



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.



Guiding Principles

Retain, attract and develop talent in our rural communities.

Incite and encourage regional collaboration in rural planning processes.

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
- Partner with applicable stakeholders on water infrastructure issues
- Implement Blight Clearance Program revisions
- Research, build and create a Section 108 program
- Partner with Indiana Bond Bank to provide a gap funding program

2 Expand OCRA's role as a Center of Excellence

- Highlight best practices and community successes via communications mediums
- Support programs focused on rural health
- Coordinate regional community development conferences
- Facilitate the Taskforce on Rural Affairs
- Prioritize continuous improvement of agency services

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
- Participate in the Opportunity Investment Consortium of Indiana

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
- Organize Midwest Main Street Conference
- 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
- Administer Next Level Connections Grant program



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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



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Strategic Framework

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 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.



Complete

1.1. Enhance 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.

On Jan. 31, 2018, Lt. Governor Suzanne Crouch announced the Stellar Communities Program, through the Office of Community and Rural Affairs, will now combine communities, creating a region that will emphasize collaboration between neighboring towns, cities and counties. Five finalists were announced in April, 2018 and began working with Ball State University's Indiana Communities Institute to discuss project alignment and continued planning efforts. In November, all five finalist regions completed the final step in the process by presenting their Regional Development Plans to the Stellar partners. Health & Heritage region and the New Allen Alliance were selected as the 2018 designees on Dec. 11, 2018.



In-progress

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.

In June 2019, OCRA announced the peer program, designed for communities to work together on improving their quality of place programming and have productive development conversations, is now open for applications. Through Peer mentorship, partnered communities will work together to enrich their community by improving quality of place programming and community development conversations. Driven by in-person assessments, stakeholder conversations, and peer advisement, a community will gather best practices and the necessary tools to help achieve their community's vision.

A second program, Connecting Communities, will be announced in 2020.



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Ongoing

1.3. 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.

OCRA will continue to meet with Indiana Finance Authority and other applicable partners to identify opportunities or enhancements that can be made to our water infrastructure programs. Ongoing participation with the Environmental Infrastructure Working Group (EIWG) and the Indiana Silver Jackets are opportunities to engage with leaders in water challenges.



Complete

1.4. Implement Blight Clearance Program revisions

Implement updates to improve the impact and accessibility for rural Indiana communities to encourage economic development.

On Oct. 2, 2018, OCRA announced that communities are able to apply for multiple projects as a part of the updated Blight Clearance Program. To improve the impact and accessibility of this grant, program revisions were made to allow cities and towns more options to fund multiple projects until the total grant amount reaches \$500,000. The new program follows an updated submission process and streamlined application. Funding is available on a yearly rolling basis. Applications are accepted until all funding is exhausted.



In-progress

1.5. Research, build and create a Section 108 program

Develop an infrastructure loan program that rural communities can utilize to assist in repair and expansion of infrastructure projects such broadband, sewer and water needs.



Complete

1.6. Partner with Indiana Bond Bank to provide a funding program

In response to financing shortfalls threatening to stall critical community development projects, a new program is created to help bridge funding shortfalls faced by recipients of Community Development Block Grants.

In Nov. 2018, the Indiana Bond Bank announced the launch of the Gap Avoidance Program. OCRA identified cities and towns who are facing financing gaps after being awarded funds as a part of their Community Development Block Grant projects. These funding gaps can cause project delays and force communities to find new funding sources in a short period of time. In a pooled financing transaction, multiple entities with similar financing needs come together in one transaction to achieve economies of scale.

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Strategic Framework

- 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.

On Aug. 9, 2018, OCRA launched a series of micro-learning videos designed as a resource to assist communities with capacity building, developing partnerships, and strengthening leadership. These twenty-five minute videos cover a variety of topics, including board development, succession planning, trail funding, health, volunteer engagement and asset mapping. New videos are released on the second Wednesday of every month. Newsletters have also been expanded to highlight successful quality of place best practices.

