COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION TOOLKIT
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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This toolkit provides guiding principles, best practices, strategies, and distilled insights into community and economic development for individuals and organizations that want to make their community America’s Best. The purpose is to provide the next great American community with an easy-to-read handbook that distills information into core competency areas and offers a glimpse into strategies for implementation. This toolkit is a starting point that only scratches the surface. It is up to your community to take this information and tailor it to local conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Rural communities create the backbone that supports our nation. They are the engines driving the United States toward a prosperous future. Despite their importance, small towns are often struggling and lack important resources that are more accessible to larger urban and suburban communities. Rural towns face many challenges such as empty storefronts, food deserts, shrinking populations and youth outmigration. When we focus upon the challenges, however, it is easy to overlook the heart of the community: the families and friends who flock to local fundraisers; the neighbors who show support through handwritten letters to the local newspaper; the small town pride that drives every high school football game; and the cash mobs organized for beloved but struggling local business. Small towns and rural communities have the tight-knit, family-friendly atmosphere that enchants locals and visitors alike.

To create a thriving community that elevate these charms and tackle the challenges, local leaders must mobilize at the on-the-ground level to build the wealth of the region. This does not just only mean creating jobs or increasing financial assets, though those are helpful and admirable steps. Community revitalization also means developing the local workforce, improving the general health of the town, preserving natural assets like clean air and water, and strengthening social connections. Rural communities may not be ‘rich’ in the traditional sense, but they have other unique and untapped assets that can, when leveraged properly, create a healthy and prosperous community.

Proactive communities want to build their region’s overall prosperity. To achieve this, they must turn toward community and economic development strategies that make

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measurable differences through taking long-term, strategic actions. Many avenues exist to move toward community and economic development. Scholars and individuals aim to compartmentalize the two activities. However, this toolkit acknowledges that economic and community development are interdependent—both seek to increase the vitality and quality of living in a region.

**WHAT IS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?**

Community development is a process in which leaders take action around problems in a community and create solutions to improve the public wellbeing. These actions are designed to improve the region as a place to both work and live. Many forms of community development processes, often with overlapping objectives, can create healthy change. Common objectives include building locally owned and retained wealth, empowering community members by developing leaders, and enacting practices that improve the quality of life of all citizens within the region. Effective community development is a locally initiated and supported process that is driven by, planned for, and inclusive of the entire community. We recognize that community and economic development activities can take place at regional, statewide, and national levels, but for the purpose of this toolkit to directly support the participants of America’s Best Communities Prize, we will focus on local level initiatives and strategies.

**WHAT IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?**

Economic development is the creation of wealth and financial health of a community, typically in the form of job development and creation that is also measurable through secondary improvements to quality of life. Many types of organizations and entities, both public and private, engage in economic development activities. This toolkit will focus on best practices that help build solid economic development foundations on which communities can build and grow.
COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Community revitalization and economic development are long-term processes. Each community is complex, multi-dimensional, and requires a unique approach to development. Organized into six linear steps, the following is a general process that can be used in community revitalization and economic development processes:

**Step 1: Organize**

Community development projects need strong project management steps to succeed. Form action teams, create action plans, set the timeline, draft a communication system, draft a decision-making protocol, and create a rough project budget.

**Convene People**

Convening community members is typically a very difficult role that few enjoy playing; however, it is also one of the most important. During the community development process, an individual or organization starts with a concept around which they want to mobilize support for implementation. Usually, when an idea is suggested, not all the essential decision makers are in the room. Therefore, the necessary step to take is to convene a group, or multiple groups, and get the right people to the table. Especially in rural communities, individuals wear a number of hats, so convening a group of key players can take time to orchestrate. If the project is one that tends to make community members on both sides passionate, be sure to have the group meet at a neutral setting with an agenda, facilitator, and key decisions.

Check out [Gather: The Art and Science of Effective Convening](#) from the Rockefeller Foundation.

**Define Goals**

Work with your community team to identify the scope of the project and what it will entail, and list the project elements including definition, outcomes, scope,
By setting goals for the vision, you are outlining a road map required to do the work. Not only will establishing these goals help reduce project delays, frustration and changes, but they will also help team members meet their shared goals and the community to make progress towards the shared vision in a successful, positive way.

**Understand the Community Roles You Need to Start and Sustain Momentum**

- **Issue Advocates** – Many of the descriptions of “leaders” are of people who come up with the big issues or ideas and who turn our attention to new issues or opportunities.
- **Conveners** – People in this role take the lead in getting people together when those issues need to be discussed. They set up the meeting space, get the word out to folks, and organize action teams.
- **Facilitator/Negotiators** – These are the people who make connections between what needs to be done and who can help to make it a reality. They help figure out where the hang-ups are and move things along while forging agreement on action steps.
- **Implementation Champions** – These champions are the “get it done” types that sustain the momentum. They are there for the long haul encouraging others to keep going to reach the goal. Most Implementation Champions do not consider themselves leaders. They may not come, or will stop coming to early meetings, until they see actionable points.

**Complete a Stakeholder Analysis**

This is used to categorize stakeholders, identify different needs and values of those individuals or organizations, and plan for how to work with different groups. Invest time assessing the position and importance of each stakeholder. Decide which are most important to maintain continued communication. Be sure to note any surprising stakeholders that have a connection to the project, especially ones that might be in opposition. Have the lead organization and convener work to engage stakeholders across all levels especially economically marginalized community members.

**Create a Common Message**
While you will be tailoring your message to demonstrate the value of your community revitalization projects to the key stakeholders, it is essential to have a consistent message to describe your community project. Work with your community team to identify the key points (who, what, where, etc.) and common terminology. It is easy to get wrapped up in jargon or superfluous terms to describe how fantastic and well-developed a project is—especially when you have been working on it for a while—but make sure to distill down to the key points and keep it relatable to your stakeholder audience.

**Step 2: Research**

Research is often the overlooked step as people become excited about an idea. It is vital to do some thorough exploration around new projects, even simple ones.

**Collect Information**

There is no limit to the types of community projects to undertake, but there is some information you should have discovered to ensure success is achieved. Research should be done on required permitting, insurance, project design, materials, specifications, implementation costs and procedures, maintenance, sustainability, and so on. Assess where you are in the community. How much momentum had there been in prior years around your project or similar ones? Look at what trends are impacting your community. If you are working among businesses, look at what products are sold where, to whom, and in what volume.

