



# CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

HOW RURAL COUNTIES ARE GROWING ECONOMIES  
WITH LOCAL ASSETS AND REGIONAL PARTNERS

NOVEMBER 2014

**NACO** National Association of Counties  


# INTRODUCTION

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Rural counties play a vital role in building economic competitiveness and community prosperity. Rural places have traditionally provided the food, natural resources and energy needed to fuel our country, while also supporting tourism, cultural resources and growing knowledge industries. However, rural counties—whether facing challenges related to shifting economic trends, population decline, lack of access to metropolitan areas or losses in traditional industries—sometimes struggle to sustain economic growth.

Rural counties are using creative strategies to address these challenges by pursuing asset-based economic development initiatives that create jobs and build wealth while preserving rural landscapes, culture and heritage. Counties are focusing on their existing assets, not deficits, to strengthen economic competitiveness and enhance quality of life. In some places, county leaders are realizing that instead of relying on outside investments, their strongest assets are the infrastructure, skills, talent and resources already found within their communities. By focusing on strengths, counties are discovering a host of qualities unique to rural places that are key for retaining residents and attracting new growth.

This publication highlights 15 rural counties that are building on their natural resources, existing infrastructure, local institutions, historic and cultural resources and human capital to sustain economic growth and productivity. The counties featured in this report demonstrate that rather than seeking a single best policy to foster economic growth, the most effective approach is identifying, re-imagining and leveraging a number of assets in order to strengthen economic competitiveness for the future.

These county stories shed light on several themes that are critical for protecting rural traditions and ensuring that rural communities thrive:

- **Identifying or Reimagining Assets.** Counties are ‘looking within’ to identify and promote their unique natural, cultural, social and built assets. For example, Hood River County (Ore.) markets its high-quality agricultural products and other place-based economic strengths to encourage a unique sense of place, attract tourism and increase employment.
- **Leveraging Partnerships to Maximize Economic Resources.** Rural counties recognize there is power in numbers and are forging partnerships with the private sector and public agencies at all levels of government to take advantage of available funding and resources. In southern Nevada, Nye County has diversified its economic base and created new jobs by collaborating with four adjacent counties to redevelop brownfield sites.
- **Pursuing Community Planning Efforts to Take Strategic Advantage of All Community Assets.** Rural county leaders are using strategic planning efforts to identify community priorities, address local challenges and outline specific strategies to optimize available assets. For instance, to address housing and transit needs for both its workforce and aging populations, Randolph County (W.Va.) pursued several long-term community planning initiatives.
- **Investing in Quality of Life to Attract Economic Growth.** Rural counties understand that enhancing quality of life for all residents not only improves social well-being but also generates economic growth by attracting new businesses, residents and jobs to the area. Coffee County (Ala.) is focused on enhancing community quality of life for low-income residents and small-scale growers by investing in more productive agriculture methods.

*Note: Currently, there is no universal definition—based on population size or characteristics—for the term ‘rural.’ This not only emphasizes the diversity and heterogeneous nature of rural communities, but also the inaccuracies of assuming rural and urban places are mutually exclusive. Instead, the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) acknowledges that U.S. settlement patterns exist on a constantly evolving continuum from the urban core to the remote homestead. See the following for more information: <http://bit.ly/1tQQTU6>*

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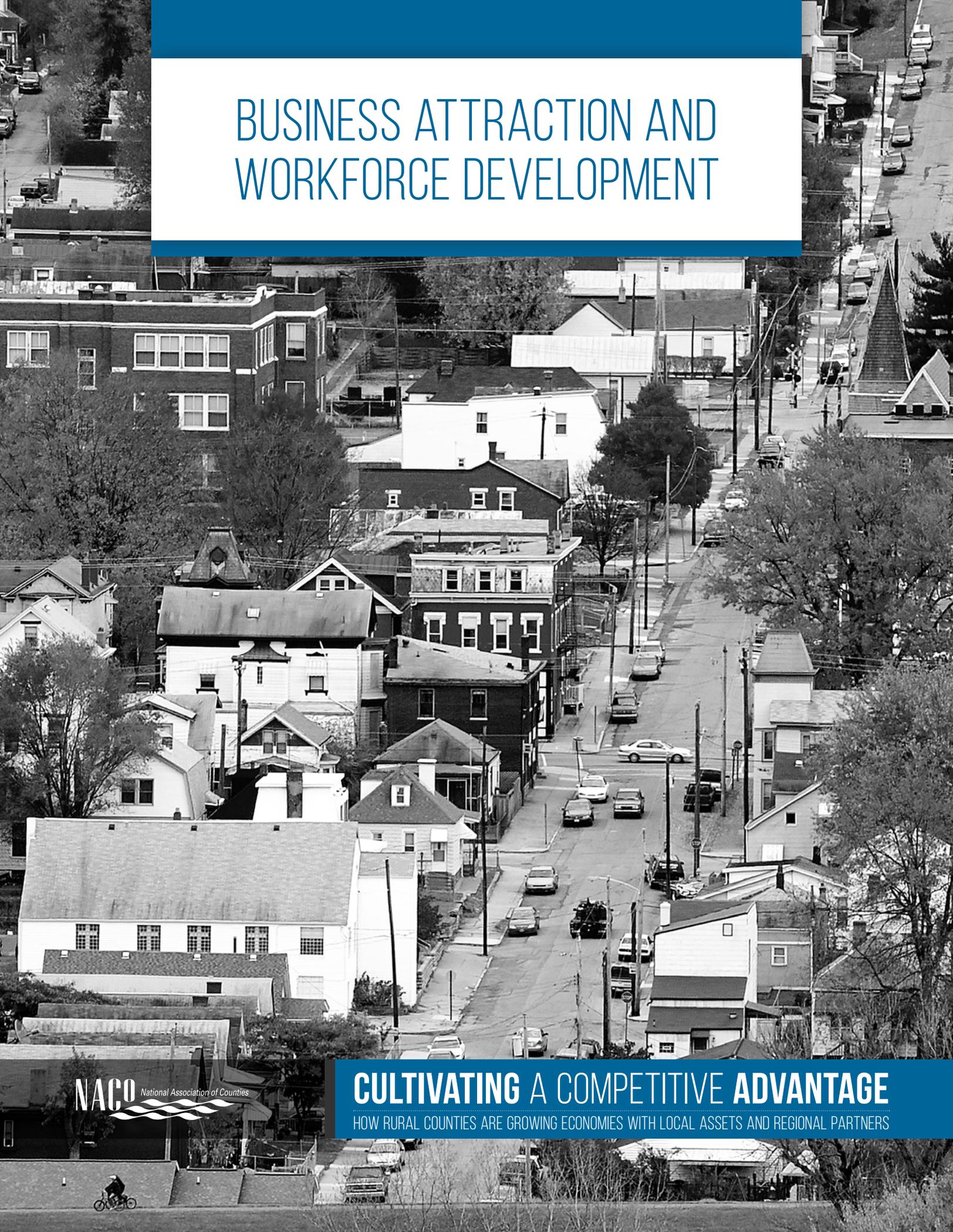
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## **CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

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An aerial, black and white photograph of a town street. The street runs vertically through the center, with cars parked and driving. Buildings of various styles and heights line both sides of the street. Some are multi-story brick buildings, others are smaller houses. Trees are scattered throughout the scene. The overall atmosphere is that of a small, established community.

# BUSINESS ATTRACTION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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# STAYING ONE STEP AHEAD: LONG-TERM PLANNING STRATEGIES FOR LASTING ECONOMIC SUCCESS

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## CASCADE COUNTY, MONT.

*POPULATION: 82,384*

### SNAPSHOT

An extensive long-term planning effort has supported economic development in Cascade County, Mont. Using strategic planning methods, county and regional leaders are working to prepare the community for future infrastructure and workforce needs, while applying financial incentives and leveraging the area's high quality of life to attract new businesses.

### OPPORTUNITY

When a nearby military base downsized in the mid-1990s and again in 2007, Cascade County felt the effects. The region lost a portion of the federal assistance it had relied on for maintaining major roads, which had supported the base while providing important access points for operations across the region. In response to the loss of the maintenance funds, Cascade and its regional partners began to develop long-term plans for economic and infrastructure projects.

### SOLUTION

In Cascade County, local leaders have adopted an economic development approach with an eye to the future, implementing strategies that attract businesses, maintain infrastructure and encourage workforce growth. One way Cascade successfully attracts new businesses is by offering tax incentives while ensuring a high quality of life for companies' employees. County Commissioner Joe Briggs explained that Cascade's favorable tax environment is a major factor for new companies, such as Canadian steel company ADF Group, Inc. (ADF), which opened a facility in the county in January 2014. Dan Rooney, the General Manager of ADF's Cascade location, cited the region's incentive package and warm welcome as some of the main reasons why the company chose to locate in Cascade, indicating that ADF was impressed both by the county's financial programs and its hospitality. Briggs underlined this dual pro-people, pro-business policy by explaining that Cascade offers "good quality jobs without disrupting quality of life," a quality of life that includes excellent schooling, health care, cultural and leisure opportunities. Investments in new businesses and maintaining a high standard of living are an integral part of Cascade's plan to ensure its economic success today and in the future.

Cascade County also promotes its long-term vision by addressing the future needs of businesses. For instance, one planning project for Cascade and four neighboring counties, underway in 2014, aims to produce an inventory of the region's infrastructure system with a focus on projected business growth. This inventory of existing assets will help the counties identify potential infrastructure issues before an actual problem arises. In addition to anticipating future infrastructure needs, Cascade and the other counties collaborate with local groups to prepare for expected workforce growth. When the new ADF facility was announced, for example, the company estimated it would eventually require up to several hundred welders. In response to this need, Cascade County, along with the city of Great Falls and the Great Falls Development Authority, coordinated with Great Falls College MSU to increase the capacity of its welding certification program. Dr. Susan Wolff, the college's CEO and Dean, noted that the college has dramatically increased its output of welding graduates as a result of the expansion. "We've already tripled our intake," Wolff said, and after the planned addition of new welding facilities, "we will be able to double that tripled intake." These planning strategies ensure that Cascade County is more resilient to economic fluctuations and can meet both current and future development needs.

## IMPACTS

- ADF's new location in Cascade County had a big effect on jobs. The Cascade facility had hired 100 people by July 2014, with 60 more positions still to be filled. ADF also planned to hire 40 workers for its new paint shop opening in October 2014, while at least 300 additional employees were expected to work in the company's product assembly yard.<sup>1</sup>
- Between 2011 and July 2014, 107 students entered the welding program at Great Falls College MSU. In July 2014, 47 of the program's graduates were employed in the welding field, with 16 of those working at ADF Group, Inc.<sup>2</sup>
- The Great Falls College MSU welding program garnered attention at the state level in March 2014 when Montana's governor granted the program \$325,000.<sup>3</sup>

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Cascade County demonstrates that the combination of business-friendly tax policies and a high quality of life creates a positive business environment that attracts new companies in the short term and builds a stable economic base in the long term.
- Cascade County worked effectively with surrounding counties to forge a mutually beneficial and lasting economic partnership.
- Cascade's response to job growth in the welding field highlights that coordinated efforts between counties, cities, states, economic development organizations and local educational institutions can be a central component of a region's economic development strategy.
- Cascade's attention to anticipated infrastructure needs demonstrates the importance of long-term planning for business attraction, which in turn contributes to economic stability and growth.

## CONTACT

- Joe Briggs, Commissioner, Cascade County  
406.454.6815 | [jbriggs@cascadecountymt.gov](mailto:jbriggs@cascadecountymt.gov)
- For more information:  
[www.gfdevelopment.org](http://www.gfdevelopment.org)  
[www.adfgroup.com/facilities/great-falls-montana-usa](http://www.adfgroup.com/facilities/great-falls-montana-usa)



Photo credit: Great Falls College MSU

*Great Falls College MSU worked with Cascade County, the city of Great Falls and the Great Falls Development Authority to increase the capacity of its welding certification program.*

1 Interview with Dan Rooney, 21 July 2014.  
2 Email from Susan Wolff, 24 July 2014.  
3 Johnson, Charles S. "Gov. Steve Bullock's Main Street Montana Project Proceeding." The Montana Standard, 6 July 2014.  
<http://bit.ly/13k6sl7>

# BUILDING A SKILLED LABOR FORCE WITH BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND WORKFORCE PREPAREDNESS INITIATIVES

**GRAFTON COUNTY, N.H.**

*POPULATION: 89,629*

## **SNAPSHOT**

Grafton County's partnerships with local schools and universities are important factors for retaining and growing a skilled labor force that supports a competitive business environment. The county invests in a high school workforce preparedness program and business incubator to prepare graduates for diverse new job opportunities to better meet employer demands.

## **OPPORTUNITY**

Grafton County, located in rural New Hampshire, began encountering workforce concerns in the mid-2000s. Younger, skilled workers were leaving the county while the county's workforce population was aging, leaving area-wide business with unmet employment needs. In an effort to retain and grow a younger, skilled workforce in the county, Grafton leaders invested in entrepreneurial and workforce preparedness opportunities to create jobs and grow the economy.

## **SOLUTION**

Situated in New Hampshire's mountainous northwest region, Grafton County has almost 90,000 residents and is home to Dartmouth College and Plymouth State University. County leaders are pursuing workforce preparedness and business support opportunities to retain recent high school and college graduates, with the aim of growing a younger, educated and skilled workforce.

Grafton County actively encourages workforce preparedness among its younger workers by supporting the North Country Workforce Education Program. Designed to build, maintain and expand a skilled workforce, the Program places students from three Grafton County high schools—Littleton, Lisbon and Profile—in internships with local businesses to receive course credit. The Program is primarily state funded with staff support from the Grafton County Economic Development Council (EDC)—a regional development corporation that receives \$50,000 annually from Grafton County to help identify private funding for countywide economic development efforts. School coordinators are appointed to each of the high schools to guide interns and coordinate with businesses to identify placements meeting the students' and businesses' needs. Through their internships, students receive skill training in business development and marketing as well as hands-on learning in subjects such as machinery, plumbing and electrical work. Reflecting on the success of the program, Grafton County EDC CEO Mark Scarano stated that local businesses realize that instead of spending time recruiting unfamiliar students from outside the county, they instead have better luck attracting and retaining workers that have grown up in the area.

