

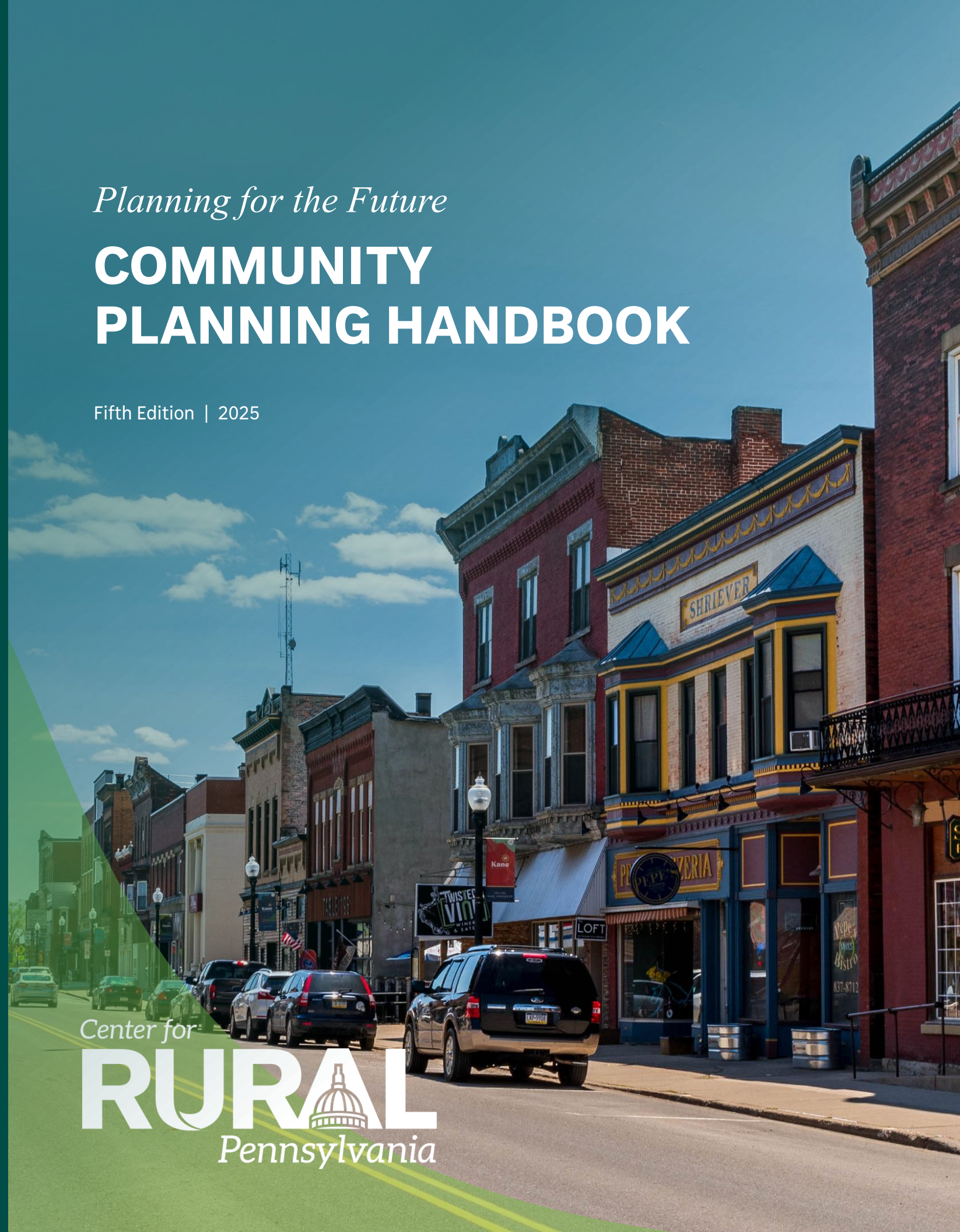
*Planning for the Future*

# COMMUNITY PLANNING HANDBOOK

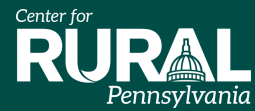
Fifth Edition | 2025

Center for  
**RURAL**  
Pennsylvania

Center for  
**RURAL**  
Pennsylvania



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative agency that serves as a resource for rural policymakers within the Pennsylvania General Assembly. It was created by Act 16 of 1987, the Rural Pennsylvania Revitalization Act. The Center works with the legislature, educators, state executive branch agencies, municipal and county stakeholders, and national, statewide, regional and local organizations to maximize resources and strategies that can better serve Pennsylvania's nearly 3.4 million rural residents.

The Center promotes and sustains the vitality of Pennsylvania's rural and small communities by

- sponsoring research projects to identify policy options for legislative, local, county, and executive branch consideration and action;