**Adapt Goals**

If you leave the research phase without making any additions, changes, or updates to your project, you have not effectively researched your project. While doing your information collection, you are trying to unearth unexpected costs, issues, or hurdles. Adapt your goals as you learn more about the in-depth details of your project.

**Understand Market Demand**
When looking for successful market demand, a project needs sources of long-term structural growth versus short-term cyclical fluctuations. It is easy to get wrapped up in the impact of the project and forget how to make it sustainable. Evaluate who among your stakeholders in your project can help understand market demands. Interview some of these individuals or organizations to understand what they want from your project.

Consider the following questions:

• What market trends are occurring in the sector that encourages us to consider further exploration?
• Is there existing market demand?
• Does the consumer market need to be educated about a product or service?
• How much of a priority is local purchasing?
• What are the key demand drivers for this project’s sector/industry growth?
• Is this project meeting any unmet market needs?
• What is the growth potential? What are specific key opportunities?

Step 3: Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is the process that brings together all sectors of a community to identify problems, evaluate changing conditions, and build collective approaches to improve the quality of life in a community. A community must set clear and attainable goals and objectives to achieve its desired outcomes. Without a comprehensive economic development strategy, a community lacks the strategic vision to set priorities in a way that builds long-term, sustainable economic growth.

Community members may not all agree on the elements driving a thriving community, but most can agree they want a flourishing economy with living wage jobs, safe neighborhoods, successful schools, and accessible food, health care, and housing. Many communities, urban and rural alike, have gone through strategic planning processes – expensive ones. Yet, those plans end up on a shelf collecting dust. Especially in community-driven processes, avoiding unnecessary expenditures of effort and money is important to keeping momentum. How do you create a strategic plan that not only acts as
a guiding star, but is also used frequently throughout your project process? Strategic planning requires making hard decisions and is only useful when it affects actions, not just defines good intentions.

**Set a Vision**

Equally important to the strategic plan is the process itself. The strategic planning process starts with a vision. If one community leader’s north star is directing the group toward the east and the other to the west, there are going to be issues. Communities must articulate their vision and build on their own history, strengths, and creativity to achieve their vision. Your vision is the dream for the community—a broad, inspiring statement that is understood and shared by members of the community. Pithy examples include safe streets and neighborhoods.

**Define the Mission**

Once you have a goal in mind, it is time to define the mission. This statement is an outcome-oriented, concrete goal that specifies that “what” and the “why.” This is still a broad statement but is slightly more action oriented. How will your community project influence the wealth of the area? Will it build local infrastructure, create a more unified community, enhance the natural assets of a region, etc.? For instance, a mission statement might be, “Create a thriving, lively downtown core through development of jobs, mixed-use housing, and historical preservation.”

**Lay Down the Objectives**

The next step is to break the project into objectives. This is where your community team starts to delve into details and look at precisely what will be accomplished and when. Brainstorm multiple ways for your community project to be achieved. This might reveal creative strategies and unique ways to involve other stakeholders.

Myriad strategic planning resources are available. Here are just a few to check out:  
*A Guide to Strategic Planning for Rural Communities*  
*The Community Visioning and Strategic Planning Handbook*
Step 4: Implement
You have arrived at the implementation phase! Now is the time to transition your plans into actions. This can be relatively simple or extremely complex depending on the project. Implementation includes managing the project, issues, and people.

Start the Program
Bring those Implementation Champions to the forefront because this is where the shovel hits the dirt. Aim to spend money like it was out of your own pocket. Be conscious of using every resource wisely. Keep track of how you spend money through organizing receipts, listing expenses, and showing who paid for what. This is mandatory when you are working with money through a grant or through an opportunity like the America’s Best Communities Prize.

Get Quick Success
When you were planning your project, you selected several key milestones. To build momentum, make sure to start off on the right foot and prioritize the early wins, so begin with a small portion of the project that has a good chance of being visible and successful given the community’s talents and assets. When you begin by demonstrating that you are on the path to success, more community members will be interested in pushing you forward.

Track the Action Items
Make sure a person or organization is accountable for each project task. It is important to give those people authority to make and enact decisions. When your team comes together to discuss progress, these are the people who will report out. Set team meetings to discuss what actions are occurring. Creating a month-to-month Gantt chart can help create a visual representation of the actions and key milestones. Naturally, some delays may occur so the Gantt chart of actions needs to be responsive and updated regularly.

Keep the Public Involved
Celebrate the big and little successes publicly. Continue to keep community members informed and involved. Tell the story of your project through different outlets like press releases or social media. Stakeholders may be watching what happens from afar so aim to keep them involved and aware of team progress through various communication media.

**Step 5: Evaluate and Measure**

Evaluation is the process that critically reviews a program for the purpose of analyzing information, judging outcome success rates, and improving program effectiveness. While it can be time and resource intensive, it is an invaluable tool for demonstrating program impact, which is vital for funding, team confidence, community buy-in, and marketing efforts. Good evaluations take planning and monitoring throughout the process. It is difficult to go back to assess a project after completion, so proactively establishing which indicators to track, setting a procedure for how data is collected, and what that timeline will look like can ensure success.

Economic development evaluation is complicated at best, and poorly understood by most. Several difficulties arise when evaluating economic development interventions including:

- Identifying changes due to initiative or unrelated factors
- Determining the difference between process and impact evaluations
- Assessing programmatic costs and benefits both monetary and non-monetary
- Considering political influences
- Organizing timelines and scope

When evaluating an initiative it is important to understand the context of evaluations. A few questions to consider when developing evaluation tools are:

- What is the specific area of intervention?
- What are the goals and realistic outcomes expected?
- What type of evaluation or measurement is best for this initiative?
- What have other communities done in similar circumstances?
What lessons have been learned from the initiative?

Contextualizing your evaluation methods and practices to local or regional needs and characteristics is an absolute must. However, there is a breadth of information to be derived from other communities. Conduct appreciative inquiries to research similar initiatives in other communities. These can inform and build a framework in which to grow and expand. Evaluation is an iterative process and must be continually tweaked to reflect programmatic and community dynamics that change and influence outcomes.

