells County, Alice and Jim Wells County EDC	\$500,000 USDA + \$100,000 county match + \$50,000 NACo subgrant	Facility under renovation; elevator modernization underway
2. Launch Business Incubator and Training Center	Jim Wells County EDC, Small Business Development Centers, Alice Chamber of Commerce	Included in facility investment	Incubator design in progress; first cohort of 10–20 businesses targeted
3. Expand Workforce Training Programs	Jim Wells County, Workforce Solutions Coastal Bend (WFSCB), Texas A&M University-Kingsville	Federal workforce grants + county support	150+ training participants targeted annually; 120 completions; 20 percent avg. wage increase

Support Requested from Partners

Jim Wells County is requesting support from partners and funders in three specific areas:

- Technical assistance connecting the Nexus Center with peer rural innovation hubs and business incubator networks to accelerate program design
- Workforce partnership introductions to regional employers and industry associations willing to co-design training curricula and offer apprenticeship placements
- Ongoing funding partnerships for the long-term operational sustainability of the Center's workforce and entrepreneurship programs beyond the initial capital investment

SECTION 1

ECONOMIC MOBILITY VISION

From oil and gas to innovation — the next chapter for Jim Wells County

Vision Statement

Jim Wells County is building an economy where every resident — whether a recent graduate, a worker ready to advance or an entrepreneur with an idea — has access to the training, capital and community support needed to build lasting economic security. We are a county that has fueled this region for generations. Now we are investing in the people who will fuel the next generation.

An Economy in Transition

Jim Wells County sits at the center of South Texas, anchored by Alice — a city that for much of the 20th century called itself the “Hub of South Texas” for its role as a crossroads of commerce, energy and agriculture. For generations, oil and gas defined what it meant to build a life here. The wells, pipelines and service contractors that spread across the region created steady, well-paying work for thousands of residents. Schools were built, neighborhoods grew and local businesses thrived on the strength of the energy economy.

When the industry contracted — through a combination of commodity price volatility, technological shifts and the pandemic’s economic disruption — the losses compounded quickly. By 2024, Jim Wells County had lost 7.1 percent of its jobs since 2019, while the national economy added 3.9 percent. The county’s population has declined by 5.4 percent and is projected to shrink by another 2.5 percent over the next five years. Sales tax revenues have fallen. Small businesses that depended on energy worker spending have struggled. Young people, looking for opportunity, have been leaving.

The county’s response is the Jim Wells County Nexus Center for Innovation and Growth: a four-story building in downtown Alice, acquired by the county and now being transformed into the infrastructure for the next economy. The Center will house business incubation services, workforce training programs and academic partnerships with Texas A&M University-Kingsville and Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX). It is a deliberate, large-scale investment in the county’s own future.

What Full Success Looks Like in Five Years

In five years, Jim Wells County’s vision is a Nexus Center operating at full capacity — supporting 10 to 20 businesses through incubation services, training 150 or more residents per year for in-demand careers and serving as a recognized model for rural economic transition in South Texas. Success also looks like businesses staying: a 75 percent three-year survival rate among incubated companies, trainees earning an average of 20 percent more within 12 months of certification and a county economy that is growing jobs rather than losing them.

ASSETS & STRENGTHS	OBSTACLES & CHALLENGES
✓ County-owned four-story building in downtown Alice	✗ Population declining 5.4 percent since 2019; projected further decline
✓ \$500,000 USDA grant secured for facility renovation	✗ Job loss of 7.1 percent (2019–2024) vs. national growth of 3.9 percent
✓ Texas A&M University-Kingsville campus within the county	✗ Oil and gas industry contraction; reduced business activity
✓ WFSCB and TEEX as active workforce training partners	✗ Low wages; limited skilled-trades training infrastructure
✓ Alice and Jim Wells County EDC as a co-leader	✗ Youth out-migration; difficulty retaining graduates
✓ County courthouse location and civic infrastructure	✗ Limited access to capital for small business startups