- collecting data on trends and conditions to understand the diversity of rural Pennsylvania;
- publishing information and research results to inform and educate audiences about the diverse people and communities of rural Pennsylvania; and
- participating in local, state and national forums on rural issues to present and learn from best practices.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The Fifth Edition of this Handbook was developed, written, and designed by Jon Stover & Associates (JS&A), an economic development consulting firm based in Washington, DC, in partnership with Future IQ. Pennsylvania Downtown Center provided strategic insights into the development of this Handbook.



Bellefonte, PA

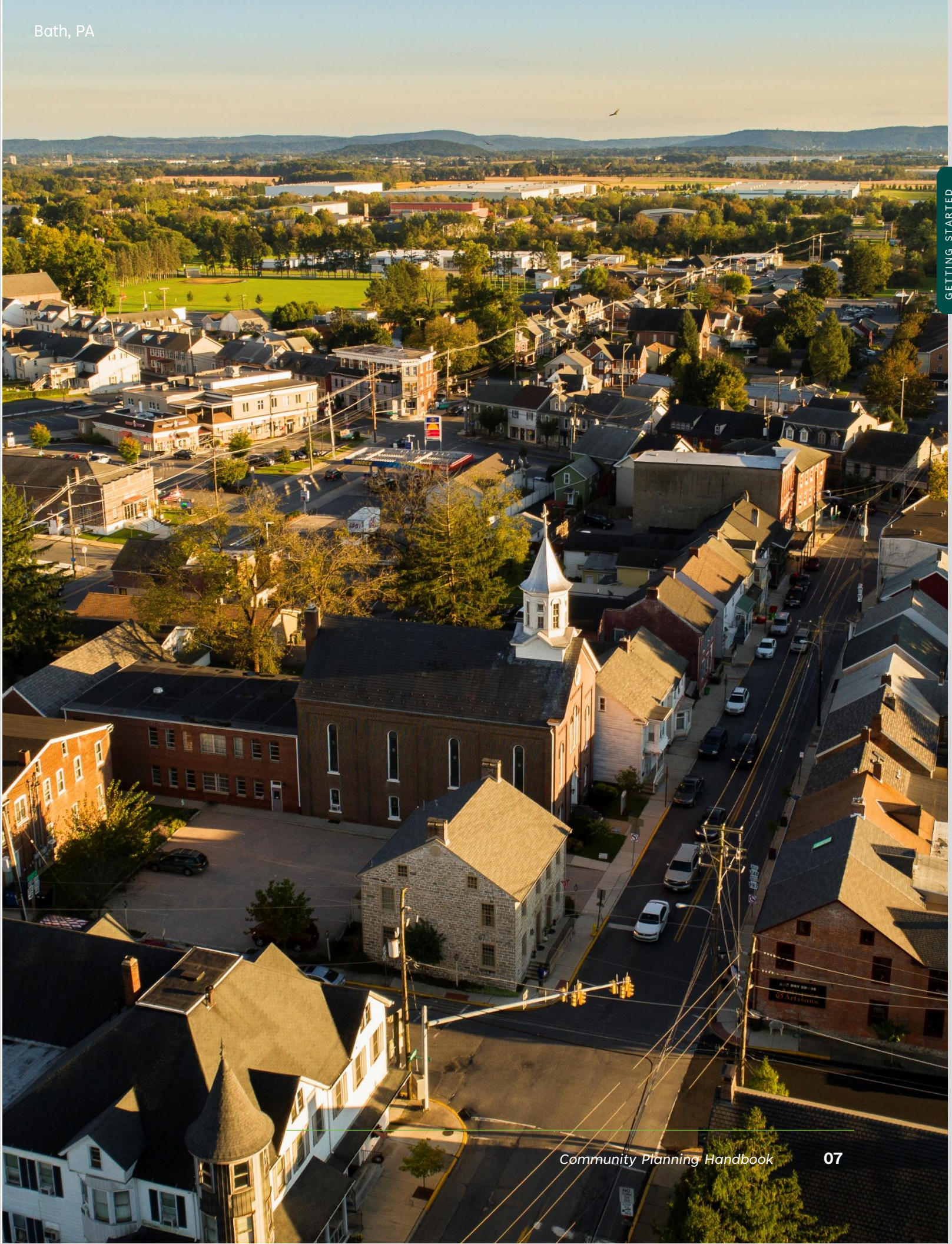
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*Community planning is essential for communities in rural Pennsylvania and beyond as communities adapt to demographic and economic changes.*