Grafton County leaders have also collaborated to create business support services for local entrepreneurs and small businesses. In 2010, Plymouth State University partnered with Grafton County's EDC—one of the 10 regional development corporations in the state—to form the Plymouth Enterprise Center, a business incubator targeted to the unique workforce and business needs of eastern Grafton County and the surrounding region. Located in a redeveloped brownfield site across from Plymouth State University in the town of Plymouth, the Enterprise Center provides start-up businesses and entrepreneurs with leased space and assists with business planning, financing, accounting, web design optimization and a host of other on-site business consulting services that would normally be unavailable or unaffordable during the risky first stages of a new business.

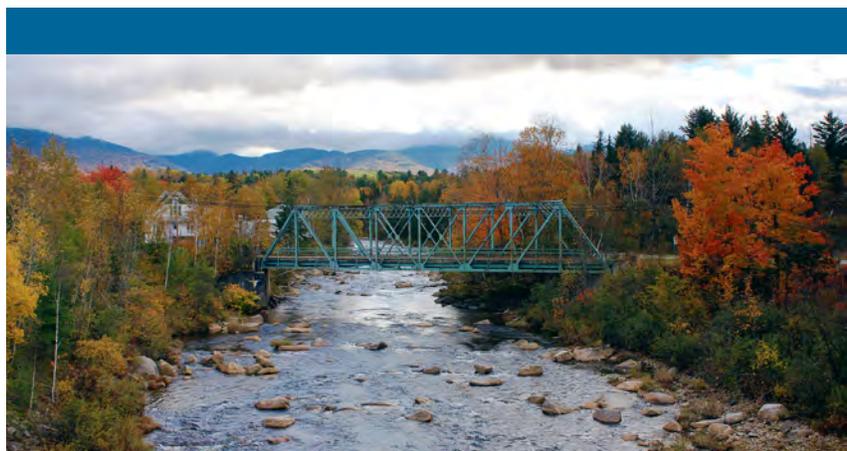
Grafton County has provided critical support for the business incubator, dedicating a 2013 Community Development Block MicroEnterprise grant of \$92,750 for technical assistance and training funds to the Enterprise Center. Based on regional demand for access to the site, leaders recently decided to expand the Enterprise Center by fully developing the rest of the three-story building where the Center is housed. Since opening in October 2014, 80 percent of the building has been occupied by new entrepreneurial companies. Scarano acknowledged that many rural-based entrepreneurs are seeking new business opportunities within the region, so it is the county leaders' role to foster a supportive environment that will keep a creative and innovative class within the county.

## IMPACTS

- During the 2013-2014 school year, 57 students and 53 businesses were involved with the North Country Workplace Education Program. Eight students also received employment opportunities with the companies where they had their internships.
- The Grafton County EDC leveraged county dollars to raise \$2.3 million from 12 funding sources and 14 corporate contributors to complete the three-story, 10,000 square-foot Plymouth Enterprise Center.<sup>4</sup>
- Since 2010, the Enterprise Center has graduated nine businesses and provided professional assistance to over 400 entrepreneurs and businesses in the Grafton County region.<sup>5</sup>

## TAKE-AWAYS

- By supporting a business incubator and workforce preparedness program, Grafton County is attracting and retaining new, younger talent, while also meeting existing business needs.
- The North Country Workplace Education Program helps fill employment gaps for local employers and provides high school students with hands-on workforce training and experience.
- The Enterprise Center demonstrates the importance of providing entrepreneurial support to rural entrepreneurs and small businesses to help grow and diversify the local economy.



*Photo credit: Flickr user cmh2315fl (<https://flic.kr/p/7aDbV6>)*

*Grafton County invests in workforce preparedness programs and supports businesses, helping prepare workers for diverse new job opportunities.*

## CONTACT

- Mark Scarano, Chief Executive Officer, Grafton County Economic Development Council  
603.536.2011 | [mscarano@grafftoncountyedc.org](mailto:mscarano@grafftoncountyedc.org)
- Mike Cryans, Commissioner, Grafton County Commission  
603.443.1901

4 “About.” Enterprise Center at Plymouth. [www.enterprisecenternh.com/about](http://www.enterprisecenternh.com/about)

5 Interview with Mark Scarano, Sept. 2014.

# POWER IN NUMBERS: PROMOTING BUSINESS ATTRACTION, JOB GROWTH AND ECONOMIC SECURITY THROUGH REGIONAL COLLABORATION

## YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONT.

POPULATION: 154,162

### SNAPSHOT

Yellowstone County, Mont. uses a multi-pronged approach to economic development. To realize the region's economic goals, public and private institutions work together to invest in local infrastructure, train a skilled workforce and attract businesses.

### OPPORTUNITY

Public agencies, private businesses and educational institutions in Yellowstone County have come to realize that they can magnify their impact by working together. Through the Big Sky Economic Development organization (BSED), the Billings-Yellowstone County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the City College at Montana State University Billings (MSU Billings), a climate of cooperation has been established and is helping the region successfully pursue its economic development goals.

### SOLUTION

Yellowstone County prioritizes public-private partnerships to maintain its stable job market and business environment. BSED, the county's primary economic development organization, represents an important juncture of government entities and businesses by combining the public Economic Development Authority (EDA), evolved from a 1989 county entity, with the private Economic Development Corporation (EDC), formed in 2002. The EDA includes public agencies like Yellowstone County, School District 2 (the largest in Montana), MSU Billings and the cities of Billings and Laurel, while the private EDC includes over 135 of the top local and regional businesses who are member investors.

Regional collaboration is critical for bringing new companies to the county, and BSED plays a lead role in business attraction. Its public and private bodies work together to highlight the region's high quality of life and economic opportunities while offering tax incentives, a business attraction strategy that has succeeded in bringing many companies to the county and expanding many existing businesses since the



Photo credit: Flickr user Kent Kanouse (<https://flic.kr/p/f17Aqy>)

*Yellowstone County utilizes public-private partnerships to invest in local infrastructure, train a skilled workforce and attract businesses.*

early 2000s. These include GE Capital, a Wells Fargo Bank western region support center, Canadian industrial gas-product manufacturer Aspen Air, the expansion of three major oil refineries and a Fed-Ex regional hub, which have together created hundreds of jobs in Yellowstone County. The expansion of the oil refineries necessitated another level of cooperation: partnering with City College, the technical college at MSU Billings. Through BSED, the county served as a liaison between the refineries and the college to create academic programs that train future refinery operators, ensuring the availability of skilled workers and thereby strengthening the local economy.

Another area where cooperation is key is county-wide transportation and infrastructure investments. BSED, in partnership with the local MPO—managed by the Yellowstone Planning County Board—leads the regional effort to pool resources in pursuit of funding for transportation initiatives. For instance, in 2013 BSED secured a \$250,000 Montana Coal Board grant for key road upgrades.<sup>6</sup>

By working with its local, state and federal partners, Yellowstone County’s BSED has captured a number of additional state and federal grants to address a variety of issues including brownfield revitalization, wildfire mitigation, community development and infrastructure projects. County Commissioner Bill Kennedy described Yellowstone’s perspective on its many partnerships. “You don’t get very far unless you’re working together. Partnerships are what it’s all about.”

YOU DON'T GET VERY FAR  
UNLESS YOU'RE WORKING  
TOGETHER. PARTNERSHIPS  
ARE WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT.

**BILL KENNEDY**

YELLOWSTONE COUNTY COMMISSIONER

## IMPACTS

- Yellowstone County’s strong partnerships have ensured a stable job market and business environment, which in turn enabled the community to continue to experience steady two percent growth during the recession.<sup>7</sup>
- The majority of students in City College’s refinery training program are hired by refineries for well-paying jobs.<sup>8</sup>
- In 2013, Yellowstone County’s MPO secured a \$250,000 grant from the Montana Coal Board for road upgrades. The MPO is partnering with the highway department on the road improvement project.<sup>9</sup>

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Yellowstone County’s partnerships between local, state, federal, business and educational entities enable a stable and growing economy across the region.
- Regional economic bodies and transportation planning agencies are an important conduit to reinforce counties’ roles as regional conveners to coordinate planning and align investments.

## CONTACT

- Bill Kennedy, Commissioner, Yellowstone County  
406.256.2701 | [bkennedy@co.yellowstone.mt.gov](mailto:bkennedy@co.yellowstone.mt.gov)

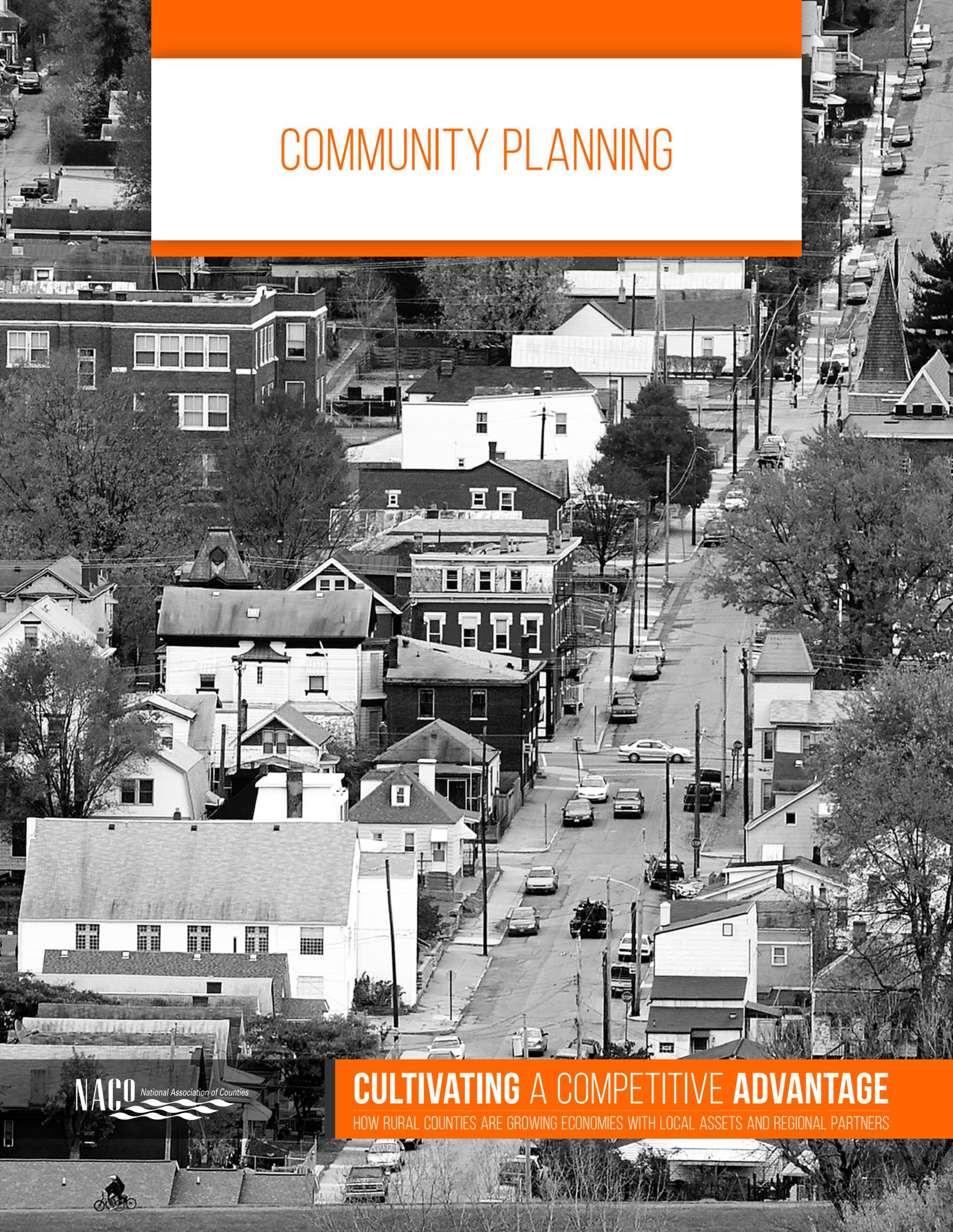
6 “Montana Coal Board Applicants and Funding History.” *Montana Department of Commerce*. <http://1.usa.gov/1wNPswT>

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.



An aerial, black and white photograph of a town street. The street runs vertically through the center, lined with various styles of houses, including multi-story brick buildings and smaller, single-story homes. Several cars are parked along the street, and a few are in motion. The background shows more buildings and trees, suggesting a dense residential area. The overall tone is professional and community-oriented.

# COMMUNITY PLANNING

**NACO** National Association of Counties

## **CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

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# ADDRESSING THE PRESENT WHILE PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE: THE DUAL USE OF SMART GROWTH STRATEGIES

MADISON COUNTY, NY

POPULATION: 72,382

## SNAPSHOT

Madison County, N.Y. has adopted a holistic approach to community and economic development by incorporating smart growth strategies into its local policy and planning initiatives. To ensure economic growth in the future, county leaders embarked on three smart growth projects: a Primer for Smart Growth, a federally funded smart growth audit tool and a county web page dedicated to sharing smart growth resources.



Photo credit: EPA Office of Sustainable Communities

*A team of planning consultants conducted site visits and meetings with local leaders, resulting in the joint EPA-Madison County development of “The Smart Growth Policy and Audit Tool for Madison County.”*

## OPPORTUNITY

Madison County, located east of Syracuse and north of Binghamton in central New York, is a rural county possessing economic potential while also facing a number of concerns, including an aging population, high rates of obesity and other chronic health problems, loss of farmland and a steady migration away from community centers and villages. At the same time, its mix of small towns, vast expanses of farmland and existing infrastructure are capable of supporting new economic opportunities. Further, Madison County boasts a diverse employment base with over 25,000 jobs that span the industry spectrum ranging from manufacturing to education to health care. There are nearly 750 operating farms in Madison, with a total value of agricultural products estimated at \$86 million in 2013.<sup>10</sup>

## SOLUTION

In 2010, county leaders began pursuing smart growth strategies to not only address the county’s stressors but also take advantage of its place-based assets and direct efforts that support continued growth of its diverse economic base. To launch its new focus on smart growth, Madison County’s Planning and Health departments collaborated to clearly define and align smart growth strategies with the county’s existing and future economic

growth trends. The result of this planning effort was the creation of “A Healthy Design for Madison County: Primer for Smart Growth,” jointly developed by the two county departments and released in September 2011.