SECTION 2			
LOCAL CONDITIONS			
<i>The data and community context that shaped this plan</i>			
Indicator	Jim Wells County	Texas / National	Source
Population	38,399	—	U.S. Census ACS
Population change (2019–2024)	–5.4 percent	—	U.S. Census ACS
Job change (2019–2024)	–7.1 percent	+3.9 percent (national)	BLS / county data
Poverty rate	22.8 percent	14 percent (state avg.)	U.S. Census ACS
Per capita income	\$26,585 (2024)	\$40,752 (state avg.)	U.S. Census ACS
Median household income	\$47,500 (2025)	\$79,721 (state avg.)	U.S. Census ACS / WFSCB
Unemployment rate	5.4 percent	4.3 percent (state avg.)	BLS / WFSCB

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2024/25 ACS estimate.)

A Community Shaped by Energy — and Its Absence

Jim Wells County’s economic trajectory is inseparable from the oil and gas industry that defined South Texas for most of the 20th century. Alice became the commercial and logistical hub of the region — the place where energy workers spent their paychecks, where small businesses serviced the rigs and where families built their lives around stable, well-compensating work. The energy economy shaped the county’s workforce expectations, its tax base and its self-understanding.

When the industry declined, the ripple effects were deep. Businesses that had served energy workers for decades saw revenues fall. A generation of workers with specialized skills found their expertise less in demand. Young people who might have gone into the trades or energy sector looked elsewhere — and in many cases, looked outside the county entirely. The result is a community with strong civic identity and a skilled labor force, but an economy whose primary engine has stalled.

County leaders heard this directly through community engagement. Residents and business owners identified the same core barriers: a lack of accessible training for in-demand industries, limited startup resources for entrepreneurs and insufficient facilities for workforce development. Jim Wells County judge Hon. Pedro Trevino and economic development director Larry Martinez convened partners across the county and region to design a response that addressed all three gaps in a single facility.

Workforce Gaps

Regional workforce data show a growing mismatch between the jobs available in Jim Wells County and the qualifications of the local workforce. Healthcare, manufacturing, information technology and skilled trades all show unfilled positions, while many residents lack industry-recognized certifications. The county’s proximity to Texas A&M University-Kingsville and its existing partnership with Workforce Solutions Coastal Bend (WFSCB) create a foundation for closing that gap — but the infrastructure to deliver training at scale has not existed. The Nexus Center is designed to fill that gap.

Small Business Ecosystem

Jim Wells County’s small business sector reflects the broader economic contraction: fewer startups, higher failure rates and limited access to the mentorship and capital that help early-stage businesses survive. The county’s acquisition of a four-story building in downtown Alice offers a rare opportunity to create physical space for business incubation, shared office resources and financial literacy programming in a single accessible location. The Alice and Jim Wells County Economic Development Corporation (EDC) is a committed co-leader for this effort and has existing relationships with the regional banking community that will support capital access for incubator participants.

SECTION 3

MOBILITY PATHWAY

How the three strategies connect to lasting economic change

Jim Wells County’s three strategies operate at different points on the economic mobility pathway — from physical infrastructure and business support, to individual entrepreneurship development, to workforce certification and job placement. Together, they create a self-reinforcing ecosystem: the Nexus Center provides the facility, the business incubator fills it with enterprises and the workforce training programs supply those enterprises with qualified employees.