This Community Planning Handbook builds on the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's ongoing commitment to empowering rural communities as they build toward strong and resilient futures.



Rural places are essential communities in Pennsylvania. In 2024, nearly one in four Pennsylvanians lived in a rural community, and almost two-thirds of the Commonwealth’s municipalities were in rural areas.



64%

of Pennsylvania’s municipalities are rural.



3.4 Million

Pennsylvanians live in rural communities, making up 26% of the Commonwealth’s population. Pennsylvania has the 4th largest rural population in the U.S.



1.2 Million

people are employed in rural Pennsylvania across more than 80,000 employers.



\$150 Billion

worth of products and services are produced in rural Pennsylvania each year.

**Definition of Rural Communities**

Rural definitions are based on population density, and designations are established following every decennial census. As of 2020, a county or school district is classified as rural when the number of people per square mile within the county or school district is fewer than 291 (which is the statewide population density). Counties and school districts that have 291 people or more per square mile are considered urban. A municipality is defined as rural when the number of people per square mile in the municipality is fewer than 291 or the municipality is in a rural county and has fewer than 2,500 residents. All other municipalities are considered urban.

Data source: Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Census



## ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

**The handbook is the fifth iteration of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's efforts to explain the concept and steps of community planning and visioning.**

The handbook explains the process of community planning, explores strategies for community visioning, provides illustrative and inspirational case studies, and details how to take action in your community with tangible and approachable steps. The fifth version of the community planning handbook is meant to speak to current trends in rural Pennsylvania and provide an approachable guide for community residents.

This handbook can be used by municipal or county leadership, community members, and other local stakeholders as they launch community-led efforts to design a path forward for their communities that suits a host of residents, businesses, community organizations, local governments, and other local players alike. It can be read cover to cover or section by section, according to your needs.

We at the Center for Rural Pennsylvania hope this handbook will serve as a useful resource for Pennsylvania's communities.

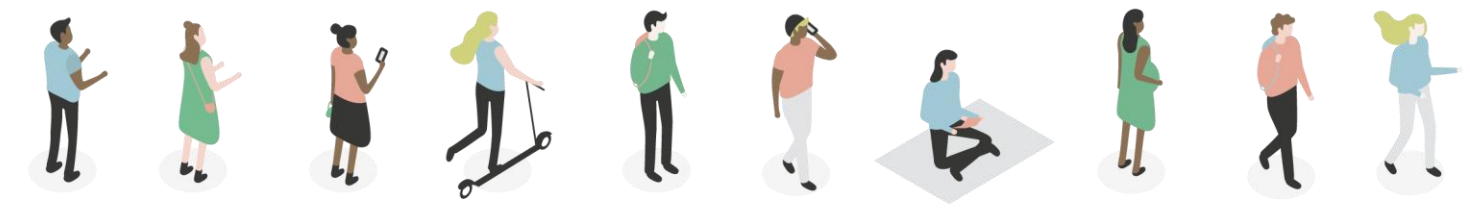
Community planning is essential to creating quality, strong, livable, and attractive places that reflect the will and desires of the communities.