The Primer demonstrates how Madison County can apply smart growth principles to address a number of its current demographic, economic and environmental concerns. It identifies structured approaches for building places with intent and provides tools and local examples to address housing needs, develop more public transportation options, support downtown institutions, discover partnership opportunities and devise new community planning efforts. The Primer was developed as an educational tool for Madison’s municipalities and local officials while also serving as a catalyst to advance smart growth concepts within the county and

10 “Madison County Economic Development Strategy.” *Madison County*. <http://bit.ly/1rD6tey>

region. Furthermore, it helped illuminate the county's already existing and underutilized assets. Madison County's Senior Planner Jamie Hart said, "So often in rural places, we are worried about what we don't have, but the Primer helped us refocus on available amenities and infrastructure to start seeing new economic growth opportunities."

Due to the momentum of the Primer, Madison County and its partners have explored a key component of smart growth—expanding transportation options to make places more desirable to live, work and play. In 2013, Madison County, the City of Oneida and a number of private sector and community partners developed the Oneida Rail Trail (ORT) project, an 11.3-mile non-motorized, multi-use trail located in the City of Oneida. Still in the implementation phases, the ORT will utilize existing rail beds along three former rail lines to link three communities, businesses, parks and tourist destinations to create a new economic engine for the county. Additionally, Madison County's Planning and Health departments serve on the City of Oneida's Community Economic Development team. The team worked with the city to conduct a walkability study of the downtown to assess pedestrian opportunities to help inform Oneida's Comprehensive Plan. The purpose of the study was to provide guidance to local city officials as they strive to revitalize and reestablish the downtown Oneida business district.

After developing the Primer for Smart Growth, Madison County's leaders continued to pursue opportunities to incorporate smart growth into county planning activities. One year after the Primer's release, the Madison County Department of Health, Planning Department and City of Oneida received a Smart Growth Implementation Assistance Grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The \$65,000 grant was awarded to provide technical assistance to the county as it updated local codes and policies for comprehensive planning and land use ordinances. To achieve these objectives, a team of planning consultants conducted site visits and meetings with local leaders, resulting in the joint EPA-Madison County development of "The Smart Growth Policy and Audit Tool for Madison County." Recommendations provided in the Tool include model code strategies, planning policies and example programs from across the country. The Tool was piloted in the City of Oneida, Village of Chittenango and Town of Brookfield, and the EPA ultimately hopes to apply the Tool in any rural community interested in identifying ordinance changes to support its economic, environmental, social and fiscal wellbeing. Although the Tool has not been officially released by the EPA, the Madison County Planning Department has provided support to the pilot communities as they update their comprehensive plans, codes and policies.

Since the development of the smart growth Primer and Tool, smart growth strategies have become an integral part of Madison County's planning agenda. The county's planning department regularly highlights local, state and national examples of smart growth best practices on its website, which also features a semiannual publication that offers resources and tools to facilitate greater communication and advancement of smart growth concepts within the county. This increase in information sharing is a welcome sign to Hart, who sees the impacts of Madison County's new emphasis on smart growth reflected in the encouragement of partnerships that facilitate the nationwide exchange of smart growth resources. This burgeoning smart growth conversation will enhance quality of life and ensure sustained environmental and economic progress.

## IMPACTS

- Madison County received \$65,000 in technical assistance from U.S. EPA's Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities program to pursue countywide smart growth efforts.
- Madison County developed a semiannual smart growth newsletter as a resource for its local communities to highlight best practices and local examples of holistic planning projects.

SO OFTEN IN RURAL PLACES, WE ARE WORRIED ABOUT WHAT WE DON'T HAVE, BUT THE PRIMER HELPED US REFOCUS ON AVAILABLE AMENITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE TO START SEEING NEW ECONOMIC GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES.

**JAMIE HART**

*MADISON COUNTY SENIOR PLANNER*

- The development of “A Healthy Design for Madison County: Primer for Smart Growth” fostered collaboration between numerous Madison County agencies, including the Planning Department, Health Department, Industrial Development Agency and Economic Development Department. Local universities and businesses, along with community members and other local leaders, were also involved.
- In 2013, Madison County started presenting communities with Smart Growth Awards to recognize local accomplishments in the smart growth arena.

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Madison County is addressing its social, environmental and economic challenges by adopting smart growth concepts and ideas that offer a collaborative and holistic approach to economic development while maintaining local rural assets and cultural heritage.
- By encouraging interdepartmental collaboration, Madison County has been able to acquire funding and technical support for its municipalities to develop codes, establish standards and plan updates. These ordinance changes incorporate smart growth principles and advance overall quality of life for county residents.
- Madison County recognizes that smart growth strategies are not just applicable in urban and suburban settings, but also help guide growth and address challenges unique to rural places.

## CONTACT

- Jamie Hart, Senior Planner, Madison County Planning Department  
315.366.2378 | [Jamie.Hart@madisoncounty.ny.gov](mailto:Jamie.Hart@madisoncounty.ny.gov)
- For more information:  
[www.madisoncounty.ny.gov/planning/smart-growth](http://www.madisoncounty.ny.gov/planning/smart-growth)

# LEVERAGING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, LOCAL ASSETS AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

## PHILLIPS COUNTY, ARKANSAS

POPULATION: 20,399

### SNAPSHOT

Located in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, Phillips County—with support from area leaders and county residents—embarked upon an inclusive community strategic planning and implementation process to alleviate poverty, enhance quality of life and reinvigorate its diminishing economic base. The plan prioritizes community development and investments in social capital, education and health care as central economic development strategies.

### OPPORTUNITY

Phillips is an eastern Arkansas county home to a number of the region's important cultural and historic sites, including the Civil War Museum, Freedom Park and the Delta Cultural Center. While rich in culture and history, Phillips suffers from low economic growth and persistent poverty: as of 2010, the U.S. Census ranked Phillips as one of the 25 poorest counties in the country.<sup>11</sup> With the goals of building on available assets and empowering residents, Phillips County leaders partnered with Southern Bancorp Community Partners (SBCP) to launch an inclusive long-term planning process. SBCP, a non-profit organization and community development financial institution (CDFI), works in partnership with Southern Bancorp, one of the country's largest rural development banks. Established in 1982, SBCP has facilitated more than \$2 billion in rural development loans to rural institutions and families across the Arkansas Delta region. In Phillips County, SBCP has invested \$74 million in economic revitalization efforts, with a focus on fostering community-scale change using a comprehensive community planning process that engages the entire community on issues such as economic development, housing, health care and leadership development.<sup>12</sup>

### SOLUTION

In 2003, with support from the Walton Family Foundation and engagement of more than 300 county residents, SBCP envisioned the Delta Bridge Project, a public-private partnership among Phillips County, local stakeholders and community organizers to better coordinate community and economic development efforts in the county. The Delta Bridge Project developed an initial Strategic Plan to meet its ultimate mission of addressing the county's rapidly decreasing quality of life.

By 2009, the Delta Bridge Project decided to refocus its efforts from plan development to plan implementation and progress tracking. To address this new focus, the Project's partners—including local leaders, private firms, public institutions and community members—updated and completed the 2010-2020 Strategic Community Plan. Overall, the Strategic Plan took seven months to complete, with engagement from over 600 community members in over 100 community meetings.<sup>13</sup> To facilitate the Strategic Plan's successful implementation, teams were established to meet goals in six key areas: economic development, education, health care, housing, leadership and tourism/quality of life. These six teams report their progress and recommendations to the Delta Bridge Project

11 "Phillips County, Arkansas Quick Links." *United States Census Bureau*. <http://1.usa.gov/1FYXqil>

12 "Funding Overview." *Delta Bridge Project*. <http://bit.ly/1nT0RBz>

13 Ibid.



Photo credit: SBCP

*Phillips County uses a strategic planning process that actively engages its county residents to more adequately address long-range economic development goals.*

Steering Committee, composed of community members and county leaders and created to guide the continuing execution of the Strategic Plan. The Steering Committee is responsible for meeting quarterly to manage and track the progress of the entire plan by reviewing new objectives, evaluating project impact and approving new amendments. County Judge Don Gentry, one of the county's representatives on the Steering Committee, stated, "Phillips County continues to stay active in the Delta Bridge Project planning efforts because we view it as a way to address the whole nine yards for economic growth in the county, including creating more jobs, improving access to education and providing affordable housing to our current residents and future workforce."

With the updated plan underway, in 2011 SBCP hired Senior Community Development Officer Mircha King to work on the ground in Phillips County to support the Delta Project's aim of tracking project impact and managing successful implementation of the Strategic Plan. King explained, "It is my priority to make sure that the Strategic Plan goals reflect the demographics of the community and bring new ideas and faces to the table. This effort is entirely focused on community visioning and goal-setting that is inclusive of the entire community."

By 2012, a number of the Strategic Plan's community projects had been completed. First, an unused school building was redeveloped into the Union Fort Curtis, a replica of an important Civil War site. Additionally, a football field-sized brownfield along the county's main historic corridor was revitalized and redeveloped into the Freedom Park Civil War Helena site. These projects attract thousands of visitors to the county each year.

King, the Delta Bridge Project partners and additional community members never lose focus of their key long-range goal: reducing the gap between Phillips County and the national average in the areas of employment, poverty and educational attainment rates. To evaluate and measure progress in meeting this and other goals established in the Strategic Plan, SBCP established a metrics program to analyze three measurable community

indicators: employment rate, poverty rate and educational attainment. Thanks to these metrics and the region's continued implementation of the Strategic Plan, Phillips County is making strides to meet its key goals and improve the lives of its residents.

## IMPACTS

- SBCP has invested \$9.3 million in grants and loans to the Delta Bridge Project and has overall invested \$74 million in economic revitalization efforts in Phillips County.
- The 2010-2020 Strategic Community Plan was a seven-month process that engaged more than 600 Phillips County residents in over 100 community meetings.
- Between 2005 and 2012, the Delta Bridge Project leveraged \$105.1 million in investments in Phillips County.<sup>14</sup>
- By 2030, SBCP seeks to reduce gaps in educational attainment, poverty and employment between Phillips County and national averages by 50 percent.<sup>15</sup>

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Phillips County uses a strategic planning process that actively engages its county residents to more adequately address long-range economic development goals.
- To combat poverty and a diminishing economic base, Phillips County leaders partnered with Southern Bancorp to develop an inclusive and comprehensive community planning effort that drives social and economic change, leading to an enhanced quality of life for all county residents.
- Phillips County demonstrates a successful example of how counties can partner with community and national foundations to leverage additional funding and resources to successfully pursue ongoing community objectives.

## CONTACT

- Mircha King, Senior Community Development Officer, Southern Bancorp Community Partners  
870.816.1122 | [Mircha.King@southernpartners.org](mailto:Mircha.King@southernpartners.org)
- For more information:  
[www.deltabridgeproject.com](http://www.deltabridgeproject.com)

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

# USING NEW PLANNING STRATEGIES TO PRIORITIZE COMMUNITY TRENDS

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## RANDOLPH COUNTY, W.VA.

POPULATION: 29,415

### SNAPSHOT

Randolph County embarked on three planning initiatives with the ultimate goal of linking the county's planning process with community needs. The plans addressed housing and transit issues while specifically considering impacts for both the workforce and aging population.

### OPPORTUNITY

As the largest county in West Virginia by area, Randolph County covers 1,040 square miles with a population of just under 30,000. As of 2013, the county population was estimated to stay the same, with the number of senior citizens projected to double by 2035; it is also expected that many seniors will have limited incomes, making it difficult for them to afford housing and other services.<sup>16</sup> Beginning in the mid-2000s, Randolph County residents also faced a lack of affordable housing options and an inefficient public transit system. County leaders realized there was no formal planning strategy to address the housing and transportation needs for two different groups: the county's aging population and existing workforce. To address these issues, Randolph embarked on a countywide housing, transportation and community development planning effort to expand economic opportunities and better meet community needs.

### SOLUTION

In 2010, the Randolph County Housing Authority (RCHA) received a Community Challenge Planning Grant, a joint federal grant program funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The RCHA partnered with the Randolph County Commission, the Randolph County Economic Development Authority and the Randolph County Senior Center to use the grant funds to develop plans guiding countywide development that better align economic and workforce development with community needs. The Randolph County Commission prioritizes involvement in the housing and transportation partnership, viewing it as a means for promoting economic development in the county. Randolph County Commissioner Mike Taylor commented, "To have a viable workforce, you have to have a place for people to live and have a way for them to get to work."

The RCHA and its county partners developed three major planning initiatives to address citizens' housing and transit needs. Two key targeted populations were the current workforce and the county's aging population, as the county recognized that many seniors will have limited income and therefore encounter difficulty finding affordable housing.<sup>17</sup> The first study addressing these concerns was Randolph County's first housing and transportation study, developed to assess population centers in the county and identify top employers, transportation routes for commuters and affordable housing near employers and transit routes. Completed in 2012, the study will guide future development by aligning housing needs with transit services resulting in increased quality of life for Randolph residents.

Next, RCHA and its local partners formulated the Transit Study, a policy planning document that will guide project selection in order to better leverage state and federal funding assistance for transit infrastructure enhancements.

16 "Strategies for the Future of Randolph County." *Randolph County Housing Authority*.

17 Ibid.

This second study also provides clear recommendations to capitalize on future funding and partnership opportunities by identifying two categories: short-term, requiring minimal investment, or long-term, requiring major investments in transportation. The county's third study was a Neighborhood Mobility Plan for Highland Park, a local neighborhood. This plan aims to improve mobility for pedestrians, bicyclists and bus riders as they access common daily destinations, such as schools, work, parks, medical offices and grocery stores. Together these plans will ensure that Randolph County provides viable housing and transportation options that not only address current community needs, but also provide new economic opportunities for the county.

## IMPACTS

- As of 2014, Randolph County's planning initiatives have led to greater ridership on the local bus service, a plan for new sidewalks, a greenway in one neighborhood and 20 new units of affordable rental housing for seniors.<sup>18</sup>
- By 2015, RCHA and its partners aim to acquire vacant rental properties to develop nearly 40 housing units in Randolph, contributing over \$4.5 million directly in construction funding. At the end of 2013, 10 of the 60 newly acquired rental units were already set aside for seniors.