Strategy	Key Inputs	Key Outputs	Long-Term Impact
1. Nexus Center Facility	\$500,000 USDA RBDG; \$100,000 county match; \$50,000 NACo subgrant; Jim Wells County building acquisition; EDC co-leadership	Renovated four-story facility; modernized elevators (third and fourth floor accessibility); branded interior and exterior signage; technology infrastructure installed	A permanent, county-owned hub for economic development that reduces the cost and barrier of launching a business or accessing training in South Texas
2. Business Incubator	County EDC; Small Business Development Centers; Alice Chamber of Commerce; regional lenders; TEEX business services	10–20 businesses incubated annually; 75 percent three-year survival rate; 50 entrepreneurs trained; networking and investor events	A sustained increase in the number of locally owned small businesses, reduced startup failure rates and a stronger commercial tax base
3. Workforce Training	WFSCB; Texas A&M University-Kingsville; TEEX; community colleges; local school districts; workforce training grants	150+ training participants annually; 120 completions; certifications in healthcare, manufacturing, IT and skilled trades; 20 percent avg. wage increase	A skilled local workforce matched to regional employer needs, reduced out-migration and a self-sustaining talent pipeline for South Texas industry

SECTION 4

STRATEGIC ACTIONS & IMPLEMENTATION

What the county is building, how it is being built and what support is needed

Strategy 1: Establish the Jim Wells County Nexus Center for Innovation and Growth

Jim Wells County has faced significant economic challenges over the past decade: persistent job losses, the long-term contraction of the oil and gas industry and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The county’s job market declined by 7.1 percent from 2019 to 2024. Sales tax revenues dropped. Small businesses struggled. And a county that had built its economic identity around one dominant industry found itself without the infrastructure for the next one.

Community analysis and engagement with local leaders identified a clear gap: Jim Wells County lacked the physical infrastructure to support entrepreneurship and workforce training at scale. The county’s acquisition of a four-story building in downtown Alice provided the opportunity to solve that problem directly. Rather than recruiting from the outside, Jim Wells County is building from within.

The Nexus Center for Innovation and Growth will bring together business incubation services, workforce training programs and academic partnerships in a single facility — accessible to residents, visible to the community and anchored in the county’s civic core. Phase 1 focuses on facility renovation: structural improvements, technology infrastructure, elevator modernization and interior buildout for training rooms, incubator workspace and shared office resources.

Performance Measure	Target Outcome
Small businesses served annually	10–20
Workforce training participants annually	150+
New jobs created within three years	100
Existing jobs supported	150
Business startups supported	10–15

RLEM Investment	\$50,000 NACo subgrant (Site modernization — accessibility of the Center)
Total Budget	\$650,000 (\$500,000 USDA RBDG + \$100,000 Jim Wells County match + \$50,000 NACo subgrant)
Lead	Jim Wells County Economic Development Department; Jim Wells County judge
Key Partners	Alice and Jim Wells County EDC, WFSCB, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, TEEX, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, local school districts and community colleges
Timeline	Months 1–3: planning and procurement → Months 3–4: design and engineering → Months 4–10: renovation → Months 9–11: equipment installation → Month 12: Center launch
Accountability	Jim Wells County Economic Development director, under oversight of the county judge; quarterly performance reports to the County Commissioners Court
Additional Support Needed	Regional economic development partners for workforce program alignment, employer engagement and long-term sustainability planning

Strategy 2: Launch the Business Incubator and Training Center

Jim Wells County’s small business ecosystem has felt the full weight of the county’s economic contraction. Fewer businesses are launching. Those that do launch face a shortage of mentorship, capital access and operational support. The Nexus Center’s business incubator is designed to change those odds.

The incubator will provide qualifying businesses with workspace, shared office resources, technical assistance workshops and access to mentors from the regional business community. Financial literacy and business planning courses — delivered in partnership with Small Business Development Centers and the Alice Chamber of Commerce — will give entrepreneurs the foundational skills to navigate startup challenges. The incubator will also connect businesses with regional investors, lenders and networking events, building the social capital that early-stage businesses need to survive.

The program targets a 75 percent three-year business survival rate — significantly higher than the national average for businesses without incubator support. Participants will be recruited from the existing small business community as well as from among recent graduates and workers who have been displaced from the energy sector and are ready to launch new enterprises.

