Strategic Plan for Rural Indiana

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

Strategic Framework

1. Provide opportunities and programs focused on our people and place-based investments
   - Enhanced the Stellar Communities Program to include a regional approach
   - Expansion of placemaking programs
   - Develop regional economic development and talent attraction program
   - Partner with applicable stakeholders on water infrastructure issues
   - Implement Blight Clearance Program revisions

2. Expand OCRA’s role as a Center of Excellence
   - Highlight best practices and community successes via communications mediums
   - Support the Commission to Combat Drug Abuse and FSSA
   - Coordinate regional community development conferences
   - Organize Midwest Main Street Conference
   - Facilitate the Taskforce on Rural Affairs

3. Build capacity of rural leadership
   - Expand community capacity building programs
   - Engage youth involvement in leadership activities through curriculum development and programming
   - Leverage existing successful leadership resources through mentorship opportunities

4. Support economic growth and preservation in downtown and commercial districts
   - Grow and cultivate downtown revitalization efforts
   - Deliver tactical placemaking training
   - Create and launch Downtown Development Week
   - Design second-story housing competition for Main Street communities

5. Facilitate strategies to address rural broadband access
   - Collaborate with Director of Broadband Opportunities
   - Establish grant program to fund planning activities for the installation of broadband
   - Host Statewide Broadband Summit

Guiding Principles

Retain, attract and develop talent in our rural communities.

Incite and encourage regional collaboration in rural planning processes.
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The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs works with Indiana communities to build relevant and economically thriving places where people want to live, work and grow.

Throughout the summer of 2017, OCRA completed a 13-stop listening tour, to hear the first-hand feedback from those who live in, and love, rural Indiana. The information gathered during this tour shaped the Strategic Framework for OCRA to build upon over the next two years.

The listening tour had representation from a broad segment of the rural population with attendees representing 73 communities across 57 counties. Additionally, meetings were held with a diverse sector of partners, stakeholders and constituents that have a vested interest in furthering the development of rural Indiana. The feedback and comments OCRA received through these activities identified two guiding principles:

- Retaining, attracting and developing talent in our rural communities and
- Inciting and encouraging regional collaboration.

Collaboration and partnership among rural communities is crucial in order to grow opportunities, take care of its people, and truly take it to the Next Level. OCRA will utilize these principles as future initiatives and programs are developed.

Further, the feedback revealed consistent themes in regards to challenges that rural Indiana continue to face. These obstacles include: access to broadband, the addiction crisis, housing shortage, the workforce skills-gap and aging water infrastructure.

This framework and our tactics attempt to align these challenges with our programs and place-making efforts. The framework focuses on five key areas:

1. Provide opportunities and programs focused on our 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 broadband access.

These four components all provide support to working collaboratively to attract and retain talent, and where possible, attempt to address the challenges identified through the listening tour. This is a framework from which to build upon, but is not all encompassing. Progress must be measured, but room to adjust to changing dynamics is crucial to its success.

The heart and soul of Indiana is truly our rural communities, and when rural Indiana succeeds, the rest of the state succeeds. OCRA is committed to continuous improvement and ensuring that we are serving the needs of our rural areas to the best of our ability while being responsible fiscal stewards. This framework lays the groundwork for making rural Indiana as strong as it can be by encouraging collaboration amongst its greatest asset, its people. The strategic plan will be a living document that OCRA will continue to update with progress being made as new challenges are encountered.

Jodi Golden, Executive Director
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 focused on improving 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. Enhanced the Stellar Communities Program to include a regional approach
Incorporate a regional approach to connect rural communities, encourage collaboration and transform rural areas. Leverage university partners to build cohesiveness and to ensure sustainability.

1.2. Expansion of placemaking programs
Building on the past 10 (+) years of placemaking efforts, OCRA will continue the Quick Impact Placebased Grant program and introduce other innovative quality of place grant opportunities. Launch a pilot granting program for Main Street organizations focusing on downtown identity, shared regional values and connectivity.