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Randolph County took advantage of a new federal program to form a countywide partnership that aligned housing and transportation needs with local and comprehensive planning initiatives.
- Randolph County leaders acknowledge the importance of providing affordable housing and diverse transportation options to attract new business opportunities and maintain a thriving workforce.
- Randolph County's multi-departmental collaboration demonstrates the importance of countywide partnerships for pooling resources and aligning goals to meet community needs, increase job access and emphasize long-term economic growth.

## CONTACT

- Kate Somers, Program Manager, Randolph County Housing Authority  
304.636.6495 x12 | [ksomers@rchawv.org](mailto:ksomers@rchawv.org)

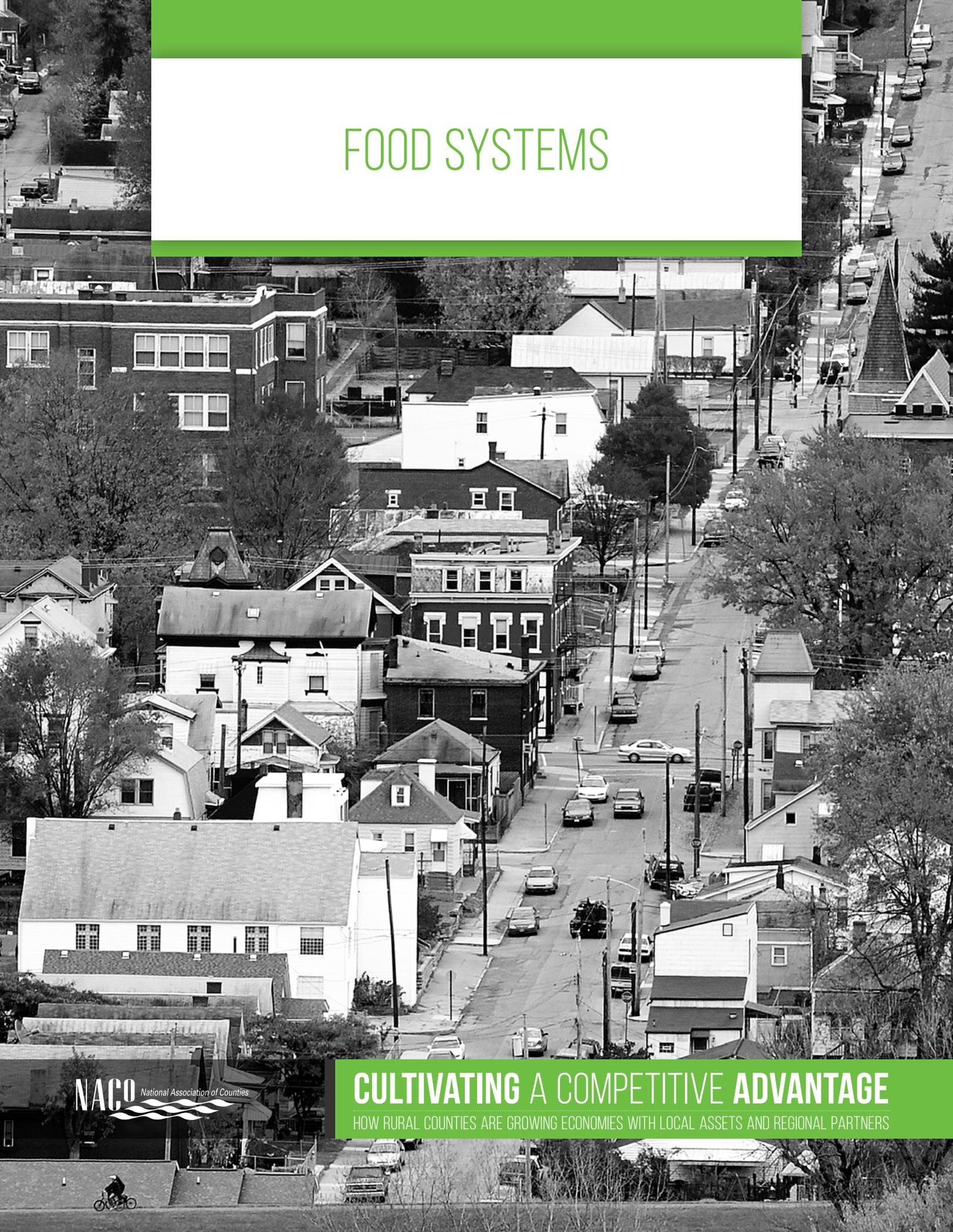


*Photo credit: Randolph County Housing Authority*

*Randolph County embarked on several planning initiatives to link its planning process with community needs.*

18 Ibid.



An aerial, black and white photograph of a town street. The street runs vertically through the center, lined with various buildings, including multi-story brick structures and smaller houses. Several cars are parked along the street, and a few are in motion. The background shows more buildings and trees, suggesting a densely populated urban or suburban area. A green horizontal bar is at the top, and a white box with green text is overlaid on it.

# FOOD SYSTEMS

**NACO** National Association of Counties

**CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

HOW RURAL COUNTIES ARE GROWING ECONOMIES WITH LOCAL ASSETS AND REGIONAL PARTNERS

# GROWING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ONE HOOP HOUSE AT A TIME

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**COFFEE COUNTY, ALA.**

*POPULATION: 50,938*

## **SNAPSHOT**

In 2011, Coffee County joined forces with the Wiregrass Resource Conservation and Development Council (Wiregrass RC&D) and nine Alabama counties to enhance economic and educational opportunities in the agriculture industry by providing residents and small-scale growers with more effective methods for growing crops.

## **OPPORTUNITY**

In the mid-2000s, Coffee County leaders started to discuss new opportunities to support the local agriculture community. Acknowledging broad income and food disparities throughout the region, Coffee County leveraged the Wiregrass RC&D's regional resources to develop a program to provide residents and growers with more effective methods for growing crops. The county views their involvement with Wiregrass RC&D as a viable way to enhance the agricultural industry, while providing economic opportunities to low-income residents and minority farmers.

## **SOLUTION**

Located in southeast Alabama, Coffee County ranks among the state's top five counties in total agricultural production. The rural county's major agricultural products include peanuts, cotton, poultry and cattle.<sup>19</sup> Despite deep-seated ties to agricultural production, many residents and small farmers live below the state poverty line and have limited access to healthy food. To help address these concerns, Coffee County works with Wiregrass RC&D, which covers a ten-county region—including Coffee's neighboring Pike, Dale, Crenshaw, Covington and Geneva counties—and is part of the system of conservation districts designated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to support conservation, development and utilization of natural and human resources to improve the local economy and enhance quality of life. Coffee County Commissioner Dean Smith serves as the Vice-Chair to the Executive Board—which includes one official from each of the ten counties—and Coffee County, along with each of the member counties, contributes \$1,000 annually to Wiregrass RC&D to cover office costs.

In October 2013, the Wiregrass RC&D Executive Board received a USDA National Resource Conservation Service grant to design a wooden high tunnel kit and construct ten pilot high tunnels in locations across the Wiregrass Region. High tunnels, commonly known as hoop houses, help farmers build simple structures that allow them to protect crops from extreme weather and pests, thereby reducing water use, extending the growing season and cutting costs for pesticides. With many components and complexities associated with constructing metal hoop house kits, Wiregrass RC&D used the grant funds to design a new, less arduous wooden kit for small-scale farmers and residents in the area. Currently, Wiregrass RC&D is working with USDA to develop a cost-share program to construct more design kits that can be sold to area growers and residents. Although still early in its conception, the plan is for Wiregrass RC&D to use the profits received from selling the design kits to fund additional agriculture, conservation and natural resource-related projects in the region.

Wiregrass RC&D Executive Director James Currington explained that the wooden hoop house kits represent a cost-effective way to support small growers and residents with limited resources because they are economical to build and require limited land for construction. Additionally, the hoop house kits help address food insecurities in the area by providing healthy sources of fruits and vegetables for underrepresented residents. Commissioner

19 "About Coffee County." *Coffee County Extension Office*. [www.aces.edu/counties/Coffee/](http://www.aces.edu/counties/Coffee/)

Dean Smith stated that the new program also provides a positive economic impact for Coffee County. “By giving low-income and underrepresented residents and growers a low-cost, efficient way to grow and sell their own crops, we are keeping money in our local economy by increasing residents’ incomes and empowering them with viable jobs.”

Thanks to an earlier 2011 grant from Wiregrass RC&D, the hoop houses can also be used as an educational tool in Coffee County’s schools. The grant, provided to the Coffee County Soil and Conservation District, provides educational hands-on agricultural learning for all Coffee County elementary schools. Victor Khan, an instructor at Tuskegee University who is working with Wiregrass RC&D through the university cooperative extension program, supports the educational effort and stated that the grant allows educators to use hoop houses as an outdoor laboratory that reinforces science, conservation and health concepts in a more hands-on and applicable way. From hoop houses in students’ school yard to their parents’ back yard, Coffee County’s partnership with the Wiregrass RC&D is improving residents’ access to education, food security and agricultural opportunities while bolstering the region’s economic strength and resilience.

## IMPACTS

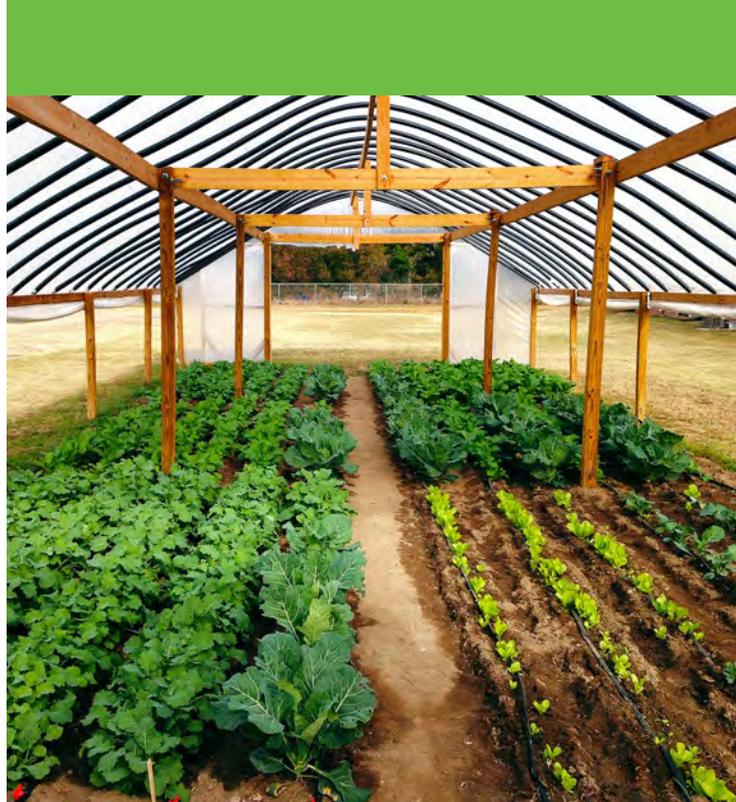
- County leaders project that by 2015, over 15 hoop house design kits will be fully implemented by small farmers and growers in Coffee County.
- Wiregrass RC&D contributed \$4,850 to Coffee County elementary schools to provide students with outdoor education programs to learn how to grow and eat healthy foods.
- Coffee County Commissioner Dean Smith projects that the county’s involvement with Wiregrass RC&D feeds \$14,000 annually into the local economy.

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Coffee County exemplifies an inclusive approach to economic development by providing new employment and growing opportunities to low-income growers and farmers.
- Coffee County demonstrates the importance of multi-county collaboration for pooling resources to address broad food disparity and poverty trends in the region.
- Coffee County is keeping money in the local economy by providing famers and residents with access to resources that increase incomes and quality of life in the area.

## CONTACT

- James Currington, Executive Director, Wiregrass RC&D  
334.774.2334



*Photo credit: Wiregrass RC&D*

*Wiregrass RC&D designed a new wooden hoop house kit to help Coffee County farmers and residents protect crops from extreme weather and pests, reduce water use and extend the growing season.*

# BRANDING AN IDENTITY: MARKETING LOCAL GOODS AND ECONOMIC STRENGTHS

## HOOD RIVER COUNTY, ORE.

POPULATION: 22,675

### SNAPSHOT

Hood River County, Ore. uses its local assets to market the region's strong sense of place by emphasizing the quality of its agricultural products and promoting its abundant economic opportunities.

### OPPORTUNITY

Advances in technology in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the mass production and commoditization of American food and other products. In the 1990s, officials in Hood River County worked with community leaders to embark on an effort to reverse this trend and instead promote the county's place-based agricultural and economic strengths. The county saw the chance to leverage the downtown Port of Hood River and the Fruit Loop region, rich in independent growers and farm stands, to market the value of its locally produced goods.

### SOLUTION

A major component of Hood River County's economic development approach is marketing the Hood River brand. By highlighting its in-place assets, the county promotes its unique identity that encourages tourism and adds value to the area's agricultural and economic pursuits. One local feature is the Fruit Loop, a 35-mile network of growers that produce high quality goods while encouraging economic growth through food stands, restaurants and tours. John Stehlik, Cellar Manager of the Fruit Loop's Mt. Hood Winery, said, "The development

of the Fruit Loop has been key to our success," helping to increase employment and attract tourism. Stehlik added that the region "thrives on a sense of place and community," a quality at the core of Hood River and an important component in marketing the area. County Commissioner Maui Meyer noted that county leaders were instrumental in realizing both the institutional and cultural worth of the Fruit Loop, and added that the food-rich region "allows Hood River to tell its story to the rest of the world."