Performance Measure	Target Outcome
Businesses incubated annually	10–20
Business survival rate after three years	75 percent
Entrepreneurs trained	50

Lead	Jim Wells County EDC
Key Partners	Small Business Development Centers, regional banks and lenders, Alice Chamber of Commerce, local entrepreneurs and industry leaders
Timeline	Months 6–8: incubator program design → Months 9–11: business recruitment → Month 12: incubator launch → Month 13: first cohort begins
Budget	\$150,000 annually (USDA RBDG program support, local economic development funds, Jim Wells County and sponsorship from regional financial institutions)
Accountability	Business participation, job creation and economic outcomes monitored through quarterly EDC reports
Additional Support Needed	Mentorship and investment partnerships to provide seed funding and venture support for startup businesses

Strategy 3: Expand Workforce Training Programs

Many residents in Jim Wells County lack the certifications required to compete for the region’s highest-demand jobs. Regional workforce data show growing shortfalls in healthcare, manufacturing, information technology and skilled trades — sectors where employers are actively hiring but cannot find credentialed candidates locally. The result is a frustrating mismatch: jobs going unfilled while qualified workers leave the county for training opportunities elsewhere.

The Nexus Center’s workforce training programs will deliver short-term, industry-recognized certifications aligned with regional labor market needs. Programs will be designed in partnership with WFSCB, Texas A&M University-Kingsville and community colleges to ensure that training leads directly to employment. Hands-on labs, certification programs and job fairs hosted at the Center will create a direct connection between training and hiring.

The program targets 150 or more participants annually, with 120 completions and an average wage increase of 20 percent among trainees within 12 months of certification. Participants will include recent high school graduates, workers who have been displaced from declining sectors and residents seeking to advance into higher-paying positions.

Performance Measure	Target Outcome
Workforce training participants annually	150
Training completions	120
Trainees reporting wage increase within 12 months	60 percent
Average wage increase for trainees	20 percent

Lead	Jim Wells County and Jim Wells County Economic Development Department
Key Partners	WFSCB, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, community colleges, local employers and school districts
Timeline	Months 6–8: workforce program design → Months 9–10: equipment installation → Month 12: training program launch → Month 13: first workforce cohort begins
Budget	\$200,000 annually (workforce training grants and Jim Wells County operational support)
Accountability	Employment placement rates, certification completion and wage growth tracked through WFSCB and county reporting systems
Additional Support Needed	Employer participation and apprenticeship opportunities to expand job placement capacity

Use of RLEM Subgrant Funds

Jim Wells County is using the \$50,000 NACo subgrant grant to fund elevator modernization at the Nexus Center — a targeted investment that ensures residents can fully access the workforce training, entrepreneurship support and community services planned throughout the facility. As the county positions the Nexus Center as a central hub for job seekers, small business owners and new economic opportunity, this improvement helps translate the larger redevelopment effort into a functional and inclusive asset for long-term workforce and economic growth.

Deliverable	Description	Deadline	Cost
Elevator modernization	Installation and repair of mechanical, electrical and structural components to restore full functionality to the third and fourth floors of the Nexus Center	April 30, 2026	\$50,000

SECTION 5

GOVERNANCE & PARTNERSHIPS

The team and organizations leading the Nexus Center

Jim Wells County leads all planning, implementation, financing, governance and operations of the Nexus Center for Innovation and Growth. The county works in close collaboration with the Alice and Jim Wells County Economic Development Corporation (EDC) on planning, financing and training delivery. Academic and workforce partners — Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK), Workforce Solutions Coastal Bend (WFSCB) and Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) — provide instruction, certification programs and workforce training. All partners participate in program delivery and external partnership development.