**Measure Success**

Take time to review the extent to which the program is achieving the outcomes set during the visioning process. How did the process improve forms of wealth? What changes have resulted? Who will be responsible for the reporting, collection and evaluation of data?

**Review Program**

Whether this is the first or fiftieth community project that a team has worked on together, team members always need to have a critical eye for possible improvements to the program. When evaluating, the results should identify the honest strengths and weaknesses, as well as identify the limitations of the program. Instead of just declaring the community project a success or failure, look in-depth at what went well and what could be improved upon, record these items, and share them with future groups. Each community project is unique to the individuals and circumstances involved, but the higher the quality of evaluation, the more accurate the results and the more confident your team can be when presenting its finding.

**Track Group Learning**

In the midst of a community project, there is often an ‘in the moment’ focus on achieving outcomes and reacting to day-to-day events that make it difficult to track important learning. As a result, writing down important details, shifts, and adaptations during a community project is essential.
Step 6: Celebrate and Appreciate

This is the most omitted step of community projects. This community project may be the first time a segment of the population or a group of organizations have worked collaboratively. It is important to recognize the organizations, individuals, funders, stakeholders, and volunteers who helped make the project achievements possible. A celebration not only marks the closure of a project, but it is also an opportunity to engage the community.

Recognize the Successes

Take opportunities throughout the project to address small and milestone successes. Not only does this keep the positive energy building within the team, but it also raises awareness about the hard work, dedication, and achievement in the community.

Always Thank Your Volunteers

Use every chance you have to acknowledge and appreciate the community members involved. This does not have to be through an elaborate, expensive gala but can be a mix of small but thoughtful actions. Plan a small volunteer award ceremony or potluck, address volunteers at a community event, post a group photo on Facebook, send a thank you gift or card, write a letter to the newspaper editor, post appreciation event photos, or comment on a website or on social media.

Invest a Little Extra

That extra bit of effort and personalization not only demonstrates great volunteer management on the part of the community team, but also creates stronger social capital and can create a dedicated pool of local volunteers.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES & BEST PRACTICES

Now that the process steps have been outlined, the following section will walk through the guiding principles and best practices that your community can follow to achieve strong results for your community revitalization and economic development projects.

Place-Based

Place-based economic development creates jobs and small businesses that are attached to a specific community. Having a place-based strategy is important because these jobs build on existing local assets, focus on locally driven opportunities when other economic development strategies are restricted, and are generally much harder to outsource. Place-based economic opportunities may arise in sectors like local food production, tourism development, outdoor recreation, natural resource programs, and local artisan craft production. Not only does place-based strategy improve multiple forms of capital, but it also locks in jobs that cannot be exported to other areas and provides alternative avenues for rural areas struggling with a loss of a natural resource based industry.

When these jobs remain in the community, an indirect effect on the community occurs as well. Opportunities for new partnerships with local organizations, establishment of living wage jobs, engagement with the broader community, and positive momentum for business development in the area may occur. When these business opportunities are locally owned, controlled, and targeted for investment, wealth remains in that community.

Best Practices can do the following:

1. Engage the community through outreach, organizing, planning, and visioning.
   a. Cultivate a process rooted in the needs, strengths, and goals of all community members by understanding what value and impact strategies will have on different segments of the region as well as what the communities want.
   b. Engage marginalized populations throughout the community engagement process – remember, inclusivity is key.

2. Cultivate place-based leadership development.
a. Reach out to organizations that provide leadership training to develop new leaders and improve existing leaders in an equal setting.

b. Find ways for leaders, young and old, to practice their skills and participate in various community programs while instilling a sense of ownership and responsibility.

3. Understand existing assets in your area in order to build on them.
   a. Evaluate community assets based on an appreciative inquiry approach.
   b. Use the spider diagram to evaluate the different forms of wealth and invite discussion.

**Locally-Driven**

It is essential to ensure that the community has a stake and voice in their development. Community members and stakeholders can easily become frustrated or even actively oppose a project if they have not had the opportunity to become involved. A stakeholder is any person, group, or organization/agency that has a positive or negative interest or investment in the project; they are also those who can affect its approval or implementation. Stakeholders include people who will benefit from the project’s success, as well as the naysayers who might prefer that the project does not reach completion. It is vital to understand who these people are in the community in order to be successful. If the project is community driven, the local community members will be aware of those who may be impacted. Projects must be both visible and accessible to local citizens in order to build support, awareness and trust. To take this a step further, successful projects often are led from within a community rather than by an outside organization. When a project is locally driven, there is greater accountability among members of the community because they feel a sense of ownership, pride, investment and motivation.

1. Identify, prioritize, and engage project stakeholders. Have all current project team members gain awareness of how other community members will be affected by project.
   a. Create a thorough list of stakeholders. Evaluate whether they could have high or low impact on the project and evaluate whether they are more likely to be supportive or not.
b. Discuss with the community team whether any stakeholders not previously considered in connection with this process exist, especially ones that might be opponents.

2. Recognize what key decisions must be made for the project; if you want to maintain buy-in and involvement in the locally driven project, it is important to have your community team and key stakeholders involved in the most critical decisions.

   a. Decide as a group how decisions will be made, especially if this is a collaborative group of organizations that have not worked together in the past. This can prevent the decision-making process from spiraling into a storm.
      
      i. Democratic – options are established and members of the group vote
      ii. Consensus – works toward general agreement to proceed with all class members tolerating the decision and no one working against it
      iii. Unilateral – one action team makes a decision for the whole group, sometimes with input from others, sometimes not

   b. Getting input from the community is important. Find easy ways for people to give input and contribute; make sure responses from marginalized groups are received. Online-only responses to a survey can leave out significant stakeholders, as can only having a survey in one language. Get creative and try to gather as much input as possible.

**Sustainability**

Sustainability is an essential element to build a vibrant and thriving community. The nexus between sustainability and economic prosperity is often blurred by the myth that one occurs at the expense of the other. Today, however, this antiquated notion is being shattered by communities across the country that are finding innovative ways to incorporate environmental sustainability into their economic and community development strategies. It is often the combination of social, environmental, and economic opportunities that attracts and retains residents and businesses.