Another asset important for marketing the county is the Port of Hood River, an industrial and commercial waterfront district operating since 1933. The Port is centrally located near downtown Hood River, offering corresponding economic activity at the county's core. To further increase its value, the Port used a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) to repair and expand its facilities in 2008-2009. With a focus on better access for business and patrons, the grant-funded construction resulted in a new industrial street and an improved pedestrian avenue, additions which led to business expansions, new tenants and job growth. Many of these tenants, such as Hood River Juice Company and family-owned Pfriem Brewers, evoke the values of the county by linking quality local assets with economic pursuits. Meyer noted that Hood River County played a large role



Photo credit: Port of Hood River

*Hood River County uses local assets like the Port of Hood River to emphasize the region's strong sense of place and abundant economic opportunities.*

in recognizing the Port as a “value-added hub” where products are “unique because they’re from Hood River.” Both the Port of Hood River and the Fruit Loop are an important part, Meyer added, of the “county-led discussion about our sense of place and appreciation for our agricultural community.”

## IMPACTS

- Since the mid-1990s, Hood River’s Fruit Loop has attracted tourists and locals alike to its 32 farm stands along a 35-mile stretch of the Columbia River Gorge.<sup>20</sup> The Fruit Loop is unique in offering visitors the full experience of food, from growth and production to eating and drinking.
- Because of the improvements made possible by the EDA grant, by the beginning of 2014 the Port of Hood River housed 23 tenants that employed over 360 people.<sup>21</sup>
- The federal investment of \$500,000 into the Port of Hood River spurred a private sector investment of nearly \$34 million.<sup>22</sup>

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Hood River County’s acknowledgement and marketing of the Fruit Loop highlights the economic potential of value-added food initiatives in rural counties.
- Hood River County’s encouragement and the EDA grant spurred significant private investment in the Port of Hood River, demonstrating that public funding can lead to private expenditures that promote unique local assets.

## CONTACT

- Maui Meyer, Commissioner, Hood River County  
541.490.3051 | [maui@copperwest.com](mailto:maui@copperwest.com)
- For more information:  
[www.hoodriverfruitloop.com](http://www.hoodriverfruitloop.com)  
[www.portofhoodriver.com](http://www.portofhoodriver.com)

20 “Places to Go – Fruit Stands.” *Hood River County Fruit Loop*. <http://bit.ly/1rVQR79>

21 “Success Story.” *U.S. Economic Development Administration*. <http://1.usa.gov/1wI9bVv>

22 Ibid.

# FOOD FOR THE SOUL: PARTNERSHIPS NOURISH FOOD SYSTEMS AND BUSINESS GROWTH

## POTTAWATTAMIE COUNTY, IOWA

POPULATION: 92,728

### SNAPSHOT

Pottawattamie County, Iowa uses a collaborative approach to regional economic development. Rather than operating as an isolated community, the county has cultivated strong economic ties throughout the larger region, successfully forging bonds both with local counties in Iowa and areas in neighboring Nebraska.

### OPPORTUNITY

Pottawattamie County has a strong agricultural tradition, but local leaders knew that simply having farmland was not enough to build a thriving economy. To create more market opportunities for the county's small-scale producers, county leaders realized that they would need to strengthen region-wide agricultural initiatives. Pottawattamie officials began to identify opportunities for regional collaboration with communities both in Iowa and neighboring Nebraska.

### SOLUTION

Collaborations are an important part of Pottawattamie's economic strategy, and one of the county's most important partnerships is the Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative (SWIFFI). SWIFFI is a coalition of nine Iowa counties and several organizations that work together to coordinate and connect the different components of the regional food system. Pottawattamie had an important role in SWIFFI's formation in 2007, creating a coordinator position to convene SWIFFI's members and offering early financial support. Reflecting on Pottawattamie's initial involvement, County Supervisor Melvyn Houser noted, "Counties are there to help create partnerships, to help convene the right partners to produce positive effects for small-scale agriculture."

In addition to directly supporting growers, SWIFFI works with local producers to create additional resources related to business expansion, marketing and funding. For example, SWIFFI, through Golden Hills Resource Conservation & Development (which acts as coordinator of SWIFFI), partnered with Iowa Western Community College to obtain U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) funding for a new class called "Dream to Farm." The Dream to Farm program, aimed at new farmers, was first offered in 2012 and covers a diverse range of topics including business planning, farming techniques and monitoring environmental quality.

In addition to its work with Iowa counties, Pottawattamie embarked on a cross-state collaboration with Nebraska in January 2014. The Advance Southwest Iowa Corporation, a public-private partnership that currently includes Pottawattamie County and local economic development organizations, and will ultimately include additional Iowa counties, was formed to represent southwest Iowa in Nebraska's Greater



Photo credit: Golden Hills Resource Conservation & Development

*Farmers markets are just one way Pottawattamie County supports small-scale farmers and bolsters the local food system.*

Omaha Economic Development Partnership. Through this collaboration, Pottawattamie and the five-county Nebraska region work together on economic development issues like marketing the region and encouraging talent growth.

Though the partnership is still new, work was already underway in July 2014 to offer collaborative programming. For example, the Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership has begun to organize training sessions for small businesses, which Paula Hazlewood, Senior Director for Business Assistance, Retention and Expansion, explained would be “available to everyone throughout the region.” These workshops are just one example of how the partnership is designed to strengthen connections among local communities. Although states often compete when it comes to economic development, Pottawattamie and its Nebraska partners are successfully combining their economic efforts with the hope of together forging a stronger economic region than either could create independently.

COUNTIES ARE THERE TO  
HELP CREATE PARTNERSHIPS,  
TO HELP CONVENE THE RIGHT  
PARTNERS TO PRODUCE  
POSITIVE EFFECTS FOR  
SMALL-SCALE AGRICULTURE.

**MELVYN HOUSER**

POTTAWATTAMIE COUNTY SUPERVISOR

## IMPACTS

- In 2014, SWIFFI coordinated 14 farmers markets and four farm stands, each featuring local producers selling locally grown food from May to October.<sup>23,24</sup>
- By July 2014, the Dream to Farm program had produced approximately 50 graduates, many of whom proceeded to form Community Supported Agriculture programs, contribute to local farmers markets and pursue additional opportunities in agricultural education.<sup>25</sup>
- SWIFFI has successfully obtained a number of grants from several groups including USDA, Iowa West Foundation and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, which it has used to provide community members with education, programs and initiatives supporting healthy, local food.
- Pottawattamie’s collaboration with the Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership led to plans for inclusive workshops aimed at training small businesses. These training sessions, to be held in 2015, will be available to both Nebraska and Iowa counties.<sup>26</sup>

## TAKE-AWAYS

- SWIFFI underlines the importance of partnerships for supporting agriculture in rural communities, and Pottawattamie’s role in SWIFFI demonstrates the power of counties to convene local groups.
- Pottawattamie’s collaboration with the Omaha Chamber of Commerce proves that multi-state cooperation is an effective strategy for integrating rural and urban economic development goals.

## CONTACT

- Melvyn Houser, Supervisor, Pottawattamie County  
712.328.5644 | [melvyn.houser@pottcounty.com](mailto:melvyn.houser@pottcounty.com)
- For more information:  
[www.sites.google.com/a/swiffi.org/www/home](http://www.sites.google.com/a/swiffi.org/www/home)  
[www.leopold.iastate.edu/regional-food-systems-working-group](http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/regional-food-systems-working-group)  
[www.iowawestfoundation.org/about-us/leadership-notes/collaboration-key-our-regions-economic-development](http://www.iowawestfoundation.org/about-us/leadership-notes/collaboration-key-our-regions-economic-development)

23 “Farmers Market Guide.” *Southwest Iowa Food & Farm Initiative*. <http://bit.ly/1nT15Zs>

24 Email from Michelle Franks, 29 July 2014.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

# FROM SEEDLING TO HARVEST: SUPPORTING ALL LEVELS OF THE FOOD SYSTEM

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**YOLO COUNTY, CALIF.**

POPULATION: 204,593

## SNAPSHOT

Yolo County, Calif. boasts some of the most productive farmland in the world and a complex, multifaceted agriculture industry. The county seeks to support all aspects of its agriculture sector, from food production, processing and distribution to innovative research and workforce training. County leaders promote a number of programs and partnerships that not only maintain the viability of its international export industry, but also assist small-scale farmers, sustain regional food systems and preserve the county's rural quality of life.

## OPPORTUNITY

In 2009, Yolo County and the five other counties composing the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) joined with local stakeholders to look at the region's growth objectives from a rural perspective, the outcome being the *Rural-Urban Connections Strategy*, a regional economic and environmental sustainability approach. Capitalizing on the region's visioning and planning efforts, Yolo County has worked to facilitate meaningful connections among stakeholders interested in the future of the county's agriculture industry.

## SOLUTION

Yolo County, located west of Sacramento at the northern end of California's Central Valley, is home to a robust agriculture industry. The county's leadership aims to support this economic engine on multiple levels, from encouraging small-scale farmers to ensuring continued growth of the export commodity sector. County Supervisor Don Saylor, current Vice-Chair of SACOG, noted that the county's focus on agriculture "fits our culture and our natural assets. It's important to play to your own strengths." Indeed, agriculture is king in Yolo County, representing a \$721 million industry in 2013, the highest-grossing year yet and up nearly 13 percent from 2012. Tomatoes, wine grapes, almonds, rice and walnuts are the top commodities, and products grown in Yolo County crisscross the globe, contributing to the more than \$18 billion in California's agriculture export value produced in 2012.<sup>27,28</sup>

One way Yolo County works to ensure the viability of the agriculture industry is through its "Farmbudsman," a unique position funded jointly by Yolo and Solano counties in 2013. The Farmbudsman acts as a consultant and advisor to help growers and ranchers with things like navigating regulatory and permitting processes, with the end goal of maintaining and growing the industry and adding jobs to the region. For Yolo County, this type of support is as much about keeping farming viable as it is about preserving farmland and open space from encroaching development in the greater Sacramento region.

Yolo County also supports agriculture research and development. The University of California, Davis (UC Davis), based in Yolo County, contains one of the world's leading agricultural colleges, home to world-class research facilities investigating solutions to complex agricultural, environmental and societal issues. By highlighting UC Davis's agricultural program and the existing biotechnology industry, Yolo County has successfully reached out to and attracted some of the world's largest seed companies to the region and now hosts a seed and biotechnology cluster comprising a number of major international agricultural research companies. These companies collaborate with UC Davis to devote thousands of acres of land to agricultural research while

27 Yolo County 2014 Export Partners." *Yolo County 2013 Agricultural Crop Report*. <http://bit.ly/1wNQeDp>

28 "California Agricultural Exports." *California Agricultural Statistic Review 2013-2014*. <http://bit.ly/1w90YJK>

creating jobs for county residents and growing the local economy. In turn, these collaborations have fostered an explosion of innovative agricultural technologies emerging from Yolo County, as many talented students have launched research at UC Davis and remained to expand their research into successful ventures that are changing the face of the agriculture industry.

In addition to promoting large-scale agriculture, Yolo County also promotes the viability of smaller farmers. To better strengthen access to and support of local growers, Yolo has identified ways to improve processing and supply-chain linkages in the regional food system. For example, Yolo provides business development support to small-scale processing centers like the Capay Valley Farm Shop by facilitating network development and assisting with grant proposals and marketing. The Farm Shop's President and Co-founder Thomas Nelson described the shop, founded in 2007, as a rural hub that connects a network

of 45 farms and ranches to markets in Northern California by collecting, packing, marketing and delivering goods, thus filling a critical gap in the regional food system and ensuring that consumers have access to high-quality, value-added products.

Another way Yolo County strengthens the local food sector is by regularly collaborating with the nearby Center for Land-Based Learning—an organization devoted to promoting responsible agriculture—on planning projects and local agricultural initiatives. The center's California Farm Academy has a seven-month education program for new farmers that includes hands-on instruction, business training, visits to area farms and post-graduate opportunities with its farm incubator. Program Director Jennifer Taylor said the academy has helped increase awareness “that real people are producing this food, which helps farmers in the long run to make a living while managing the land as a natural resource.” From bolstering new farmers and small-scale processing at the local level to encouraging large-scale agricultural research and international crop exports on the global stage, Yolo County's investments in its agriculture system represent a multifaceted approach to strengthening regional assets to achieve its economic goals.

## IMPACTS

- Yolo's crop exports and the growth of the agriculture research cluster have created jobs, bolstered the county's economic base and strengthened its role as a leader in the agriculture sector.
- Since its establishment in 2007, the Capay Valley Farm Shop has returned \$1.5 million to local growers. It connects 45 farms and ranches (a number that has increased each year) with consumers, including over 400 individuals and families as well as corporate cafeterias, restaurants and specialty shops. The Farm Shop has also created 10 full and part time jobs.<sup>29</sup>
- The Capay Valley Farm Shop has helped numerous small farmers connect to markets. One example is the Skyelark Ranch, operated by two young farmers who realized that they needed access to wholesale buyers

29 Email from Thomas Nelson, 13 Aug. 2014.



*Photo credit: California Farm Academy at the Center for Land-Based Learning  
A class weeding beets at the California Farm Academy.*

to stabilize their business. The Farm Shop worked with Skyelark Ranch to help find consistent buyers for their products and also helped Skyelark to network with other local ranches.<sup>30</sup>

- The California Farm Academy accepts around 20 students every year. As of August 2014, the program had graduated 37 students, with nine graduates participating in the academy's farm incubator and 75 percent of all graduates working in the farming industry.<sup>31</sup>