A new resource page is currently being developed to give a one-stop shop for communities and main street organizations looking for ideas, information and best practices.

- 2.2 Support programs focused on rural wellness**
By working with the Indiana State Department of Health OCRA will help develop supportive opportunities to assist rural communities learn how to address rural health issues from multiple angles
- In 2018, new funding from The State Office of Rural Health, a division of the Indiana State Department of Health was added to the Stellar Communities Program. The grant totals \$37,500 per region for projects that address health and wellness issues within the respective regions. Projects are encouraged to address a challenge identified in their Community Health Assessment.*

- 2.3 Coordinate regional community development conferences**
Identify knowledge gaps in rural community leadership in order to provide technical assistance through full day conferences.
- During the month of May 2019, six regional conferences were held in various locations across the state. The agenda included presentations on various ways communities can utilize OCRA and other state agencies like the Indiana Department of Homeland Security and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. These departments, as well as the director of broadband opportunities, shared how cities and towns in Indiana can increase the quality of life in their communities with state assistance.*

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Complete

2.4 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.

At the end of 2018, the taskforce concluded its mandate. Each member was asked to join an advisory group to serve in a consultative capacity to OCRA, to provide feedback and suggestions on programming and operations moving forward.



Ongoing

2.5 Prioritize continuous improvement of agency services

Provide the highest quality customer service and deliver efficient and effective government resources to rural communities.

Throughout 2018, OCRA has enhanced the grant procedures, streamlined processes and improved the collection of stakeholder input. OCRA is also in the process of implementing a new grant management system that is planned to go live by late-2019.

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Strategic Framework

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.



Ongoing

3.1. Expand community capacity building programs

Build on past agency efforts to support regional leadership and planning efforts.

In August 2018, OCRA partnered with HPG Network to launch regional capacity building workshops to assist communities interested in preparing for the Stellar Communities Program application. The program is designed for any community leaders looking to build relationships within their own community and the region that surrounds them.

In 2019, OCRA continued this program and offered workshops focused on providing an understanding of regionalism, creating your narrative and transforming individual communities into high capacity regions. By sharpening existing or introducing new tools, communities can work better individually and collaboratively within self-created regions.



In-progress

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.

In June 2019, OCRA announced it partnered with the Indiana Youth Institute to provide a unique opportunity to retain talent and build assets in rural areas for future generations. Rural communities were invited to apply for an opportunity to launch a Promise Indiana initiative in their county. This program works with collaborative communities to encourage saving behaviors, while engaging local schools and community and youth-serving organizations.



In-progress

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.

In August 2018, Lt. Governor Crouch made nine appointments to a newly created Main Street Council. Currently, OCRA is exploring programming around regional main street organizations.



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In-progress

3.4. Support Rural Opportunity Zones

An advisory leadership, together with backbone agencies, training, and consultancy partners, will collectively provide coordinated assistance to investment deals as they clear milestones and prepare for Opportunity Zone investment infusions.

As of April 2018, OCRA is marketing the informational webinars available to communities within the zones wanting to learn more.

In August 2019, OCRA partnered with the Purdue Center for Regional Development/Extension Community Development, to create an initiative is to build the capacity of Opportunity Zones in rural Indiana to attract private, public and/or philanthropic sector investments that support locally-driven priorities. Six sites were selected to receive technical assistance and capacity-building support . This program is funded by a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from the Indiana U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development.



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Strategic Framework

4 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.



In-progress

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 and Indiana Main Street organizations.

In late 2018, seven Indiana Main Street communities will participate in transformation workshops led by National Main Street Center consultants: Angola, Beech Grove, Jasper, Madison, Peru, Terre Haute and Winamac volunteered for this pilot program. Workshops will assist the Indiana Main Street organizations to define community informed and market driven strategies that can direct and strengthen their revitalization efforts. As of April 2019, all the community based workshops have been completed and community summary data is being compiled by the National Main Street center.