Sustainability, as defined here, means meeting the needs of today without compromising the needs of future generations. Three primary aspects that measure sustainable economic activities are the following:
1. Being economically feasible
2. Reducing or preventing environmental degradation
3. Promoting equity and fairness

Every community should develop a sustainability plan within its economic development strategies. No single path or method exists to begin this process. However, a good way to start is to examine current and anticipated community needs, assets, and opportunities, engage local and regional stakeholders, and create a long-term vision and action plan, programs, and policies to reach consensus driven goals. Visit the National League of Cities website for additional insights about possible paths to developing a sustainability plan.

By incorporating sustainability into economic and community development strategies, a community can expect cost savings resulting from increased productivity and more efficient use of resources such as energy or water. These savings present opportunities for additional public investments. Additionally, sustainability-focused programs and policies provide long-term benefits such as job creation or retention, increased property values, community revitalization, business attraction, and reduced costs (e.g. transportation, housing and healthcare) for businesses and residents.

To begin, start a conversation around what sustainability means and how it applies to the community. Sustainability may be a new concept so it is important to be inclusive in this process so that everyone who wants to be involved is afforded the opportunity.

**Inclusivity to Process**

Every economic development activity involves some level of process. Typically, though, these activities are reserved within the field or within a narrow range of supporting sectors. Detached decision-making renders it difficult to understand the broader extent and impact of our economic development decisions. Most efforts are well intentioned, but without creating space or reaching out to marginalized populations, opportunities are missed.

As you develop economic development strategies and engage stakeholders, it is important to have an outreach and communication strategy that connects your effort to a broad cross-section of your community. Part of this strategy should include representation from
social and nonprofit sectors, healthcare and education, investment and banking, and many other areas. It is often difficult to get single parents or individuals working two or three jobs to the table to discuss broad community and economic development strategies. However, locating organizational advocates that can represent their interests and bringing them into the conversation can be helpful first steps. Find creative ways to use social media to gather input, or conduct in-person interviews at strategic locations like job fairs or a food bank. The added value of engaging those typically absent from our economic development processes significantly outweighs any associated cost. To empower individuals to improve their own lives, it is essential to find approaches that capture and enable conditions of economic and social development and includes deliberate and actionable focus on inclusive economic growth.

A broad consensus exists that ending poverty should be a core tenet of economic development practitioners. However, there is no silver bullet to build broad, equitable economic growth that reaches the poorest and most marginalized individuals in our communities. Still, every economic development strategy should find ways to establish deeper connections between those individuals, groups, and organizations and the economic, social, and political activities within broader economic strategies. This comprises inclusivity to both process and opportunity.

**Inclusivity to Opportunity**

It is important to be inclusive to the opportunities created in economic development strategies so that we are improving the lives of everyone—not just those with the deepest pockets or the loudest voices. Everyone needs equal access to infrastructure, social services, government institutions, and education so that benefits extend to all citizens. Creating access may mean breaking down barriers that prohibit individuals, families, or entire communities from connecting to basic services such as health care or education. Before starting any community and economic development strategy, scan the economic landscape to determine whether access is broadly shared or reserved to the few. This requires the will of community leaders to ask hard questions about themselves, the organizations they represent, and their community, but it is the only way to create broad-based impact within a community.
Creativity and Innovation (Creative Economy)

Innovation and creativity are essential for sustainable growth and economic development. The future of economic health rests within the ability to innovate and create. In order for a community to support an economy that encourages creativity and innovation, an openness to change must exist. Ability to embrace change, learn from others, and welcome new technologies and people creates a supportive environment in which companies want to invest and entrepreneurs want to learn and grow.

Cultivating an entrepreneurial spirit within a community is a must-have strategy to grow and attract the kinds of industry that build broad community wealth. A community’s vibrancy hinges on its ability to cultivate business opportunities. This creative environment can be developed in many ways. For example, start a Lemonade Day for youth and begin growing tomorrow’s business owners. Build a coalition of local small business owners who mentor young adults interested in creating a business. Hold an Entrepreneurship Summit where early stage businesses are connected with sector experts and supportive organizations. Develop a Small Business Plan Competition and provide incentives for winners such as reduced rent or seed money. The ideas are as endless as the entrepreneurial mind itself, so find what works for your community.

Numerous studies have shown that innovation makes a significant contribution to overall economic growth. Spillover effects between firms and industries as well as educational institutions positively impact a community’s economy and foster a culture that embraces the next generation of thought leaders. Work with community leaders to find ways to adapt to the creative economy. Your community’s long-term success depends upon it.

Entrepreneurship

A culture of entrepreneurship can create an ecosystem ripe for business development, especially when tailored to regional economic and cultural strengths. Not only does entrepreneurship empower local community members, but it also offers a viable career option to youth, young adults, and other segments of the community such as immigrants. It is difficult to shift the perception of entrepreneurship, but to do so can help address some of the most pressing needs of an area by filling gaps, identifying demand, and keeping young adults rooted in their community. Instead of solely focusing on bringing in
businesses from an outside area, community teams can focus on developing existing businesses and connecting with local small-scale business owners looking to open a new venture. Especially with the Great Recession, many organizations and leaders are shifting their attention toward the field of entrepreneurship because of the role it plays in innovation and developing the creative economy.

Your community can be a startup ecosystem even if you are not in Silicon Valley. To begin, analyze your community’s entrepreneurship ecosystem with this [blueprint](#). You can create a vibrant startup scene everywhere from Roseburg, Oregon, to Rye, New York. The entrepreneurial ecosystem is spreading to every corner of the U.S., not just in urban areas.

A few first steps to developing a business-focused community include the following:

1. Create awareness of entrepreneurship: Bring together key stakeholders including city officials, service providers, and existing and new business owners in your city from both private and public sectors.

2. Create a network of business people: By establishing a community of mentorship and experience that new entrepreneurs can look to for advice, experience, and input. When rooted locally, it can create a hotbed of momentum and attract new talent to the area.
   a. Spot the gaps in your community: For instance, in some very rural areas, it is unusual to find knowledgeable workers within key sectors.

3. Connect to your local educational institutions: They have the students, some financial resources, and knowledge to help with workforce and business development.

4. Look into entrepreneurship trainings that can help community members take an idea on a napkin to fruition: Connect with a small business development center, statewide business organization, or host a [Startup Weekend](#).