## TAKE-AWAYS

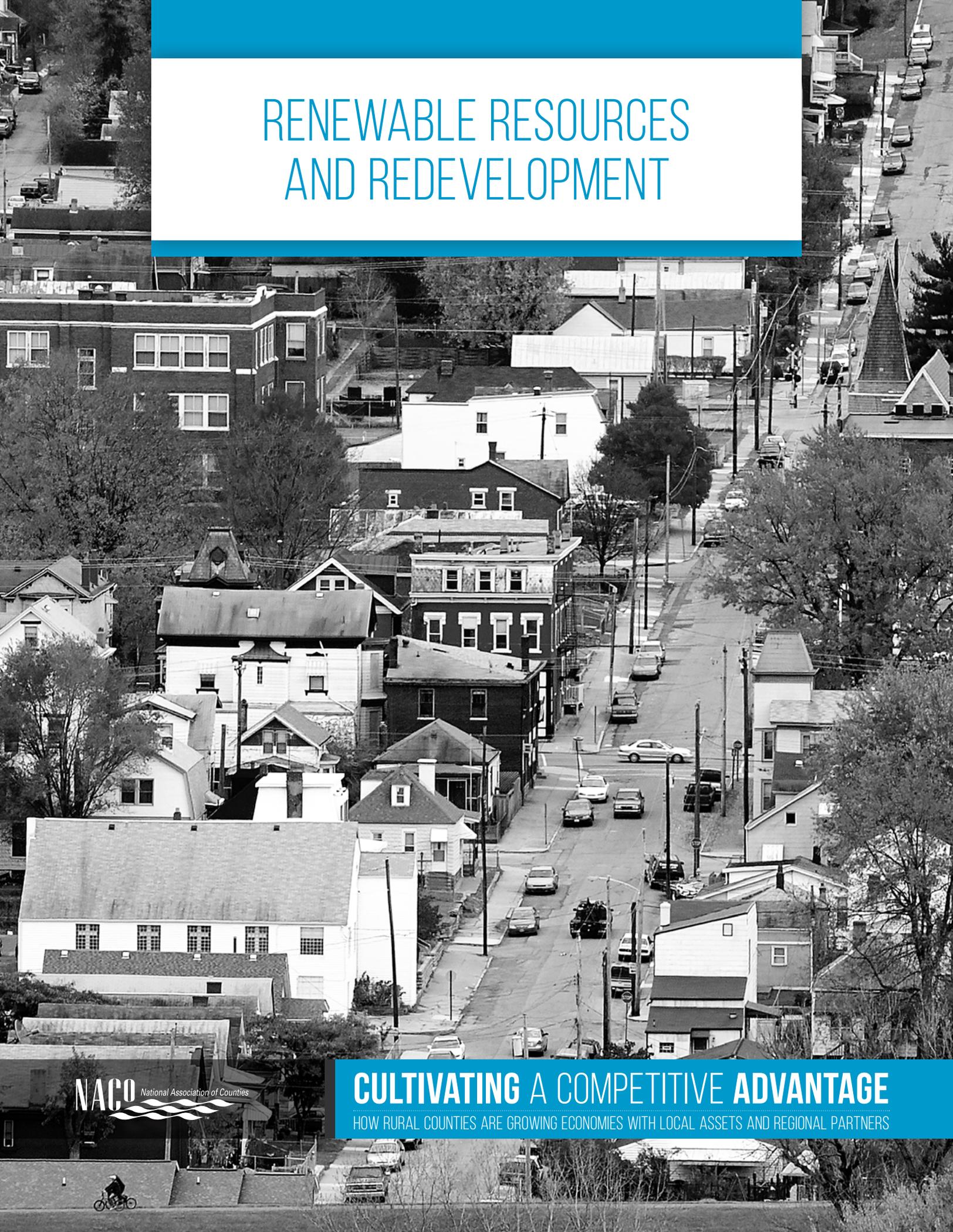
- By taking steps to maintain the viability of large-scale agriculture, Yolo County demonstrates leadership in growing rural America's contributions to the export economy.
- Educating new farmers is critical to ensuring the long-term prosperity of agricultural traditions in rural counties.
- Yolo County's support of the high-tech agricultural research cluster, large and small producers and other actors in the agriculture industry all demonstrate how the county works to ensure that the industry remains profitable and competitive.

## CONTACT

- Don Saylor, Supervisor, Yolo County  
530.757.5556 | [Steve.Rea@yolocounty.org](mailto:Steve.Rea@yolocounty.org)
- For more information:  
[www.caes.ucdavis.edu](http://www.caes.ucdavis.edu)  
[www.capayvalleyfarmshop.com](http://www.capayvalleyfarmshop.com)  
[www.landbasedlearning.org/farm-academy](http://www.landbasedlearning.org/farm-academy)

30 Ibid.

31 Interview with Jennifer Taylor, 4 Aug. 2014.

An aerial, black and white photograph of a town street. The street runs vertically through the center, with cars parked and driving. On either side are various buildings, including multi-story brick structures and smaller houses. Trees are scattered throughout the scene. A blue banner is at the top, and a white banner with blue text is in the middle. A blue banner is at the bottom with white text.

# RENEWABLE RESOURCES AND REDEVELOPMENT

**NACO** National Association of Counties

**CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

HOW RURAL COUNTIES ARE GROWING ECONOMIES WITH LOCAL ASSETS AND REGIONAL PARTNERS

# WELCOMING A WINDFALL: PROMOTING RENEWABLE ENERGY TO SPUR ECONOMIC GROWTH

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**BENTON COUNTY, IND.**

*POPULATION: 8,767*

## **SNAPSHOT**

Wind energy in Benton County, Ind. plays an important role in the local economy. In addition to providing a source of clean energy, Benton's suite of wind farms encourages job growth, increases tourism and significantly contributes to the county's revenue.

## **OPPORTUNITY**

After a 1996 expansion of the Benton County jail left the county with debt, county leaders spent the ensuing years seeking new ways to raise funds, leading to larger questions about how to diversify and grow the county's economic base. In the mid-2000s, the county conducted a study about the potential of wind energy to expand and strengthen the local economy. The study yielded promising results and led to the 2008 decision by county leaders to encourage the development of several new wind farms.

## **SOLUTION**

After conducting a two-year study on wind energy in the mid-2000s, officials in Benton County, Ind. decided to support the development of the state's first wind farms and passed a wind energy zoning ordinance in 2007 to guide wind farm development. Kelly Kepner, the county's Economic Development Director, explained that they were "amazed by the amount of wind available" in the region. The county worked with Orion Energy Group LLC to build the first facility in 2008, providing tax abatements as an incentive. By 2011, BP Alternative Energy and EDF Renewable Energy had developed two more facilities, with a total of 495 turbines across the three wind farms. This rural county of fewer than 9,000 residents became the first county in the state to host wind farms, and now holds among the highest single concentrations of wind turbines in the United States.

Since the wind farms have been in operation, their benefits have been numerous and far-reaching for Benton County. Kepner said that the most important piece was the ability to pay off county debt using tax revenues generated by the wind farms, while additional funds have been allotted to various projects across the county. Examples include improvements to the county's community center, new equipment for the fire department and \$2 million awarded to Benton County schools.

The wind farms have provided further benefits to county residents through new job opportunities and lower property taxes. All wind farms are also located on independently-owned farmland which allows the county to get multiple uses of the land. Landowners gain additional income through contracts with wind developers, offering farmers new sources of revenue while allowing farm operations to continue. Furthermore, Benton County created a new wind farm tourism center, established to educate visitors about wind energy and give them the opportunity to observe the wind turbines up close. Tours began in 2010, and Kepner said in June 2014, "This year has been the busiest year yet." From eliminating the county's debt to attracting more tourism to the community, the wind farms have proven to be a successful venture for Benton County that continues to yield positive economic results.

## IMPACTS

- Benton County used a year's worth of tax payments from wind farm developers to completely pay off its decade-old debt.<sup>32</sup>
- Benton County's three wind farms (Orion-Benton County Wind Farm, BP-Fowler Ridge Wind Farm and EDF-Hoosier Wind Farm) created hundreds of construction jobs during their installation and 95 permanent jobs in Benton County.<sup>33</sup>
- As of August 2014, there are 495 wind turbines erected on the three wind farms, which combined produce enough power annually for 250,000 homes. Additional turbines are planned for development in 2015.<sup>34</sup>

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Benton County's wind farms show that investing in renewable energy is not only about finding cleaner sources for electricity; it is also an effective strategy for creating new economic opportunities including more jobs, increased tourism and greater revenue for counties.

- By capitalizing on its wind potential, Benton County demonstrates the importance of rural counties using their natural resources and existing assets to promote economic growth and diversification.

## CONTACT

- Kelly Kepner, Economic Development Director, Benton County  
765.884.2080 | [kkepner@bentoncounty.in.gov](mailto:kkepner@bentoncounty.in.gov)
- For more information:  
[www.bentoncounty.in.gov/windfacts](http://www.bentoncounty.in.gov/windfacts)  
[www.bentoncounty.in.gov/tourbrochure.pdf](http://www.bentoncounty.in.gov/tourbrochure.pdf)



Photo credit: Benton County

*A tour group explores one of Benton County's wind farms.*

32 Interview with Kelly Kepner, 19 June 2014.

33 "Wind Farms." *Benton County*. [www.bentoncounty.in.gov/windfacts](http://www.bentoncounty.in.gov/windfacts)

34 "Project Detail – Hoosier." *EDF Renewable Energy*. [www.edf-re.com/projects/detail/hoosier/](http://www.edf-re.com/projects/detail/hoosier/); "Benton County Wind Farm." *Orion Renewable Energy Group LLC*. <http://orionrenewables.com/benton-county-wind-farm/>

# INVESTING IN SMART GRID TECHNOLOGIES IN HAWAII

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## MAUI COUNTY, HAWAII

*POPULATION: 160,202*

### SNAPSHOT

Maui County is partnering with the Japanese government to conduct a multi-year smart grid demonstration project, exploring new and more efficient ways to connect the county's electric grid with sources of renewable energy. These efforts promise to reduce the county's dependency on fossil fuels, increase its energy security and contribute to its vibrant energy sector.

### OPPORTUNITY

Maui County, Hawaii is located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, thousands of miles from any large land mass. Because all fossil fuels must be imported, the cost of energy in Hawaii is the highest in the nation. To address these energy concerns, Maui County has increased efforts to harness its bountiful sun, water and wind resources. Meanwhile, the Japanese government, which boasts a strong relationship with Maui County, has demonstrated its commitment to testing sustainable smart grid technologies, and in 2011, Japan selected Maui County as the site for a smart grid demonstration project.

### SOLUTION

In 2013, Maui County and Japan's New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization (NEDO) began the JUMPSmart-Maui demonstration project to test smart grid technologies in Maui County. The project, slated to run through March 2016, convenes a variety of American and Japanese partners including Japan's government, the engineering and electronics company Hitachi, Ltd., Mizuho Bank, Cyber Defense Institute, the State of Hawaii, Maui County and the Maui Economic Development Board (MEDB). Japan is funding the multi-million dollar project in Maui because the county's geography and energy challenges make it the perfect place to explore smart grid solutions. The project's main goal is to determine how to successfully integrate renewable energy into Maui's grid.

JUMPSmart-Maui includes several project components to support the development of Maui County's smart grid. One of these explores ways to optimize renewable energy use. Doug McLeod, the county's Energy Commissioner, explained that Maui's renewable energy sources produce surplus energy at certain times of the day that the local utility company cannot always use. To more efficiently access and utilize this excess energy, Maui County is testing specialized equipment linking renewable energy to utility sites and private homes, such as a solar power-utility system connection that stabilizes the electric grid when necessary.

As part of another project involving electric vehicles (EV), MEDB and Hitachi recruited over 200 EV owners and lessees to test special home-charging systems linked to local wind farms. These systems enable more efficient usage of energy; for example, when the charging system detects excess energy from wind farms at night, it automatically starts charging the vehicles. Hitachi also installed fast charging stations across the county to encourage EV use, and in the project's next phase Maui County will introduce additional fast chargers at county facilities.

MEDB President and CEO Jeanne Skog has already noticed positive results from the demonstration projects, observing, "With the fast charging stations, having an EV is more convenient and less expensive than fossil fuels." County leaders expect JUMPSmart-Maui's economic benefits to continue beyond the project's completion, and are looking ahead to produce a business model that will help Maui County incorporate the demonstration's results after its 2016 end date. The business model, to be developed over the next few years, will help the county capitalize on the economic potential of the smart grid research results and encourage the incorporation of the research into an enhanced smart grid sector within the county's energy industry.

## IMPACTS

- Japan's governmental organization, NEDO, is providing \$54 million for JUMPSmart-Maui, encouraging energy investments in Maui County and providing economic benefits for county residents.
- Hitachi, Ltd. and MEDB recruited over 200 electric vehicle owners to volunteer in JUMPSmart-Maui's electric charger demonstration project. These volunteers have enjoyed lowered energy costs due to the convenience of home chargers and public fast charging stations for their vehicles. The EV demonstration will extend to 500 volunteers in future phases of the project.
- By linking business and residential utility systems to the county's renewable energy sources, JUMPSmart-Maui is increasing energy efficiency across the county.
- Long-term goals of the project include: creating more stable energy infrastructure in Maui County; lowering energy costs for county residents; encouraging future smart grid technology projects in Maui County that will create business opportunities and new jobs; supporting an international exchange of knowledge between the United States and Japan; and generating a business model that can be applied to other smart grids worldwide.

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Maui County's collaboration with groups in Hawaii and Japan demonstrate that international partnerships are an effective way to pool resources in order to spur energy research, stabilize the energy industry and increase the resilience of the local economy.
- JUMPSmart-Maui's encouragement of economic growth through more efficient energy consumption and the emergence of a new industry sector indicate that exploring smart grid options is a smart investment for counties.

## CONTACT

- Doug McLeod, Energy Commissioner, Maui County  
808.270.7203 | [doug.mcleod@mauicounty.gov](mailto:doug.mcleod@mauicounty.gov)
- Jeanne Skog, President & CEO, Maui Economic Development Board  
808.875.2314 | [skog@medb.org](mailto:skog@medb.org)
- For more information: [www.jumpsmautmaui.com](http://www.jumpsmautmaui.com)



Photo credit: JUMPSmart-Maui Project

*Maui County residents examine a model of the JUMPSmart-Maui project at the Maui Electric Energy Fair.*

JUMPSmart-Maui brings together many American and Japanese partners from both the public and private sectors. These partners are: New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization; Hitachi Ltd.; Mizuho Corporate Bank; Cyber Defense Institute; Maui County; Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism; Maui Economic Development Board; Hawaii Natural Energy Institute / University of Hawaii at Manoa; University of Hawaii Maui College; Maui Electric Company / Hawaiian Electric Company; the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy; Advanced Energy Company USA; and HNU Energy.

# THERE'S GOLD IN THOSE HILLS: REVITALIZING BROWNFIELDS IN RURAL NEVADA

**NYE COUNTY, NEV.**

*POPULATION: 42,297*

## SNAPSHOT

A vast, sparsely populated county in southern Nevada, Nye County reinvigorated its economic prospects by cleaning up brownfields and preparing them for new uses. The county then leveraged its expertise to form a regional coalition to advance brownfields redevelopment and become a national model for brownfields remediation.