## PLANNING AND VISIONING MATTER IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

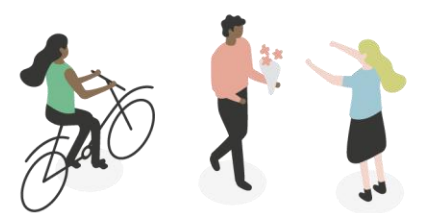
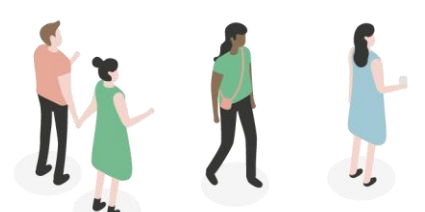
Long-term plans and visions help communities work toward the best version of the towns and cities they want to become. Strategizing about how places should look and feel gives shape to future decision-making and provides a map for development efforts.

When planners understand the wishes of local stakeholders, they strengthen their decision-making and can orient their approach and priorities around what will make the biggest positive impact on the people who live there.

Community visioning and planning are two different tools for helping places achieve their goals and priorities. Visioning reflects big-picture aspirations for the future, illustrating the hopes of the community and laying a foundation to guide decision-making for years to come. Meanwhile, community planning delivers pragmatic and action-oriented strategies to work toward community goals.

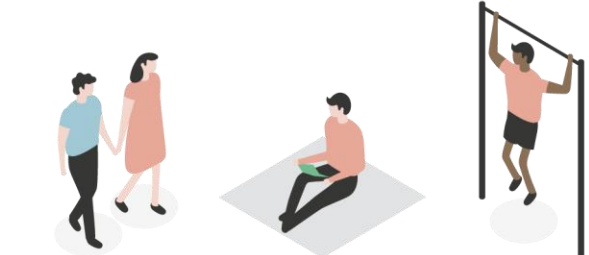
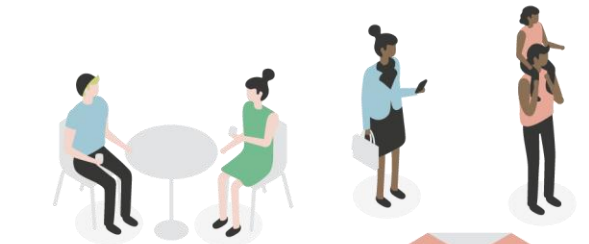


Community planning can start with anyone who's interested in building momentum around ideas for the future of their community.



**YOU CAN START THE PLANNING PROCESS FOR YOUR COMMUNITY.**

The person to begin community planning (and perhaps visioning) is often a community member who is connected to either local networks of community members, nonprofit partners, or a public institution, but anyone can be first if they're willing to start small and invite fellow stakeholders into the process to start the conversation. Municipal or county officials may initiate visioning prior to a Comprehensive Plan Update or other major planning initiative. Nonprofit partners or community development organizations may kick off community planning around a specific redevelopment or creating a new institution, public space, or financing mechanism for municipal projects. Members of the community may organically come together to discuss specific concerns or major projects gaining public awareness. **Remember, the process can be as formal or informal as needed when getting started.**



**Who can be involved in community planning?**

Community planning can involve a broad range of stakeholders, each playing a distinct role in conveying their perspectives and opportunities.



**COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

Community members are front and center throughout the process, whether they drive the community planning process or are brought into the process by municipal staff or officials.