### Youth Engagement

Rural communities across the nation are facing a serious issue of youth leaving the area after high school and never returning. This is referred to as rural brain drain, where the best and brightest leave small towns and rural communities, and is the result of several factors including a belief that there are no job opportunities for youth after high school. Young adults often make the decision to move to more urban areas to pursue higher education and professional careers. This drain of rural youth is evident in quantitative
metrics of communities. For example, Jeff Yost, President of the Nebraska Community Foundation, states that while much of a community’s wealth will be transferred from parent to youth “due to outmigration, many of the heirs no longer live where the wealth was built, and may no longer feel connected to those places. Over the next fifty years, [Nebraska] will experience the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in its history. The World War II and Baby Boom generations own more private wealth than at any time: more than $600 billion in Nebraska.”

While they are in their hometown school, rural communities have the opportunity to help build strong connections between their youth and the land and the people of their area. Stronger connections increase the likelihood of that youth will return back home after they go away for college or other opportunities. Involving youth in a community carries great potential for social change, including lowered crime rates, increased academic performance and decreased substance abuse rates. Engaging youth is a win-win for communities because young adults gain skills, knowledge, and a record of service while adults and organizations build new stakeholders, improve community buy in, improve programs, and attract funders. The benefits to youth and business combine to result in an overall better quality of life, improved services, and increased youth representation.

According to the Search Institute, there are eight domains of youth engagement:

1. Youth service: volunteerism, community service, and service learning
2. Youth leadership: often developmental in nature, helping youth acquire skills to understand and address issues affecting them
3. Youth decision-making: youth in governance or other roles that lead to decision making in a community
4. Youth philanthropy: giving of one’s time and resources for the benefit of others
5. Youth political engagement: youth in civic and political affairs
6. Youth organizing: community organizing and advocacy
7. Youth media: developed and disseminated by youth
8. Youth evaluation and research: youth in systematic inquiry into issues that affect them and their communities

A few first steps in engaging youth include the following:

1. Engagement from a young age is essential to create a sense of community ownership, pride, and giving-back mentality.
   a. Find outlets to connect high school leaders to for experience. This will give them a voice, encourage them to participate in local events, form a mentor network, build a sense of pride through community service, as well as help them better understand the assets and issues facing the community.
   b. Connect with a service provider that has a leadership program that brings together new and seasoned leaders. Not only is this a professional and personal development opportunity, but it is a chance to build social capital and interconnectivity.
   c. Connect with organizations that focus on youth engagement and development like 4-H programs, high school leadership classes, civic organizations, nonprofits, etc.

2. Learn what is important to youth and young adults in a community. Engaging is one thing, retaining and getting returning young adults is another. Understand what young families, employees, and business owners are looking for in a thriving, rural area.

3. Understand that youth engagement includes more than just having young adults at the table – it requires meaningful roles where they are more than just a representative but are heard, understood, and valued.

The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship Youth Engagement System and Case Studies on Community Impacts of Youth Engagement provide an excellent framework for these kinds of endeavors.

**Community Leadership Development**

Successful economic development efforts include multiple leaders from different levels and varying organizations. Government leadership is about numerous levels of government making the financial and political commitment to economic development, taking reasonable risks, having a vision for the future, and helping create and support community leaders. Community leaders can be non-governmental and include business leaders. ABC COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION TOOLKIT | 23
interests, faith groups, retirees, youth, and anyone else who is willing to put in the time, effort, and energy for the betterment of the community. Leaders have a vision and possess the drive to see efforts come to fruition.

With economic development coming from a grassroots level, motivated leaders need to be at the helm to create action. Leadership development needs to be established early on as a community priority. Not only is it essential to develop the seasoned leaders but also to engage young adults and youth in community decision making. Having a broad base of knowledgeable, skilled, and empowered local leaders actively engaged in the community is essential to creating thriving, innovative communities capable of adapting to change. Leadership development builds leaders, networks, and social capital within a community for future projects.

Why Leadership?
- Challenge conventional thinking and initiate change
- Connect diverse community members and projects
- Raise the profile of the volunteer sector in media and government
- Fill the gap in rural community services through volunteer time and effort
- Provide energy and drive to help communities through economic crises
- Offer an insider perspective, local experience, and a personal stake in the issues
- Help a community maintain a competitive advantage in a rapidly changing global economy
- Inspire other community members to get involved
- Differentiate between short and long term priorities which help a community act strategically

A leadership development program impacts community members at a personal level. When other community members understand the value of the program is more than altruistic, then they are more likely to become engaged.

Here are just a few benefits to participating in a leadership program:
● Gain skills for a professional and personal setting – examples include how to run effective meetings, how to work with different personalities, and public speaking
● Network with a diverse group of people in the community, make connections, and build future collaborative relationships
● Learn new skills, make a difference locally, and give back to the community
● Connect to a greater network of leadership graduates making a difference in the region
● Develop personal experience in the class (learn about your personality in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator; understand your style of conflict, etc.)

Visit the Ford Institute Leadership Program website for an example of a successful rural leadership program which is held in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California.

Collaboration

It can feel like a community is tackling a goal alone, but in fact, many organizations in a region or another state face similar economic development issues. Especially in rural areas, relationships are some of the strongest currency available. Not only are people the key to accomplishing goals, but they also can make or break your community project’s chances of success. The strength of the social capital in an area can be a driving force in a community. It is the stock of trust, relationships, and networks that support civil society.

Two forms of social capital are bridging and bonding. Investments in bridging social capital are those that lead to unprecedented conversations, shared experiences, and connections between otherwise unconnected individuals and groups. Investments in bonding social capital are those that strengthen relationships within groups. For example, sponsoring a town-wide festival could be seen as an investment in bonding social capital for town residents. Earnings from investment in social capital include improved health outcomes, educational outcomes, and reduced transaction costs, among others. Your community can be the biggest advocate for your community project when they see the value and potential impact.

When looking at community collaboration, start by analyzing the following field sector areas, then determine who and how you will engage them:
  ● Service organizations and volunteer groups
Niche community groups: specific clubs related to your project
Service providers: business, general assistance
Youth and youth development: youth clubs, faith-based youth programs
Educational Institutions: community colleges, high schools, trade schools, universities
Government: city, county, tribal, and more

Once you have worked within your community and actualized the human resources, connect with external organizations and communities doing similar work. Part of the hurdle is finding these groups. It is important to start by familiarizing your community team with resources and connections through local, state, and national economic development organizations. Second, seek out small business assistance programs, as well as workforce and business development in your area. Third, look for community development corporations, foundations, and organizations in the region.