## OPPORTUNITY

Nye County is the largest county by land area in Nevada and the third-largest in the U.S., but is home to fewer than 43,000 residents, many of whom are concentrated in the unincorporated community of Pahrump. Approximately 98 percent of the county—18,000 square miles—is public lands, including the Nevada Test Site for nuclear testing and the proposed Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository. The county's history is largely rooted in the mining industry, which remains Nye County's dominant industry today. Other primary sectors include energy and defense, cyclical industries prone to boom-and-bust cycles. With a limited amount of developable land—much of which is potentially compromised by pollutants—the county pursued brownfields redevelopment to create new economic opportunities.



*Photo credit: Nye County*

*Before and after of a Nye County brownfields redevelopment site.*

## SOLUTION

Nye County's foray into brownfields redevelopment began in 2002 with a successful application to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Brownfields Program, under the leadership of Joni Eastley, who then served as county commissioner and now serves as Assistant County Manager. The county was awarded a \$200,000 Brownfields Assessment Pilot grant to assess 10 sites for reuse potential, including such diverse sites as former gold mines, abandoned commercial buildings, livestock show facilities and a portion of the Tonopah Airport. In 2005, the county won two more EPA Brownfields Assessment Grants, totaling \$400,000, to assess an additional 15 properties. These 25 assessed sites are owned by a range of groups, from counties and school districts to private organizations and non-profits.

A key component of Nye County's brownfields work was supporting new industries in the county—particularly in the renewable energy sector, which the county identified as a growth opportunity—and training people to fill jobs in these emerging industries. In 2008, Nye County expanded its brownfields program with a \$200,000 Brownfields Training Grant from EPA to prepare county residents for technician positions in the brownfields redevelopment and environmental services fields, in collaboration with a regional job training program. The county extended this program with another EPA grant in 2012. In total, over 130 residents graduated from these training programs, specializing in hazardous waste operations, emergency response training, environmental assessment, cleanup techniques, renewable energy and related subjects, and many are now employed in these fields.

To further expand its brownfields program, promote regional coordination and better leverage available funds, Nye County worked with four adjacent counties—Esmeralda, Lincoln and White Pine in Nevada, and Inyo in California—to form the Rural Desert Southwest Brownfields Coalition (RDSBC) in 2011; a sixth county, Mineral County, Nev., joined in 2014. Like Nye County, the other member counties are characterized by a history of mining and the associated contamination and blight, a very high percentage of land under federal control (97 to 99 percent of the land in each county) and difficulties in growing and attracting new businesses that will diversify the economic base and create new jobs for residents. Eastley commented, “We have learned that collaboration is our most powerful tool. We rally around the brownfield flag we hoisted and encourage others to join us in the fight for redevelopment.” The RSDBC has since used EPA grants and state grants to conduct additional assessments, site cleanups, area-wide planning, community outreach activities, monitoring, evaluation and other activities.

In addition to focusing on economic gains, Eastley noted that there are other benefits to brownfields redevelopment. “The mitigation of public health concerns and other quality of life issues are important. Real success in brownfields redevelopment hinges on initial goals and objectives that can't always be measured in dollars and cents.”

WE HAVE LEARNED THAT  
COLLABORATION IS OUR  
MOST POWERFUL TOOL.  
WE RALLY AROUND THE  
BROWNFIELD FLAG WE  
HOISTED AND ENCOURAGE  
OTHERS TO JOIN US IN THE  
FIGHT FOR REDEVELOPMENT.

**JONI EASTLEY**

*ASSISTANT NYE COUNTY MANAGER*

## IMPACTS

- Since 2002, Nye County has assessed approximately 50 properties for real or perceived contamination, which are now at various stages of planning, demolition, clean up and reuse. New uses of brownfield sites include a farmers market, the Tonopah Fire Station and a county administration building.
- Nye County worked with the Nevada Department of Environmental Protection and the Nevada State Legislature to issue statewide guidelines to address cleanup of former methamphetamine labs in Nevada.
- Within the brownfields assessment process, Nye County identified the opportunity to use brownfield sites for renewable energy development with a focus on solar power. The county pursued this strategy to take advantage of existing infrastructure, capitalize on the region's abundant sunshine, provide alternative energy and train the workforce to support a growing industry. Nye County has since awarded contracts to energy providers to install photovoltaic panels on remediated county-owned property.

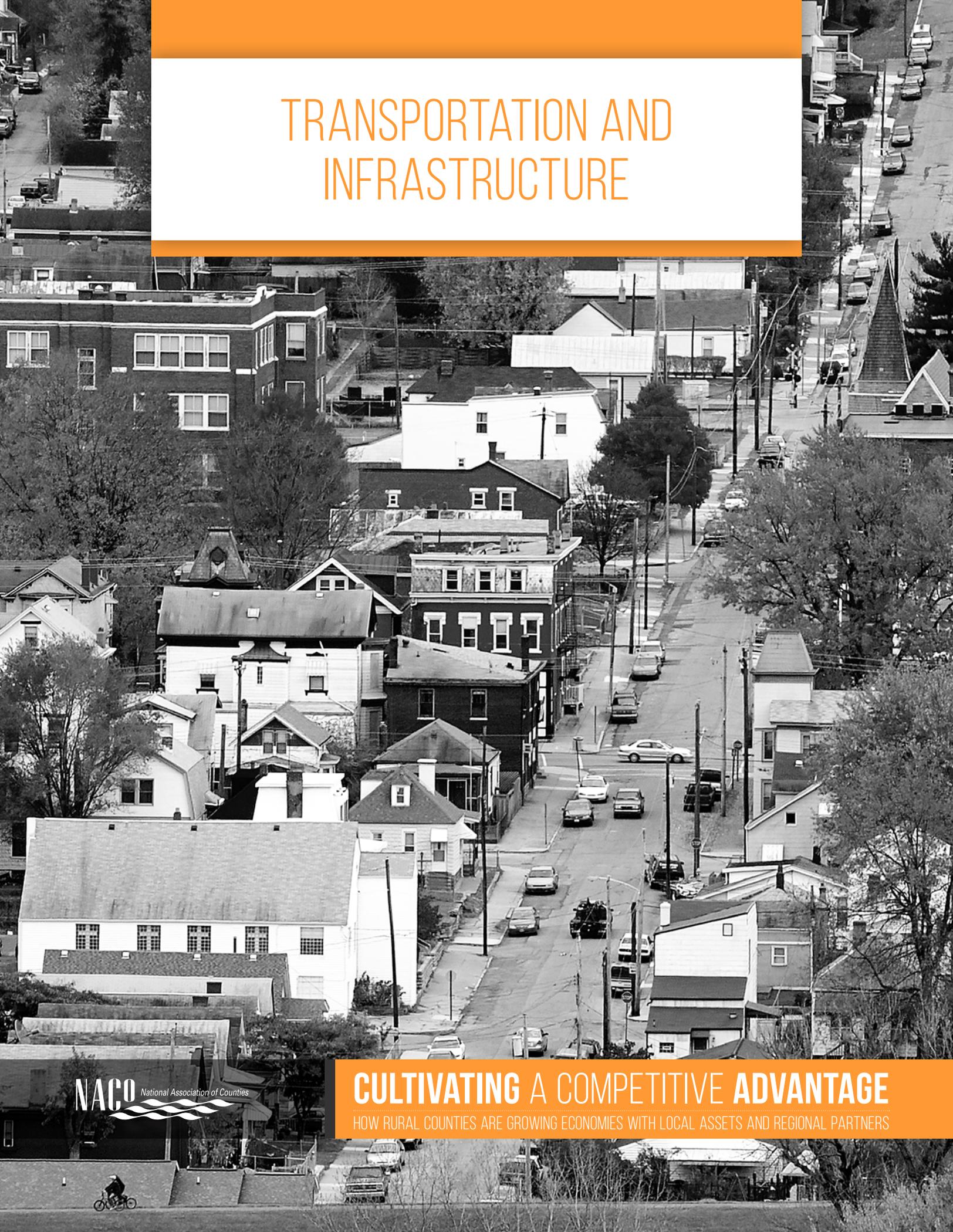
- Nye County used EPA grants in 2008 and 2012 to prepare residents for brownfields redevelopment-related jobs, training 134 county residents, of whom 54 are now working in industries related to brownfields and sustainability.
- Through its brownfields work, Nye County has gained expertise in many areas such as economic development, planning for hazardous waste disposal and attracting new industries like renewable energy. The county has emerged as a national model for rural brownfields redevelopment and readily shares resources, such as MOU templates and its county brownfields ordinance, with communities across the country.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Often thought of as an urban issue, brownfields redevelopment is an important tool that rural counties can use to make property available for new uses and clean up environmental hazards.
- By developing a proficiency in brownfields redevelopment, Nye County became a regional and national leader in rural brownfields remediation and is now empowered to share its expertise with peer counties.

## CONTACT

- Joni Eastley, Assistant County Manager, Nye County  
775.482.8189 | [jeastley@co.nye.nv.us](mailto:jeastley@co.nye.nv.us)
- For more information:  
[www.nyecounty.net/index.aspx?NID=647](http://www.nyecounty.net/index.aspx?NID=647)  
[www.rdsbc.org](http://www.rdsbc.org)

An aerial, black and white photograph of a town street. The street runs vertically through the center, with cars parked and driving. Buildings of various styles and heights line both sides of the street. Trees are scattered throughout the scene. The overall atmosphere is that of a small, established community.

# TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

**NACO** National Association of Counties

**CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

HOW RURAL COUNTIES ARE GROWING ECONOMIES WITH LOCAL ASSETS AND REGIONAL PARTNERS

# LEVERAGING REGIONAL ASSETS AND INTEGRATING LONG-TERM PLANNING FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH

**DINWIDDIE COUNTY, VA.**

POPULATION: 27,904

## SNAPSHOT

Dinwiddie County, Va. has capitalized on its geographic and infrastructure assets to grow into a hub for logistics and transportation-focused businesses. While promoting regional economic growth linked to a global economy, county leaders have also worked to protect rural landscapes and support small businesses, guided by integrated long-term planning and regional collaboration.

## OPPORTUNITY

In the mid-2000s, Dinwiddie County leaders, cognizant of the county's strategic geographic advantages near major multimodal transportation connections, began a focused effort to integrate economic development with long-range planning. The county sought to attract new businesses and diversify the economic base, while bolstering the agriculture industry, protecting the county's rural heritage and training workers for growing industries.

## SOLUTION

Covering 507 square miles with a population of 27,904, Dinwiddie County is one of Virginia's largest and most sparsely populated counties. Interstate 85 and U.S. 460 both cross the county, and Interstate 95 runs just east of the county line. The county has dual rail line access via both CSX and Norfolk Southern facilities, and is 80 miles from the Port of Virginia (the third largest container port on the East Coast).<sup>35</sup> In 2005, the Dinwiddie County Board of Supervisors initiated long-range planning activities dedicated to economic development by acquiring property, conducting economic development studies and pursuing infrastructure development. In many counties, planning and economic development activities may not be closely linked, but Dinwiddie County has made a concerted effort to integrate the two. The planning division is housed within the economic development department to ensure the staff work together.

The county recognizes that its strongest asset is its transportation infrastructure, and has thus worked to foresee and accommodate interest from companies seeking to locate in the county. Given its multimodal connections, Dinwiddie has been able to work with companies that have multiple domestic and international distribution patterns using both truck and rail. Two Amazon distribution facilities opened in Dinwiddie County and in neighboring Chesterfield County in 2012. Each facility is approximately one million square feet, and in total they represent a \$135 million



Photo credit: Flickr user Taber Andrew Boin (<https://flic.kr/p/48XfeX>)

*Dinwiddie County has leveraged its geographic advantages to attract new growth and support economic development in ways that are appropriate for a rural community.*

35 "2013 Key Performance Indicators." *Port of Virginia*. <http://goo.gl/aJmcv8>.

investment. The counties see the two facilities as regional benefits, noting that both locations employ residents from both counties and bring economic impacts to the entire region. Amazon was initially attracted to the area for its proximity to transportation connections, the sites' readiness and the county's ability to align land development, infrastructure and workforce development.

Because of its rural nature and small population, Dinwiddie County has focused on regional partnerships to position itself for greater returns on investment. As part of the eight-county Gateway Region in Virginia, Dinwiddie regularly collaborates with surrounding localities to partner in business attraction strategies and grow regional clusters, such as the burgeoning advanced manufacturing cluster. Dinwiddie County also works at the regional level to prepare the local workforce to meet the demands of new businesses locating in the county, particularly in the advanced manufacturing and logistics fields. For example, as Amazon finalized plans to locate in the county, Dinwiddie participated in collaborative efforts of regional agencies involved in workforce development to strategize how to meet Amazon's needs for 1,300 new hires. Dinwiddie later organized and implemented hiring events on behalf of Amazon and set up a technology center to provide application assistance, enabling local workers—many of whom lacked broadband service at home—to complete applications.

Finally, agriculture remains a thriving industry in Dinwiddie County. County leaders are working to link its high agricultural output (corn and soybeans are its major crops) with its growing logistics industry, noting that the county is well-positioned to use its natural assets to grow the food processing sector and ship products around the world. To protect the county's rural heritage and support long-time farmers, Dinwiddie County passed a cluster zoning ordinance in 2010 aimed at preserving farmland and directing growth to areas that can accommodate it. The county's Planning and Community Development Chief, Tammie Collins, noted that business attraction efforts have been consciously focused on keeping industrial development clustered in the northern part of the county where infrastructure is already in place. Furthermore, the county places equal emphasis on supporting small and mid-size businesses, providing technical assistance, training, financial incentives and other support to local entrepreneurs.

DINWIDDIE COUNTY IS FORTUNATE TO BE AT A PRIME INTERSECTION FOR MULTIMODAL MARKET ACCESS, WITH HIGHWAY AND RAIL CONNECTIONS AND GOOD ACCESS TO THE PORT OF VIRGINIA. WE HAVE WORKED TO THINK STRATEGICALLY ABOUT OUR PLANNING ACTIVITIES TO PLAY OFF THESE ASSETS AND BRING QUALITY ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUR COMMUNITIES.