Function	Jim Wells County	EDC	TAMUK	WFSCB	TEEX
Planning	X	X			
Implementation	X	X			
Governance	X				
Training delivery	X	X	X	X	X
Partnerships	X	X	X	X	X
Finances	X	X			

Hon. Pedro “Pete” Trevino, Jr. — *Jim Wells County judge — MAP Lead*

Judge Trevino brings a background in education and criminal justice, holding a master’s degree in psychology. He has budgetary and administrative authority over county government operations and, as budget officer assisted by the county auditor and county clerk, maintains the county’s expenditures and presents financial reports at each regular meeting of the Commissioners Court.

Judge Trevino serves as president of the South Texas Judges and Commissioners Association and as executive chair for Workforce Solutions Coastal Bend and Coastal Plains Mental Health Services. Previously, he served as dean of student services at Coastal Bend College, working closely with the community across general studies, industrial technology, public services, allied health, and student recruitment and retention. He has extensive experience in grant writing and administration, governmental affairs and economic development.

Larry Martinez — *Economic Development director, Jim Wells County — Implementation Lead*

Larry Martinez retired from the U.S. Postal Service and served as a long-time mayor of the city of Alice, Texas. He brings broad knowledge and experience in county and city government, economic development and governmental affairs, and is well-versed in the risks and needs of local government.

As EDC director, Mr. Martinez has served as a facilitator and mediator — bringing together diverse groups of individuals to arrive at productive solutions and build a positive, collaborative working environment focused on economic growth for Jim Wells County.

SECTION 6

SUSTAINABILITY & FUNDING STRATEGY

How the Nexus Center continues beyond the initial investment

Jim Wells County designed the Nexus Center with long-term financial sustainability as a core requirement, not an afterthought. The total capital investment of \$650,000 — \$500,000 from the USDA Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) program, \$100,000 in county match and \$50,000 from the NACo subgrant — covers construction, renovation, equipment and accessibility improvements. This front-loaded capital approach allows the county to focus ongoing resources on programs rather than infrastructure.

Federal Funding Sources

Ongoing federal support will come from USDA Rural Business Development programs, workforce initiatives through the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). The county will pursue additional USDA grants as the Center scales its programs and demonstrates measurable economic outcomes.

State and Regional Sources

Texas Workforce Commission programs will support workforce training costs. The county will also pursue Texas Department of Agriculture rural development programs and regional economic development initiatives available through South Texas partnerships.

Local and Earned Revenue

Jim Wells County and the EDC will provide baseline operational support. The Center will implement modest program participation fees for business incubation services, workforce certifications and specialized training courses. Regional banks and financial institutions — which benefit directly from a healthier small business ecosystem — are expected to provide sponsorship support for incubator programs. The EDC’s existing relationships with the regional banking community make this a realistic near-term revenue stream.

Partnership Sustainability

Partnerships with Texas A&M University-Kingsville, TEEX and WFSCB ensure continued delivery of workforce training and certifications that do not depend on county operating budgets. Private-sector partners will support the Center through mentorship, internships and investment opportunities for small businesses — contributions that strengthen the program without requiring direct county expenditure.

Funding Area	Source	Status
Facility renovation and equipment	\$500,000 USDA RBDG + \$100,000 county match	Secured
Elevator modernization	\$50,000 NACo subgrant	Secured
Workforce training programs	Texas Workforce Commission + U.S. Dept. of Labor grants	To be pursued
Business incubator operations	EDC operational budget + regional bank sponsorships	Partially committed
Long-term Center operations	Program fees + county operational support + federal grants	In development

SECTION 7

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contacts for funding, partnerships, planning and implementation

Contact	Title	Organization	Address & Contact Info
Hon. Pedro “Pete” Trevino, Jr.	Jim Wells County judge	Jim Wells County	200 N. Almond St., Alice, Texas 78332 (361) 668-5706 Pedro.trevino@co.jimwells.tx.us
Larry Martinez	Economic Development director	Alice and Jim Wells County EDC	601 East Main St., Alice, Texas 78332 (361) 562-4529 larrymartinez@alicejwcedc.org

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.