**LOCAL BUSINESS OWNERS**

Business owners may not always be the first ones involved in planning but provide an essential viewpoint on the local economy and as employers.



**LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Municipal or county government staff can be helpful as both conveners and suppliers of expertise, supporting community planning efforts step by step.



**NONPROFIT PARTNERS**

Nonprofit partners are essential to expanding the impact of community planning efforts and ensuring there is resourcing behind proposed initiatives. Community foundations, in particular, are often key partners.



**DEVELOPERS**

Understanding incentives and challenges for developers is critical to building a path for future development in a way that is realistic and sustainable.

## Community planning efforts exist on a spectrum of investment and formality, spanning a wide range of projects.

**COMMUNITY PLANNING CAN BE INFORMAL AND GRASSROOTS-ORIENTED, OR PART OF A SUBSTANTIAL FORMAL PLANNING PROCESS. THE KINDS OF RESOURCES AND INVESTMENT NEEDED WILL DEPEND ON THE PURPOSE AND SCALE OF YOUR PROJECT.**

Community plans can range in scale, from planning for a new regional effort to refreshing a singular block or park in a community. The community planning process can be adapted and scaled to meet the needs of each project and the opportunities within each community.



### REIMAGINING PLACES

Reimagining buildings, exploring new development opportunities, or improving a local park are just a few examples of how you can plan new uses for community spaces. These planning efforts can range from a small space to a vast site.



### CREATING A NEW IDENTITY

As community demographics shift and populations change, it becomes essential for communities to plan with both today's community and tomorrow's future generations in mind. Plans like Downtown Master Plans are one example of how communities can do this.



### MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Key topics like health, access to food, transportation, and social infrastructure can be central to larger planning efforts or approached as a singular topic for a community's plan. These projects may be launched by municipal or regional organizations, or by nonprofits and residents.



### ACHIEVING OBJECTIVES

Municipalities are often required to create long-range plans, such as Comprehensive Plans, to receive state and federal funds. The community planning components of this process ensure that future investments align with the community's vision and create a roadmap for the future.



## COMMUNITY PLANNING PROJECTS AND EFFORTS CAN BE ADAPTED AT VARIOUS RESOURCE LEVELS AND CATERED TO MEET STAKEHOLDERS AND PLANNING LEADERS' OBJECTIVES FOR THE PROCESS.

Larger investment projects require more resources—whether that be more staff capacity, additional financial resources, a longer duration, or greater volunteer effort. Highly formal projects are often part of an official process and therefore require components such as public notice periods. Meanwhile, highly informal projects tend to emerge from free-flowing conversations rather than an official setup. As you think about your project, consider how formal and how resource-intensive your process will be, and how this will impact the kind of community engagement you undertake.



## Find your process.



Your planning process should be tailored to the type of project and desired outcomes of the process. There is no single right way to do community planning; the approach should fit the project and the community.

### NOT SURE THE RIGHT PROCESS FOR YOUR COMMUNITY? CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS:

- Are we focused on a specific project (e.g. museum, park, community event) or an overall plan for all future development?
- How big is the range of stakeholders we need to include? Will we focus on gaining input from specific organizations or from a full cross section of community members, businesses, and community leadership?
- What is the timeline for our process? Do we expect to arrive at a set of guiding insights over the course of several weeks or several months?
- How substantial will our action steps be (in terms of timeline, level of investment, number of residents or staff members involved, etc.)?

## Find your people.

Who you choose to engage, and in what order, can have a big impact on the flow of your process and the outcome of your project.

Start with a core group of stakeholders who are genuinely invested in the community and are committed to tackling the same challenge. Then work tier by tier to think through which groups should be brought into the process as it unfolds. Remember to include people whose perspectives will make the project better, people from whom you need approval or buy-in, and people who are connected to particular spaces or services in the community.



## How To: Community Planning Framework

Community planning is about translating the opportunities and existing dynamics in your community into improvements for local residents and community members. Use the chapters that follow to understand best practices for each step in the process, get inspired by case studies, and begin planning out how the steps can be applied in your own community. Depending on where you are in the process or where you could use the most help, you can dive into any of these sections to make use of this handbook.