1.3. Develop regional economic development and talent attraction program
Work with stakeholders on the development of a statewide strategy encouraging communities to embrace universal principles and best practices accelerating economic and community development.

1.4. Partner with applicable stakeholders on water infrastructure issues
OCRA will collaborate with state and federal agencies to strategically allocate resources to rural communities to address water infrastructure challenges.

1.5. Implement Blight Clearance Program revisions
Implement updates to improve the impact and accessibility for rural Indiana communities to encourage economic development.
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2. Expand OCRA's role as a Center of Excellence.
OCRA has the privilege of working with rural Indiana communities providing 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 Highlight best practices and community successes via communications mediums
Elevate our rural areas by collecting and showcasing successful projects, ideas and solutions via the OCRA website, microlearning webinars and other communication mediums.

2.2 Support the Commission to Combat Drug Abuse and FSSA
By working with ISDH, IRHA and the Commission to Combat Drug Abuse, OCRA will help develop a grassroots workshop schedule to provide opportunities for rural communities to learn how to address the opioid epidemic from multiple angles.

2.3 Coordinate regional community development conferences
Identify knowledge gaps in rural community leadership in order to provide technical assistance through full day conferences.

2.4 Organize Midwest Main Street Conference
In partnership with Ohio and Kentucky Main Street Programs, OCRA takes the lead on planning and executing a newly created midwest Main Street conference in 2019.

2.5 Facilitate the Taskforce on Rural Affairs
In partnership with the Lt. Governor’s Office, Department of Workforce Development and the Governor’s Workforce Cabinet, OCRA will help lead the taskforce on gathering input on programming and policy for Rural Indiana. Recommendations may center on categories of leadership, tax and fiscal policy, placemaking, housing and workforce development.
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. Expand community capacity building programs
Build on past agency efforts to support regional leadership and planning efforts.

3.2. Engage youth involvement in leadership activities through curriculum development and programming
Collaborate with Mayors’ Youth Councils, Promise Indiana, and school districts to provide programs and curriculum targeted towards youth involvement in community planning and development.

3.3. Leverage existing successful leadership resources through mentorship opportunities
Serve as convener for a mentorship program pairing local leaders in an effort to share best practices and inspire innovation and collaboration.
Support economic growth and preservation in the 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. Grow and cultivate downtown revitalization efforts
Provide strategic training using transformative and pioneering strategies with the guidance and assistance of the National Main Street Center, IMS organizations and Indiana Landmarks.

4.2. Deliver tactical placemaking training
Short-term, low-cost, and scalable placemaking projects can launch neighborhood and community development and long-term growth in rural Indiana communities. This series of two day hands-on workshops provides practical skills to complete a quality of place project that bolsters local community development.

4.3. Create and launch Downtown Development Week
As a way to encourage and celebrate downtowns of all sizes, OCRA will plan and execute a week-long celebration filled with activities, resources and trainings for communities around the state.

4.4. Design second-story housing competition for Main Street communities
The National Main Street Center cites this initiative as being the single most important element of successful and prosperous downtowns. With high vacancy rates in second story units across Indiana, the development of these units lead to an increase in property values and the profile and density of downtown districts.
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Facilitate strategies to address rural broadband access.

The importance of broadband cannot be overstated in rural Indiana and how it has an immense impact on education, workforce, healthcare, economic development and quality of life. Rural broadband is vital to ensuring our rural areas can continue to thrive. In order to grow access to broadband, infrastructure and community involvement must be established and cultivated.

5.1 Collaborate with Director of Broadband Opportunities
Partner with new Director, state agencies and other private sector partners to encourage innovation and broadband access. Work with communities to help take appropriate steps to minimize limitations to broadband investment.

5.2 Establish grant program to fund planning activities for the installation of broadband
Launch a pilot planning grant program to identify local broadband needs in order to define parameters for installation. Technical assistance will be provided in the form of data analysis by content experts at local universities.

5.3 Host Statewide Broadband Summit
Understanding the critical nature of quality broadband access across our rural communities, OCRA will gather experts and other key stakeholders to provide a day long informational seminar highlighting key topics and issues surrounding broadband opportunities.