



# STRATEGIC PLAN FOR RURAL INDIANA

Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs  
Effective 2022-2023

## Vision

The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs works with communities to build relevant and economically thriving places where people want to live, work and grow.



# STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

## Strategic Framework: History and Background

In 2017, OCRA completed a 13-stop listening tour to hear feedback from regional partners, stakeholders and constituents across rural Indiana. Each had a vested interest in furthering community and economic development in non-metropolitan communities. The information gathered during these meetings shaped the Strategic Framework utilized by OCRA for the next two years.

The feedback revealed consistent themes relating to the challenges faced by rural Indiana communities. These obstacles included: access to broadband, the addiction crisis, housing shortage, the workforce skills gap and aging water infrastructure.

OCRA's **Strategic Framework** aligned these challenges with the agency's programs and place-making efforts by focusing on five key areas:

1. **Provide opportunities and programs focused on people and place-based investments;**
2. **Expand OCRA's role as a Center of Excellence;**
3. **Build capacity of rural leadership;**
4. **Support economic growth and preservation in the downtown and commercial districts; and**
5. **Facilitate strategies to address rural infrastructure access.**

Collaboration and partnership among rural communities are crucial in order to grow opportunities, take care of its people, and truly take it to the next level.

The framework's **Guiding Principles** supported the idea of working collaboratively to attract, retain and develop talent in Indiana's rural communities. Additionally, where possible, it supported the attempt to address the challenges identified during the listening tour by inciting and encouraging regional collaboration.

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## Strategic Framework: Where We Are Now

The heart and soul of Indiana is its rural communities. When rural Indiana succeeds, the rest of the state succeeds. For this reason, OCRA remains committed to continuous improvement, and to ensuring we are consistently serving the most current needs of rural areas. While the **Strategic Framework** provided a foundation for making rural Indiana as strong as it can be by encouraging collaboration amongst its people, it is a living document. Measuring progress and making adjustments in response to changing dynamics is vital to its success.

For this reason, in 2021, OCRA updated its **Strategic Framework** to address new challenges that have emerged in the aftermath of the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis, including the addition of a **third guiding principle**: Facilitate transformative investment in rural commercial corridors and support healthy, economically resilient communities working to address inequity.

Facilitating transformative investment is not a stand-alone principle, this is seen throughout OCRA's framework, meeting the needs for rural communities. For example, the new Hoosier Enduring Legacy Program does just that, guiding communities to invest in transformational projects that will create a legacy for their city, town or county.

OCRA's Community Development Block Grants provide grants for storm and wastewater improvements, helping the communities ensure safe drinking water and prevent future flooding. The Next Level Connections program expands broadband access to underserved communities, as a result, these areas have reliable internet access.

Each of these programs further advances this principle as they can be transformational for rural Indiana.

Denny Spinner,  
Executive Director

# Guiding Principles

Retain, attract and develop talent  
in Indiana rural communities.



Incite and encourage regional  
collaboration and holistic rural  
planning processes.

Facilitate transformative  
investment in rural commercial  
corridors and support healthy,  
economically resilient  
communities working to address  
inequity.



# STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The five strategic priorities in this framework provide the agency's tactical direction over the next few years. Each priority, outlined below, includes several key initiatives explaining how the agency will work to accomplish the goal.

**1. Provide opportunities and programs focused on our people and place-based investments** - In order to encourage population growth, rural communities must collaborate and prioritize initiatives to improve the quality of life for current and future residents. Strong community development programs create engaging, vibrant places where people are motivated to stay, grow, live, work and play.

## **1.1 Create a smaller scale grant opportunity for communities to spearhead quality of life efforts in rural communities.**

Building off the successes of previous quality of life grants, OCRA will work to develop a smaller scale grant program for OCRA Downtown Affiliates and Indiana Main Street communities. OCRA will continue to emphasize the value of partnerships with this program. Additionally, this program will give communities granting experience while increasing local organizational capacity to apply for and to administer other grant funds.