### Phase 1: Laying the Groundwork

*Getting ready to start a community planning project or not sure where to start?*



**IDENTIFY THE OPPORTUNITY:** Determine the challenge you're responding to and get buy-in from core stakeholders.



**UNDERSTAND THE COMMUNITY:** Gather and interpret data about the community to understand trends in your municipality that you'll respond to through community planning.

### Phase 2: Creating a Vision

*Interested in re-imagining your community or launching a visioning project?*



**ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY:** Conduct community outreach and engagement to bring a thoughtful group of voices together.



**CREATE A VISION:** Synthesize community input and data insights into a cohesive vision statement, building on what community members imagine for their future.

### Phase 3: Taking Action

*Ready to make your community plan a reality?*



**TRANSLATE VISION INTO ACTION:** Connect your vision to specific routes of action and map out what resources and partners you can leverage as you begin.



**BUILD A ROADMAP FOR THE FUTURE:** Build an action plan to identify specific tasks, responsible parties, resources, and timing.



*Phase 1:*

## Laying the Groundwork



Communities in rural Pennsylvania are experiencing ongoing change, producing new challenges and opportunities. By discussing evolving trends and bringing community members together around new projects, communities can successfully adapt to these shifting dynamics.

### What does it mean to lay the groundwork in your community?

To begin the planning process, you'll need to carefully articulate the dynamics you're responding to in your community, especially the kinds of challenges and opportunities that inspired you to get started. Define the specific circumstances in a way that builds community buy-in and energy to collaborate on this planning effort. You'll begin gaining consensus on the project at hand and considering the right scale for your effort, whether it's a comprehensive plan, a specific development project, a community event, or even a new community event. Sum up some possible approaches and identify community assets, strengths, and resources you can leverage throughout the process.

Once you've identified the task at hand, you can begin having conversations with early stakeholders. Make sure to stay informed with respect to ongoing community news, including demographic, social and economic trends. By examining the nature and extent of the problems and challenges you're working to solve, you can get buy-in from local stakeholders and pick the right path for future community planning.



Annual "Breakfast Meeting on Agriculture" in Tioga County, PA



## Identify the opportunity.

Gaining momentum around planning is critical —and requires both identifying a goal and engaging key people in initial discussions.

The very first step of the planning process is to set your initial aim and examine the current context. From here, you can create your initial coalition to guide planning efforts. Figure out what challenge the community needs to respond to and start rallying others around the use of community planning to address it. As you begin to articulate your community goals, try to formulate a simple pitch that you can use when bringing others into the initial steps of the community planning process.

Through conversations with neighbors and community members, you can begin to encourage the community to recognize the role of community planning in responding to collective concerns. Consider which stakeholders will be most essential to visioning and begin reaching out to leaders and community members from different backgrounds and perspectives. Be strategic about who you connect with, understanding who can be a close ally as you initiate community planning, versus who might become part of the process later on.

**TIP:** Starting with the right group of people is essential to building a sustainable community planning process. Focus on connecting with community members who can speak to the needs and perspectives of a particular community group or hold a specific area of expertise. The core group facilitating visioning should be composed of people who are united around understanding and addressing the problem, excited about using community planning as a tool, and focused on solving community issues and bringing a positive mindset toward solving problems, rather than focusing on getting the credit for doing so.