Also announced in late 2018, nine Main Street organizations were selected for the IMPACT program to include: Seymour, Fairmount, Tell City, Tipton, Rockville, Sullivan, Dillsboro, Elwood and LaPorte, and they will be working with Ball State University’s Indiana Communities Institute to design and implement business investment strategies for their downtowns. OCRA was awarded a \$100,000 grant from the USDA Rural Development to create the IMPACT Main Street program.



Complete

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.

In October 2018, [The Musicant Group](#), completed a series of two-day workshops titled “Placemaking for Main Streets” in six communities across Indiana to include: Lafayette, Bloomington Angola, Plymouth, Bargersville and Marion. Each community built a temporary public placemaking installation created in strategic areas of their respective downtowns. More than 200 participants from local main street organizations, planners, and private firms devoted time, resources and creativity in helping communities grow.



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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.

More than 30 cities, towns, main street organizations and economic development groups planned events to include festivals, scavenger hunts, contests, business openings, and costume contests, just to name a few. Five communities received a \$1,000 grant to fund their DDW events.

In May 2019, five communities received up to a \$1,000 grant to fund their DDW events. Planning is underway to host DDW again in 2019.



4.4. Organize Great Lakes Main Street Conference

In partnership with the National Main Street Center and Michigan Main Street Program, planning and hosting a newly created midwest Main Street conference in 2019.

The event was held on August 19 and 20, 2019 at the Century Center in South Bend, Indiana. Multi-track sessions will occur throughout the two-day conference focusing on sustainability, economic vitality and cultivating quality places. Local tours and networking opportunities are also components of the conference.

It was also announced that the 2020 Great Lakes Regional Main Street Conference will be held in Downtown Royal Oak, Michigan.



4.5. Design second-story housing competition for Main Street communities

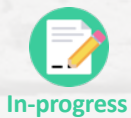
The National Main Street Center cites this initiative as being the single most important element of successful and prosperous downtowns. With high vacancy rates in second story units across Indiana, the development of these units lead to an increase in property values and the profile and density of downtown districts.

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Strategic Framework

5 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 the 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.

On Aug. 16, 2018 Lt. Governor Suzanne Crouch announced Scott Rudd will serve as the state's new Director of Broadband Opportunities. In 2018, OCRA has partnered with Scott to administer the Broadband Summit, the Broadband Readiness Planning Grants and future opportunities.



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.

In Aug. 2018, five rural Indiana communities were announced who received funding as a part of the Broadband Readiness Planning Grant. Purdue Center for Regional Development will provide technical assistance to all the pilot communities.



5.3 Host 2018 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.

On Oct. 18, 2018, a full-day broadband summit was completed with panels and speeches from Lt. Governor Crouch and City of Fishers Mayor Scott Fadness. The event was hosted by Office of Lt. Governor, the Office of Community and Rural Affairs and the State Department of Agriculture. The purpose of the summit was to engage the public and stakeholders with information to accelerate broadband connectivity, improve digital inclusion and support local priorities. More than 250 attendees from local governments, state agencies and broadband providers gathered to explore ways to facilitate the expansion of broadband capacity, access and utilization throughout the state.

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Ongoing

5.4 Administer Next Level Connections Grant program

OCRA will design and administer the first program to fund broadband expansion in the State. As part of Governor Holcomb's broader Next Level Connections infrastructure program, it is a significant investment of \$100 million for broadband deployment. The NLC program builds on infrastructure investments made through industry funds as well as prior and ongoing grant programs.

On March 22, the Next Level Connections Grant program was launched by Governor Holcomb with applications due in May followed by a brief challenge period.

On Aug. 8, \$22.1 million in funding was awarded for 11 broadband expansion infrastructure projects across the state. This funding will provide broadband infrastructure to more than 4,800 homes and commercial locations in 12 counties. In addition to the \$22.1 million awarded through the grant, the seven telecommunications providers and utility cooperatives contributed \$14 million in matching funds, resulting in \$36.1 million total investment for broadband.