Partners: TBD

Timeline: Q4 2022

## **1.2 OCRA will continue to expand on its capacity-building programs by engaging in efforts to build regional capacity. This will help ensure equal access to capital investment opportunities and incentives available to communities.**

OCRA, in partnership with the Purdue Center for Regional Development, will launch a self-guided course for rural communities interested in strategically identifying and securing investment opportunities for rural opportunity zones. OCRA will utilize expertise acquired from past rounds of the Rural Opportunity Zone Initiative in the creation and launch of the course. The course will assist communities in creating their own prospectus documents to spur such investment in qualified projects to drive growth.

Potential partners: USDA\_RD, PCRD, IHCD, OIC

Timeline: Q3 2022

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## **1.3 Partner with FSSA's Division of Mental Health to create, launch and administer a Recovery Housing Pilot Program (RHP).**

The Recovery Housing Program provides funding for communities to create stable, transitional housing for individuals in recovery from a substance use disorder. OCRA is working in partnership with Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA). OCRA awarded \$1,200,000 to two rural communities through the RHP program in the first-quarter of 2022.

Potential partners: FSSA Division of Mental Health  
Timeline: Q1 2022

## **1.4 OCRA will launch and administer an Owner-Occupied Rehabilitation (OOR) Program Pilot.**

The OOR program aims to empower Indiana communities to directly fund homeowners of low-moderate income to make needed repairs on their homes. OCRA awarded five communities \$1,189,900 in funding through the pilot launch. OCRA will continue to evaluate its capacity to administer this program.

Potential partners: HUD, IARC, Local Housing Agencies  
Timeline: Awarded Q4 2021 - Evaluation will continue through Q4 of 2022

**2. Expand OCRA's role as a Center of Excellence** - OCRA has the privilege of working with rural communities across Indiana. This provides the opportunity to collect ideas, successes and best practices. Sharing this information, connecting regional approaches and expediting solution implementation establishes OCRA as a trusted resource for rural Indiana.

## **2.1 Create more opportunities to celebrate communities engaged in comprehensive planning and development.**

OCRA will create opportunities for the lieutenant governor to recognize grant recipients and successful communities. Large celebrations recognizing annual awardees will be held at the Statehouse, or a different venue will be determined based on the size of the audience. On-site check presentations, groundbreakings, announcements and other events may be scheduled in selected communities as determined by the lieutenant governor's schedule.

Potential partners: Lieutenant Governor's Office, Rural leaders, Legislators, and Media  
Timeline: Ongoing

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## **2.2 OCRA will create an American Rescue Plan Toolkit for rural communities to highlight the eligible activities based on the Final Rule issued by U.S. Treasury.**

The American Rescue Plan Act Toolkit outlines eligible uses of the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds. This includes calculating net tax revenue, the provision of premium pay to eligible workers, and the development of water, sewer, or broadband infrastructure. Additionally, the toolkit covers programs or projects that address the public health emergency or negative economic repercussions on households, small businesses, or non-profits. Other helpful resources for communities to utilize are included, such as compliance and reporting guidelines, along with a strategic planning process.

Potential partners: N/A

Timeline: Q2 2022

## **2.3 The Community Liaison Regional Map will be updated to better align OCRA CL districts with existing community-driven collaborations in those areas.**

OCRA staff members, Mayors, and regional planning groups and coalitions consulted on the regional map. The purpose of the realignment is to utilize the Community Liaisons in a more strategic manner to assist multiple communities in fulfilling their goals.

Potential partners: Rural leaders and stakeholders, Regional Planning and Community Development groups

Timeline: Q1 2022

## **2.4 Expand OCRA's partnerships with other associations to improve offerings and develop new, sustainable community planning processes. These processes will help support public, private and philanthropic investment.**

OCRA will collaborate with DHPA and Indiana Landmarks to add an educational track to the Statewide Historic Preservation Conference for Indiana Main Street. OCRA will also produce quarterly podcasts to update its partners about OCRA programs and deadlines. The podcasts will be hosted by the executive director with rotating guests. Each podcast will be sent directly to our partners and posted on the OCRA website.