**HARRISON MOODY**

*DINWIDDIE COUNTY SUPERVISOR*

## IMPACTS

- Since 2013, the county has seen nearly \$80 million in new private investment and added nearly 300 new jobs.<sup>36</sup>
- In 2013, the county secured a \$150,000 grant from the Cameron Foundation to assist the Town of McKenney in developing a strategic plan for economic development, aligned with countywide goals to revitalize the community and support local business growth.
- Also in 2013, Dinwiddie County was awarded a \$650,000 grant from the Virginia Tobacco Commission to investigate the feasibility of developing an intermodal facility in the county.
- The county has conducted numerous business assistance workshops, including business marketing, workforce development, agri-business development and entrepreneurship.

36 Interview with Tammie Collins and Morgan Ingram, Dinwiddie County Economic Development, 22 August 2014.

## TAKE-AWAYS

- Dinwiddie County took stock of its geographic, infrastructure and natural advantages, and has leveraged them to attract new growth and support economic development in ways that are appropriate for a rural community.
- By integrating the county's economic development and planning divisions, Dinwiddie County leaders have ensured that business recruitment activities are aligned with the county's land use and infrastructure plans.
- Dinwiddie County has recognized the importance of attracting major corporations to take advantage of the global and domestic shipping opportunities available in the county, while simultaneously working to support smaller local businesses in the community.

## CONTACT

- Tammie J. Collins, Chief of Planning and Community Development, Dinwiddie County  
804.265.1226 | [tcollins@dinwiddieva.us](mailto:tcollins@dinwiddieva.us)
- Harrison Moody, Supervisor, Dinwiddie County  
804.469.4500 | [hmoody@dinwiddieva.us](mailto:hmoody@dinwiddieva.us)

# COUNTY COLLABORATION RESTORES RAIL SERVICE TO RURAL MINNESOTA

## MINNESOTA COUNTIES OF CARVER, REDWOOD, RENVILLE, SIBLEY AND YELLOW MEDICINE

*COMBINED POPULATION: 151,687*

### SNAPSHOT

Five counties in southern Minnesota have partnered to reinvest in a regional short line railroad. Thanks to this regional collaboration to fund infrastructure improvements, agriculture-based communities along the rail line have reaped the economic benefits.

### OPPORTUNITY

In 1982, Carver, Sibley and Redwood counties formed the Minnesota Valley Regional Rail Authority (MVRRA) with the purpose of reopening a 94-mile Class III short line railroad track that was originally built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, acquired by the Chicago and North Western Transportation Company in 1960 and later abandoned in 1982. Crossing some of the most productive farmland in Minnesota, the condition of the rail line deteriorated as it went unused over the years. Several railroad companies attempted to restore service to the line without success.

### SOLUTION

In 2002, the MVRRA—which had grown to include the five counties of Carver, Redwood, Renville, Sibley and Yellow Medicine—succeeded in securing funding to rehabilitate the track, with \$4.8 million from the state, \$1 million from the federal government and the Minnesota Rail Shippers and MVRRA each providing \$600,000.<sup>37</sup> Minnesota Prairie Line, Inc. (MPL), a wholly owned subsidiary of the Twin Cities & Western Railroad, became the operator of the line. The 2002 project began with improving the rail infrastructure and resulted in reestablished rail service on the short line. MPL began using the track to transport a variety of agricultural products including fertilizer, butter, wood, soybeans and corn, and the renewed rail service provided agricultural companies and farmers with access to critical transportation infrastructure.

While the 2002 phase was an important catalyst for restoring service, Renville County Commissioner and MVRRA Chair Bob Fox explained that by 2009, continued improvements were needed. The MVRRA set a new goal of fortifying the track to support trains travelling at 25 miles per hour, and received a \$2.5 million grant from the federal government as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and \$5 million from the state of Minnesota to fund the project. Inter-county collaboration was crucial for establishing and pursuing the new goal. The line's east end restoration was finished in November 2012, and as of summer 2014 a total of 34 miles of track had been rehabilitated to withstand speeds of 25 miles per hour, as outlined in the 2009 plan. These improvements have increased service reliability and decreased transit times, and the enhanced activities of MPL and MVRRA have created jobs and generated economic activity by inserting funds into the local economy to facilitate the rehabilitation.

Furthermore, the restored rail service has brought economic benefits to the localities along the rail as well as the region and state. A 2009 study found that the rail line contributed \$3.2 million in output in the area economy in 2008.<sup>38</sup> Commissioner Fox and MVRRA Administrator and Redwood County Economic Development Specialist Julie Rath noted that several agricultural companies—dealing in products like salt, sugar, butter and ethanol—

37 Tuck, Brigid and Linscheid, Neil. "The Economic Contribution of the Minnesota Valley Regional Rail Authority Rail Line." Jan. 2010. <http://bit.ly/1qC34ND>

38 Ibid.



*Photo credit: Minnesota Valley Regional Rail Authority*

*Workers rehabilitate the MVRRA short line track.*

have established new facilities along the short line, taking advantage of the proximity to rail for shipping their products. Towns across the five-county region are seeing economic revitalization of their agriculture industries as a result of increased shipping opportunities made possible by access to the restored railroad.

Winthrop, in Sibley County, is a prime example, with an ethanol plant expansion, new fertilizer facility and several other new companies moving in since the railroad project began. Rath explained, “Other towns that don’t have rail access are dwindling away, while our 16 communities in our five counties are still viable because agriculture producers can still remain competitive and ship products out to market on either coast or to the Mississippi River for global distribution.” Fox and Rath also underlined the importance of the five-county partnership, explaining that a regional effort was critical for carrying out the transportation enhancements that have led to strengthened, more resilient local economies.

Moving forward, MVRRA’s priorities include repairing the remaining 60 miles and improving bridges along the track. An additional goal is filling train cars to capacity: since the entire short line cannot yet withstand faster speeds, trains currently do not transport as much volume as they can physically hold. When the track and bridges are restored and trains can be filled to capacity, shipping will be more cost-efficient, the rail cars will be able to link more efficiently with Class I rail lines and more communities along the railroad will reap the economic benefits associated with the rehabilitated line.

## IMPACTS

- In 2008, MPL and MVRRA directly employed 15 people and indirectly created six additional jobs through spending.<sup>39</sup>
- Operating the short line contributed \$1.4 million in labor income to the local economy in 2008 while shipping activity contributed \$3.2 million in economic output.<sup>40</sup>
- From 2007 to 2012, Minnesota’s Gross State Product (GSP) grew more than the national average in rail-dependent industries:<sup>41</sup>
  - Minnesota agriculture grew 9.4 percent per year, compared to 3.1 percent growth for U.S. agriculture.
  - Minnesota manufacturing grew 4.3 percent per year, compared to 1.9 percent for U.S. manufacturing.
- Arlington and Winthrop, served by the MVRRA’s Minnesota Prairie Line, are two examples of towns that experienced business expansion thanks to the rail rehabilitation.<sup>42</sup>

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Munnich, Lee and Horan, Tom. “The Value of Freight Economy in Minnesota.” Sept. 20, 2013. <http://bit.ly/13khehx>

42 Ibid.

## TAKE-AWAYS

- The MVRRA is made possible through inter-county collaboration. The five-county partnership demonstrates the power of regional alliances to strengthen critical transportation systems.
- The short line rail redevelopment initiative underscores the importance of investing in rail infrastructure for rural counties seeking to bolster their agriculture sector and attract companies that rely on rail for product shipment.

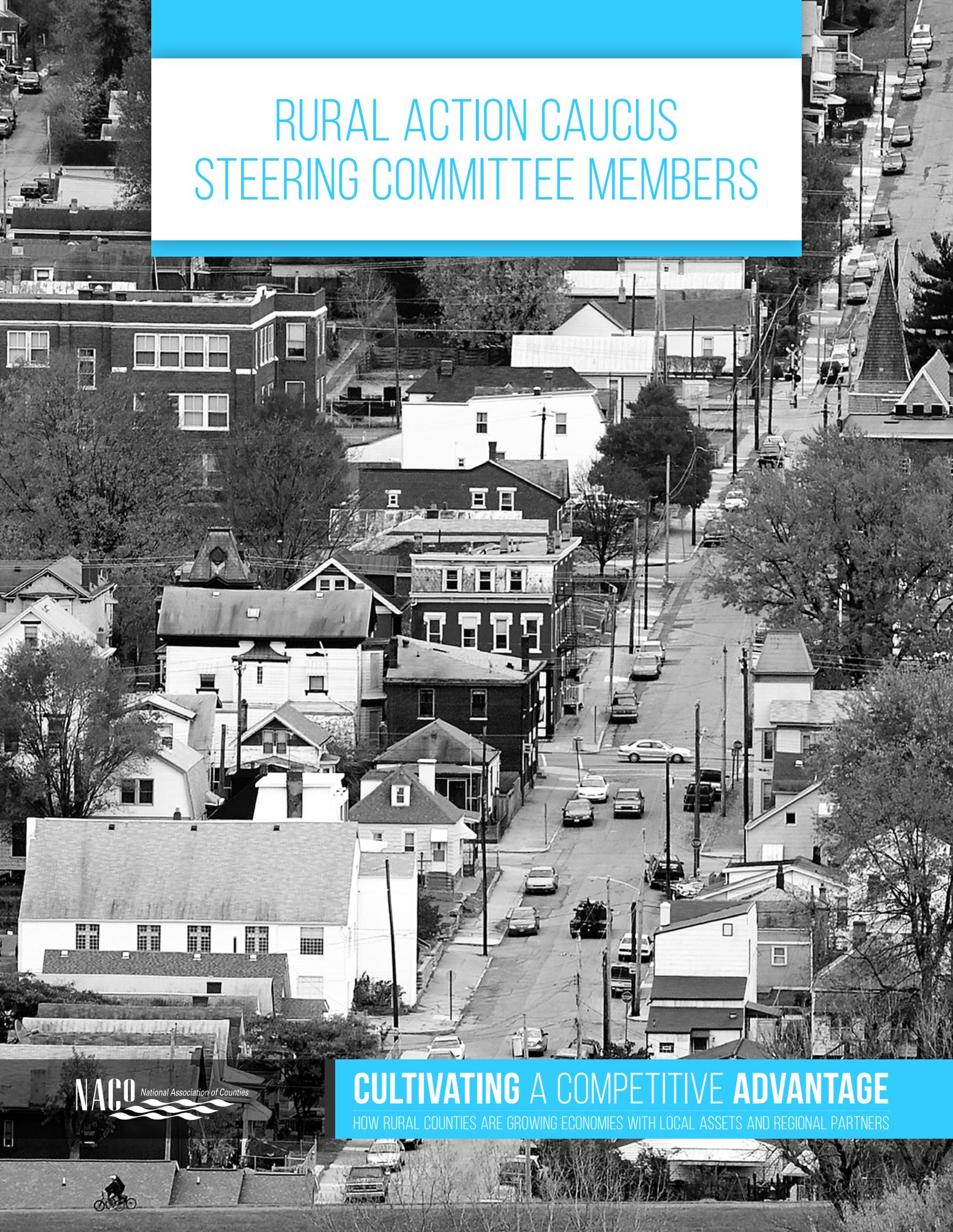
## CONTACT

- Bob Fox  
Commissioner, Renville County | Chair, Minnesota Valley Regional Rail Authority  
320.894.2022 | [Bob\\_F@co.renville.mn.us](mailto:Bob_F@co.renville.mn.us)
- Julie Rath  
Executive Director, Redwood Area Development Corporation | Administrator, Minnesota Valley Regional Rail Authority  
507.637.4084 | [julie@redwoodfalls.org](mailto:julie@redwoodfalls.org)
- For more information: [www.mvrra.org](http://www.mvrra.org)

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- **Asset-Based Economic Development: Building Sustainable Small and Rural Communities** (<http://bit.ly/1rVRjCn>). 2012. ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities.
- **Asset-Based Economic Development in Rural Communities** (<http://bit.ly/1E5wcoE>). 2013. Kathy Nothstine.
- Center for Rural Entrepreneurship: [www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/](http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/).
- Citizens' Institute on Rural Design: [www.rural-design.org](http://www.rural-design.org).
- **Defying the Odds: Sustainability in Small and Rural Places** (<http://bit.ly/1tklFla>). 2013. ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities.
- **Downtown Revitalization** (<http://1.usa.gov/1ziJoqg>). 2014. United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Library.
- **Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities** (<http://bit.ly/1nT1QBM>). 2010. ICMA and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Sustainable Communities.
- Rural Policy Research Institute: [www.rupri.org](http://www.rupri.org).
- **Small Urban and Rural Livability Center (SURLC)** (<http://bit.ly/1DCfcv8>). Western Transportation Institute.
- **Supporting Sustainable Rural Communities** (<http://1.usa.gov/105SNCh>). 2011. Partnership for Sustainable Communities.
- **Sustainable Rural Downtowns Case Studies** (<http://1.usa.gov/1yJwmit>). United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development.
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An aerial, black and white photograph of a town street. The street runs vertically through the center, lined with various styles of houses, including multi-story brick buildings and smaller, single-story homes. Several cars are parked along the street, and a few are in motion. The background shows more buildings and trees, suggesting a densely populated area. The overall tone is historical and community-oriented.

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**CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

HOW RURAL COUNTIES ARE GROWING ECONOMIES WITH LOCAL ASSETS AND REGIONAL PARTNERS

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## **ABOUT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

The National Association of Counties (NACO) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACO assists America's 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient counties. NACO promotes sound public policies, fosters county solutions and innovation, promotes intergovernmental and public-private collaboration and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACO, [www.NACO.org](http://www.NACO.org).

## **ABOUT THE RURAL ACTION CAUCUS**

NACO's Rural Action Caucus (RAC) is a bipartisan coalition of county officials to serve as the voice for America's rural counties before Congress and the Administration. Since 1997, RAC has addressed critical federal, state and local issues affecting rural counties. RAC also serves as a conduit for technical and programmatic assistance with the private sector. For more information about RAC, visit [www.NACO.org/RAC](http://www.NACO.org/RAC).

*\*Note: all population statistics are based on the 2013 Census.*

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To request copies of this publication, please contact:

- Jen Horton  
Program Manager  
National Association of Counties  
202.942.4274 | [Jhorton@naco.org](mailto:Jhorton@naco.org)



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