If you start creating an inventory list of regional resources, connect other organizations to this list to be their resource as well. It is possible you will find one or more organizational gaps. Does your region not have a community foundation? Consider bringing those gaps to the community’s attention. Not only can your project create positive change in your region, but some of these findings can create spin-off projects that gain momentum as well.

Community Buy-in and Engagement

Collaboration and consensus are essential to the visioning and strategic planning process. Successful efforts all share similar ingredients including the following:

- People with varied interests participating throughout the process.
- Individuals contributing to the final outcomes.
- Everyone viewed as peers and participants; strong leadership from multiple sectors.
- Relationships based on mutual trust, understanding, and respect.
- Participants taking personal ownership of the process and outcomes.
- Participants using consensus to achieve outcomes.
- Participants learning from past efforts and applying learning.
One of the most powerful ways to achieve long-term success within an economic development strategy is to develop a process that creates ownership. As ownership is established and increased over time, individuals are empowered to implement the plans they helped create. No community outcome is achieved alone; therefore, creating buy-in from the beginning of any initiative is essential for success.

**Markets beyond Borders**

While focusing on improving the business and economic environment locally through place based businesses, development of local leadership and promoting collaboration across the community, the advent of internet and other telecommunications technologies have brought rural communities out of isolation. With the limited scope of rural markets, the key benefits of High-Speed Internet have been the ability for rural communities to market themselves, allow remote work, and perhaps most importantly, allowed businesses to reach markets outside of their geographic regions.

Finding local and regional resources to reach broader audiences will be critical to helping businesses thrive in the small towns and rural communities. Helping businesses establish websites and e-commerce or online tourism campaigns will help bring dollars into the community by reaching audiences and markets outside of the region.

**Multiple Forms of Capital**

A lot of attention is directed toward economic development focused solely on creating and developing financial capital for private and public institutions exists. This focus, however, fails to capture the importance of the multiple community dynamics that make a place great to live. The following table details eight capital areas in which a region should focus. The table below captures a case example of a food system economic development initiative and the impact this strategy may have in multiple capital areas.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF CAPITAL</th>
<th>IMPACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Capital: How will your plan impact the skills and physical and mental</td>
<td>▪ Improved diets, better health, and reduced rate of obesity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>healthiness of people in a region?</td>
<td>▪ Improved skills of new and small farmers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital: How will your plan impact the trust, relationships, and networks</td>
<td>▪ Strengthen connections among farmers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that support society?</td>
<td>▪ Promote labor, knowledge, and equipment sharing among producers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Build connections between growers and larger buyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Capital: How will your plan impact knowledge, innovation and</td>
<td>▪ Create new uses for local foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creativity?</td>
<td>▪ Design a regional label/brand for jointly marketed products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Capital: How will your plan impact the environmental assets in a region?</td>
<td>▪ Reduced farm and food waste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Reduce some water consumption through crop-switching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built Capital: How will your plan impact the existing infrastructure?</td>
<td>▪ Expand food processing capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Increase the number of food co-ops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Establish commercial compost facilities to substitute for imported fertilizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Capital: How will your plan impact the power and goodwill held by</td>
<td>▪ Alliances form between farmers, consumers, health care, and business interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individuals, groups, and/or organizations?</td>
<td>▪ Policies to support regional food production and consumption are developed and promoted by an increasingly diverse group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Market Demand

Understanding market demand is essential to connecting business development to investment opportunities. By identifying the demand for a set of products or services, a community can begin developing a systematic approach to connecting consumers to producers in a coordinated and collaborative way.

Demand is different from a desire or need. Demand is the quantity of a good or service that consumers are willing and able to buy at a given price in a given period. The ability for a community to fill a gap in the market and respond to market demand is essential to financial success and sustainability. A community must assess and determine if there is sufficient demand for an opportunity and whether it is scalable to have a positive impact with a given set of resources.

An important first step is to show evidence of demand. Are there committed customers? What are actual prices and sales volumes? What are the demand growth estimates? What is the production process like? How do we implement next steps? You will want to look at customer characteristics, geographic location, market size, and growth patterns among many other factors. A good place to begin is by interviewing prospective buyers using a Sector Scan, Product-Buyer Scan, or Regionally based Demand/Scan. Through these
methods, you can collect secondary data to uncover market opportunities that otherwise may not be visible.

A community cannot be everything to everyone, so understanding market forces within and outside of the city can distinguish one community’s ability to build on its assets versus another community’s inability to focus strategically within high-growth sectors. Understanding market demand is a great first step in a community becoming globally competitive while also establishing meaningful steps to connecting rural and urban markets.

**Community Marketing and Branding**

Community marketing for economic development aims to bring outside businesses, visitors, and investments to the region. These activities stimulate local business development and create more community wealth, and will help strengthen relationships between local leaders, organizations, and citizens. There is an essential transition from unfocused to focused branding and consistent marketing by committed groups interested in spreading tourism or other messages. However, most communities struggle to find common messaging that everyone can agree to push forward. The best way to go through this is to organize a community visioning process with key stakeholders.

Consider the following steps:

- Engage a broad array of community members in a community dialogue.
- Define the identity of the region. What is it that really makes the area unique?
- Identify strengths, opportunities, and resources.
- Start crafting an idea of what the thriving community would look like five to ten years later.
- Raise awareness and understanding of the importance of a consistent marketing message.

**Marketing of a Community Project**

- Draw on traditional media: use newspaper articles, letters to the editor, radio, television, bulletin boards, and face-to-face communication.
Use new forms of media: Utilize social media platforms, blogs, videos and social networking sites.

Get in front of civic organizations and other community clubs: Present on your project to a captive audience.

Look for connectors in your community: Who are the people that seem to know just about everyone? Is there a group that might be interested in the project that is difficult to access? What areas of community connection and social capital within your team are the strongest and the weakest?

Work with service providers: Connect with Economic Development Organizations, Chambers of Commerce, visitors’ centers, and nonprofits to access community members either through in-person or marketing materials.

Cross-promote: Connect with another organization working on a project to cross promote each other’s work.