Potential partners: Aim, AIC, IARC, Indiana Landmarks, DHPA

Timeline: Q3 2022

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## **2.5 Engage the Rural Affairs Working Group to help renew the agency's focus by participating in regional and local discussions.**

The Rural Affairs Working Group includes key stakeholders that will help OCRA to align initiatives with current community needs and generate new ideas. The RAWG was formed in 2021 but met only once during the year. The RAWG will now meet quarterly, beginning in the second quarter of 2022. Members will be contacted to determine if they wish to continue to serve as a member. The executive director will work with all OCRA directors to set the agenda for each quarterly meeting, to be held in Indianapolis.

Potential partners: N/A

Timeline: Q2 2022

**3. Build capacity of rural leadership** - The challenges in rural communities are increasing in frequency, complexity and intensity, emphasizing the need for effective rural leadership. While self-sufficiency is important, connecting leaders provides the foundation for a strong collaborative network, capable of sharing ideas and addressing multi-faceted issues together. Cooperation to achieve jointly established priorities helps leverage the assets each party brings to the table, making the most of the region's resources.

## **3.1 Adapt INeGMS and CRM platforms to improve procedures for OCRA management of resources to ensure the best results for our communities**

OCRA's online grants and customer relationship platform are tools that can be used to relay timely concerns or to celebrate victories of collaboration and work in communities. OCRA will continue its commitment to advancing both systems. This includes making enhancements as needed to improve communication across divisions, ensuring consistent delivery of services, and building better customer relationships with communities.

Potential partners: Grant Services, ISDA, IOT

Timeline: Q4 2022

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## **3.2 Develop more opportunities for Indiana Main Street programs, focusing on shared downtown revitalization efforts.**

Encourage knowledge-sharing between Main Street communities to increase the capacity of local organizations. Pursue more collective opportunities for transformational projects and help communities successfully apply for higher levels of the Indiana Main Street Program.

OCRA will accomplish this through expanded technical assistance opportunities. This includes six community exchanges, new executive director training, six Main Street 101 events for prospective communities, the creation and execution of a technical assistance interest form, monthly virtual webinars and lunch & learn events, and encouraging regular communication and participation on the Indiana Main Street Facebook page.

Potential partners: MSA, IN Main Street Council, Indiana Landmarks, Indiana Humanities

Timeline: Q1 2022

## **3.3 Incorporate strategic support for planning efforts in order to help local community decisions on utilizing federal allocations of ARPA.**

Building off the experience with Stellar Communities, OCRA has developed the Hoosier Enduring Legacy Program (HELP) to assist rural communities with achieving their goals. This is accomplished through team training, the development of a community engagement plan and the creation of a Strategic Investment Plan. The incorporation of the ARPA toolkit will also enable communities to replicate the HELP program in future planning processes. Additionally, the toolkit will provide communities with a breakdown of eligible activities to make educated and informed decisions for use of the funding.

Potential partners: PCRD, BSU (ICI), Civic Labs, IU CRE, Ivy Tech, IAC

Timeline: Cohort 1 Designees Announced Q4 2021-Kickoff Q1 2022-2023

## **3.4 Expand OCRA's Grant Administrator training and continuing education offerings to enhance community-based knowledge of CDBG granting policies and procedures. This will be accomplished through the development of topical interactive learning sessions.**

Potential partners: IARC, ACEC, Grant Services

Timeline: Starting in Q2 - Q3 2022

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**4. Support economic growth and preservation in downtown and commercial districts** - Downtown and commercial districts are a visible indicator of community pride, along with its economic and social health. Downtowns also help define a community's identity through distinctive, often historic architecture; shops and restaurants; and community gathering places. Maintaining the places that make a community unique, contributes to a sense of place and neighborhood identity.

## **4.1 Establish a program supporting historic preservation principles to encourage economic development in downtown corridors.**

With the creation of the PreservINg Main Street program, OCRA developed a multi-faceted community development program. The program is designed to build a sustainable historic preservation community ethic, build capacity for local Main Street programs, and serve as a comprehensive downtown revitalization model.

Kendallville and Brookville were selected as pilot communities in 2021. As of March 2022, both communities have surpassed 50% of their fundraising goal, scheduled some of their first-year educational workshops and submitted plans for their Indiana Humanities funding. The two communities also established their local preservation commissions and are in the planning process for selecting the construction work to be completed.