Host an event: Give people an opportunity to interact with your community team in an informal, fun setting such as an open house or potluck.

Branding Your Community for General and Tourism Purposes

Connect with existing tourism organizations. Seek out your state tourism agency, destination marketing organizations (DMO), and convention and visitors’ bureaus or centers. A DMO is an organization at a local or regional level that is focused on attracting visitors to a region to build the local economy. Some of these tourism organizations have ready-made resources available to match the state and regional marketing style. One example of a successful toolkit was created by Travel Oregon. It includes social media engagement tips, a guide to hashtags, information about how to embed videos, and methods for showcasing key destinations.

Use appreciative inquiry to reflect on your community. Create an inventory of local or regional community assets. What culinary, outdoor recreation, cultural, agri-tourism, or natural assets are in your region? It is important to know how your community is viewed internally and externally. Your community brand is made up of perceptions, so what differentiates this community from the rest?

Engage the online audience through Social Networks. If you are not familiar with Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Instagram, it is time to get started. Familiarize yourself and/or community team members with content creation, hashtags, photocomposition, and
creative engagement strategies. To create a thriving tourism destination, both creativity and buy-in will be needed to create authentic, relevant content.

- Make sure your marketing is conversational rather than a sales pitch. Include information that an insider would know about the area like a renowned dish at a local restaurant, a great beach or river access point for a boat, or highly reviewed hotel. Social media is not a way to cram offers and sales pitches down potential visitors’ throats. The more you can offer custom content that is relevant, interesting, and engaging, the more successful your marketing efforts will be.

- Get your community on board to cross-promote together. Marketing resources are limited even in less cash-strapped communities. Start a conversation with business owners, destination managers, local tourism organizations, etc. to share content that is relevant to the mutual audience you seek to reach. Use the same regional hashtag across different platforms and postings. Consider connecting with those outside of the community and expanding to a regional approach.

For Marketing Plans, Community Branding resources, and more – check out the Municipal Research and Services Center’s webpage.

UNDERSTANDING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

This toolkit has covered several economic development best practices including visioning and planning, being inclusive, having strong leadership, creating sustainable business practices, and having locally driven initiatives. With this knowledge in hand, it is time to think about specific strategies that you can develop in your communities. The following section introduces several economic development strategies. It is ultimately up to your community to determine whether these approaches are feasible. Remember, when developing economic development strategies, there are no cookie-cutter solutions; be sure to tailor to your needs and assets to your specific region. Lastly, it is important to note that these strategies only scratch the surface. Be sure to research other strategies before implementing any single approach.
Business Retention and Expansion

According to Blane, Canada, LTD, Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) strategies experience the majority of their growth and investment from companies already located in a community. For example, an urban community averages 76% of their growth from existing employers. A rural community is even more dependent on internal growth.

The components that drive BR&E strategies include identifying potential growth companies, identifying businesses at risk of closing or leaving a community, identifying company and community problems, providing strategic assistance, and building trusting relationships.

Economic Gardening

According to the Edward Lowe Foundation, the organizational and research leaders, Economic Gardening is a “grow from within” strategy targeting existing growth companies and offering them critical strategic information that is customized to their needs.

Economic Gardening involves connecting and using sophisticated business intelligence tools, research, and databases that high-growth companies either are not aware of or cannot afford. Research specialists typically assist in four key areas: strategic market research, geographic information systems, search engine optimization, and social media marketing. Research includes identifying market trends, mapping geographic areas for markets, tracking competitors, and making informed business decisions.

Sector Strategies

Sector strategies are often referred to and known as multiple things such as cluster strategies, business clustering, or value chain management. Although these and other cluster strategies can vary considerably, and we will not get into the nuances in this toolkit, the crux of sector strategies is a geographic concentration of competing and collaborating firms that produce innovation and higher than average wages.

According to the International City/County Management Association, cluster-based economic development strategies are “interventions designed to improve a cluster’s performance by addressing the common needs of businesses within the cluster. Local
government managers and other local officials can enhance the success of clusters through interventions that cut across a number of domains, including economic development, education and training, workforce development, and infrastructure provision.”

At the crux of cluster strategies is the notion that bringing together stakeholders across a supply or value chain in a coordinated and collaborative setting can help target gaps producing business development opportunities. A value chain, as defined here, is a set of direct and indirect supporting stakeholders that represent the multiple interests within an industry sector. Typically, an economic development organization acts as the coordinator and facilitator for discussions that focus on specific needs within the industry sector strategy area. A community plays an important role in these discussions as they provide many public goods that directly impact an industry’s decision. Reach out to your local and regional economic development organizations to determine what, if any, sector strategies they are deploying.

**Downtown Development – Main Street Approach**

At the center of many small towns is the downtown business core. This part of the community often symbolizes the historical as well as present-day identities; they illustrate how the past shaped our community, and provide an intimate window into our community living room. Tourists are attracted to active, thriving, bustling downtowns, not vacant and dusty storefronts.

The Main Street Four-Point Approach® is the foundation for local initiatives to revitalize their districts by leveraging local assets from cultural or architectural heritage to local enterprises and community pride. The four points of the Main Street approach work together to build a sustainable and complete community revitalization effort. These four points include organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring. For more information about how to revitalize your town and become a part of a national network, visit [The National Main Street Center](http://www.mainstreetcenter.org).
RURAL COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

How does a town engage in community and economic development practices and increase overall vitality? While the theories and strategies are endless, it is important to note that no one-size-fits-all solution approach exists. We will start by looking at just a few existing economic and community development models tailored to rural conditions. We will look at the Tupelo model, WealthWorks model, Asset Based Community Development model, Social Capital Theory of Change model, and HomeTown Competitiveness model.

The Tupelo Model

The Tupelo Model is a people-focused approach that asserts that community revitalization and economic development are not possible without a strong foundation of human leadership and organizational development. Organized as a multi-step pyramid, the first level is human development, including the health, knowledge, and capacity of the local population. The second layer is leadership development; civic engagement and empowerment are vital to this stage. The next layer represents organizational development—the capacity, efficiency, and trust of an organization to carry out its mission, goals, or purpose. In action, this may look like the development of a collaborative organization, the strengthening of an existing organization, or the creation of nonprofits filling a resource gap.

The success of the two highest levels of the pyramid is dependent upon the strength of investment and development of the lower levels. Community development, the fourth layer, could look like the founding of a new collaborative network of organizations working together to support local efforts, or the creation of a community development foundation. The pinnacle of the pyramid, economic development, consists of local investment, workforce development, small business cultivation, and entrepreneurial growth. Each level
of development necessitates time investments, as well as trust and civic engagement. By acting locally, planning regionally, leveraging external capitals, and adapting resources to meet local needs, it is possible to build firm foundations for thriving economies. For a more in-depth look at the Tupelo Model and its story, you can review the case study [here](#).

**HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC)**

HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) is a comprehensive economic development strategy that builds on community assets and resources. As a ‘come back, give back’ approach, it is based on research that vibrant communities share common traits around four key pillars: leadership, philanthropy, entrepreneurship, and youth.

The four HomeTown Competitiveness Pillars are as follows:

- **Building Local Leadership** – to mobilize and organize diverse regional capacity that can sustain community and economic development into the future.

- **Expanding Community Philanthropy** – to use charitable giving and endowment building made possible through the intergenerational transfer of wealth as a tool for sustaining homegrown community and economic development.

- **Energizing Entrepreneurship** – to nurture and network residents who want to start or expand a business thus creating local wealth and jobs.

- **Engaging Youth and Young Adults** – to cultivate a sense of belonging, investment, and community involvement so that remaining or returning home is seen as an attractive option, thereby stabilizing and growing the community into the future.

For more information on how to apply this strategy to your community, visit the HTC [website](#).

**Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)**

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) focuses on a community’s existing assets rather than on a lack of resources. This form of development identifies and utilizes the strengths of a region for meaningful, maintainable development. Instead of wishing for external resources, this model emphasizes and leverages what a community already has. ABCD focuses on asset mapping, which identifies targeted resources, acts as a visionary...
tool to consider new ways to connect resources in innovative ways, and connects new people and groups to multiple resources and efforts.

Types of assets include the following:

- Personal Assets – Talents and skills of people, including their knowledge base, capabilities, and passions.
- Associations – A network of informal relationships including social groups, organizations, clubs, teams, councils, boards, government, and community institutions.
- Institutions and Professional Entities – City council, schools, etc.
- Physical Assets – Land, buildings, equipment, natural elements, etc.
- Economic Assets – Work of individuals, financial institutions, giving organizations, businesses, spending power, etc.

Not only is asset mapping a great way to inventory the positive aspects of a community, it can also do the following:

- Help widen the circle of participation to accomplish more.
- Encourage collaboration and representation to entice more diverse participation.
- Build a bigger platform for the creation and expansion of opportunity.

For more information about applying ABCD to your community, visit the Asset Based Community Development Institute’s [website](#) for the [ABCD toolkit](#) and additional downloadable [resources](#).

**Social Capital**

Social capital is the social connectivity of individuals and organizations such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Robert Putnam, author of Bowling Alone and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard, popularized the term social capital while researching the decline of interconnected human capital. Specifically, he noted a sharp decline in traditional civic, fraternal, and social organizations that had brought previous generations together. Putnam said that social capital is created by the quality and frequency of relationships through individual behavior that reflects trust and reciprocity such as volunteering, sharing tools and assisting others.
Social capital can build on a one-to-one basis, but it much more visible at the community level through venues such as festivals, clubs, volunteer events and potlucks. The connections woven throughout the community become a social fabric that reinforces local community institutions like local government, community centers, and schools. It may not seem like the interconnectivity of a community is important, but in fact, communities with strong social capital report having fewer violent crimes, more responsive government, lower dropout rates, and even less road rage according to the New Hampshire Charitable Foundations. Social capital is not built overnight; it is a long-term strategy that requires committed citizens.

To view a social capital building toolkit from Harvard Kennedy School, preview the link here. For more information on how to cultivate social capital in your community, visit bettertogether.org here while visiting, check out their list of 150 things you can do to build social capital.

WealthWorks

WealthWorks is an innovative wealth creation framework customized to the unique assets of a region. It is a systems approach to regional economic development that connects rural assets to market demands in ways that build multiple forms of wealth. By using a multi-capital framework, WWNW is able to strategically target multi-sector value chain investment opportunities in ways that build a region’s human capacity, promote market-driven business development, and reinvest wealth locally. The WealthWorks approach is not a cookie-cutter recipe; it is a framework intended to be strategically tailored toward a region’s needs.

According to WealthWorks authors, this approach is designed to produce and sustain the following results:

- Build a more self-reliant and robust area economy.
- Bring underutilized community assets, people, place, property, and know-how into fuller participation and production.
- Create wealth that sticks because it is locally owned, controlled, and reinvested.
Increase overall upward mobility and advance the livelihoods of lower-income people, firms and places.

- Strengthen industry sectors that fuel the economy.
- Forge valued partnerships that can deftly and flexibly connect and reconnect to power resilient regions.

At the heart of the Wealthworks approach is the notion that a coordinated value chain cooperating and working toward shared values and goals creates broad economic opportunities. For more information on the WealthWorks approach and to see stories of WealthWorks wealth creation on the east coast, visit the WealthWorks website [here](#). To view the pilot WealthWorks initiative in the Pacific Northwest, visit Rural Development Initiative’s website [here](#).

**CONCLUSION**

Rural communities across America are working to strengthen their economies, develop multiple forms of wealth, improve quality of life, and build on the rich historical and natural assets unique to rural communities. Through well-planned, proactive economic and community development, regions can create thriving, livable areas that attract and retain their citizens. Rural communities face a seemingly exhaustive number of challenges, especially those who previously thrived as resource-based economies. However, these tight knit communities have an increasing number of resources available. Each community has the opportunity to collaborate internally to create projects and initiatives aimed at shaping their own growth and development. This toolkit has included resources and best practices to empower small towns and spark ideas that encourage communities to take advantage of their assets, develop businesses, brand their region, access financial resources, and ensure that economic development efforts have lasting results.

For communities selected to advance to the quarter-finalist round of America’s Best Communities, it will not be required to use the information contained herein. This document is provided to all application teams and their communities as a token of our gratitude for your participation.

For any feedback or questions, please contact us at [info@americasbestcommunities.com](mailto:info@americasbestcommunities.com).