Potential partners: Indiana Humanities, Indiana Landmarks, MSA  
Timeline: Q3 2021 - 2 years, starting in Q4 2021 – 2023

## **4.2 Continue to support revolving loan funds through the expansion of community training opportunities**

In February 2022, OCRA announced a new partnership with the Purdue Center for Regional Development and Ohio State University to launch a second phase of the Hometown Business Preservation Initiative, also called HBPI 2.0. This instructional program will guide community leadership on how to sustain a Revolving Loan Fund.

Potential partners: PCRD, OSU Extension  
Timeline: Q1-Q2 2022

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## **4.3 Redesign the Main Street Revitalization Program (MSRP) to strengthen collaboration between local government and main street organizations.**

OCRA will review its MSRP Program to ensure it encourages designated Main Street communities to implement long-term, holistic community development efforts and sustainability in their Main Street business district.

Potential partners: HUD, MSA, Main Street Midwest Coordinators Group, BSU ICI  
Timeline: Q4 2022

## **4.4 Revise the Historic Renovation Grant Program (HRGP) to support the preservation and rehabilitation of historic properties.**

Beginning in 2021, HRGP transitioned to a competitive grant program rather than a first-come, first-served. This model allowed OCRA to maximize the impact of this program. To further this effort, in 2022 OCRA will study the economic impact of the program through a partnership with Indiana Landmarks and Ball State.

Potential partners: Ball State (ICI and CAP), Indiana Landmarks, DHPA  
Timeline: Q3 2022

**5. Facilitate strategies to address rural infrastructure access** - Rural Hoosiers need adequate access to water, energy, land, public health services, broadband, education, etc. to attract and retain the best talent. Lack of access to any one of these can limit the opportunity for communities to improve and sustain their social and economic well-being. With the limited resources at their disposal, it is vital for rural Indiana communities to choose the best investment projects and ensure all available resources are used in the most strategic, cost-effective manner.

## **5.1 Reward communities already addressing rural decline to encourage and reinforce success.**

The agency will review its current program scoring matrices to incentivize communities committed to evolving for the better. Adjustments made will recognize community achievements in addressing rural decline and establish an entrepreneurial system of rewards in support of future efforts.

Potential partners: IU Business Research Center, IARC, HUD, RAWR  
Timeline: Q4 2022

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## **5.2 Promote a holistic approach to project development and prioritize staff education on creative uses of public funds available for projects.**

Build agency subject-matter expertise on the mechanics of public finance. This includes taxation, management of a municipality's revenue, expenditures and debt load through various government and quasi-government institutions and how it relates to more comprehensive strategies for community and economic development.

Potential partners: BSU (ICI), Purdue Extension  
Timeline: Q1 -Q2 2022

## **5.3. Implement new programming to provide line extensions along with updates to the Next Level Connections Program (NLC).**

OCRA will expand The Next Level Connections (NLC) Broadband Grant Program to promote access to reliable and affordable broadband service to all areas of the state. This is necessary for a highly functioning 21st-century economy. The expansion is part of Governor Holcomb's broader Next Level Connections infrastructure program. The new program will build upon investments already made through NLC by assisting schools and rural clinics to connect to 1 gig broadband; providing households a connection to broadband internet.

Potential partners: Gov. Eric Holcomb's Office, Service Providers, Local Education Providers, IDOH, DOE, IOT, PCRD, IBO  
Timeline: NLC Rd3 Announcement Q2 2022 - ICP Rolling

## **5.4 Implement efforts focused on green infrastructure and reducing the impact of extreme heat.**

OCRA and Indiana University's Environmental Resilience Institute (ERI) will launch a two-year program. The program will help two Indiana local governments develop and implement heat relief strategies and response protocols. The goal of the program is to create sustainable, long-term projects, programs and educational materials that help residents, especially those most vulnerable, cope with hot days and nights, decreasing public health impacts.

Potential partners: Indiana University's Environmental Resilience Institute (ERI)  
Timeline: Q2 2021 - 2 years, starting in May 2021 – April 2023