## Getting started

It can be intimidating to kick off the planning process and bring the initial group of stakeholders together, but keep in mind that the essence of this step is simply starting the conversation with friends and neighbors. As you check in with different players in the community, keep in mind the following steps:

- 1. Identify a challenge**  
Thinking about the needs of the community and the ongoing dynamics that are impacting your community, what are the shifts, problems, or opportunities that you want to respond to? Sum these up in a succinct and compelling way so that you can initiate conversations with others on the subject.
- 2. Consider past actions**  
If there were previous attempts to do what you are planning on doing, learn from how the project was approached before.
- 3. Articulate the goal of your project**  
Prepare a short pitch on why the community needs to address this challenge and how community planning can play a role in identifying solutions and activating the community to implement them.
- 4. Make a stakeholder list**  
Build a list of people who will be most critical to making the planning process a success. The list should include people from different backgrounds (e.g. economic development, workforce, local institutions, community groups) who can bring a valuable perspective or organizational resources to bear on the tasks ahead.
- 5. Contact community members**  
Reach out to the folks on your list! Explain the need for planning and the value visioning can bring to creating positive change in your community.
- 6. Create a forum for continuing discussions**  
Identify a location or cadence for early meetings—or, if it feels too early in the process to set official meetings, consider where future meetings could be held and how and when your initial group of stakeholders can connect to discuss further.

### REMEMBER

The starting point of community planning can look different depending on the scale of your project and the existing resources of your community. Just having the initial conversations with neighbors is a great way to get started, as you think through defining the goal of community planning and visioning and bringing more stakeholders into the fold.

## Making the case for community planning to friends and neighbors

As you figure out the scale of your community planning effort and who to bring into the conversation as you kick things off, also consider how you'll encourage the group to leverage community planning (and possibly visioning) throughout the process. Use these benefits of community planning listed below to show other community members the value of community planning in bringing your goals to life.

### INCREASING COMMUNITY BUY-IN

- Community planning fosters a sense of ownership by community members who were part of co-creating the guiding principles for future development.
- Inviting more stakeholders and community members to discuss their ideas makes future planning outcomes both more effective and more sustainable, championed by those who are most impacted by these decisions.

### RECOGNIZING KEY PRIORITIES

- Incorporating feedback from a variety of stakeholders helps ensure that development decisions bear in mind a full spectrum of considerations, including multiple viewpoints that might be overlooked otherwise.
- With substantive public input can elevate important concerns and ensure that decisions prioritize what is most desired by the community.

### GUIDING DECISION-MAKING

- Having a clear set of community needs and ideas for the future serves as an invaluable guide for future planning efforts.
- A community-led plan helps decision-makers direct resources where they will be more impactful and adhere to the community's development priorities.



*Turning Weaknesses Into Strengths  
Spotlight on Vision Together*

## Finding Your Superpower and Using it for Good

In Johnstown, Pennsylvania, community members kicked off the process of community planning by forming Capture Teams. Each team was a group of neighbors coming together around an issue they'd identified together—spanning from housing and vacant properties to animal welfare. The United Neighborhoods group recognized that Johnstown's high vacancy rate and many blighted properties were one key issue to address.

Vision Together, the community organization created to support neighborhood Capture Teams, ran the numbers to see how many vacant properties there were in Johnstown and how much it would cost to construct new housing in those spaces. Vision Together partnered with a local nonprofit to build homes at an affordable price. The first home has already been purchased by a sponsor on behalf of a local veteran!

*"It's the beginning of a solution when you ask, 'what if?' It's 'what if?' and then 'what's next?'"*

—Robert Forcey,  
Executive Director of Vision Together

### INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Website: [www.johnstownvision.com](http://www.johnstownvision.com)

Contact: <https://www.johnstownvision.com/contact/>



## Recommendations for your initial outreach:

- Start with a coordinating committee first, including a core group of facilitators who are committed to the project of community planning.
- Build from there, inviting representatives of core organizations such as economic development professionals, nonprofits, the public library, the chamber of commerce, relevant community foundations, and workforce organizations.
- Once you have a regular schedule of meetings and have fully initiated the planning process, expand to include a broader stakeholder list such as community banks, tourism office, conservation groups, downtown groups, county services like housing and planning, and other institutions like a local hospital or higher education, if applicable.
- Keep inviting your group to meet monthly. Begin selecting big-picture things to work on. Often, communities create task forces to address the top priority items that emerge through community planning conversations.

## Ready to move forward?



**I know the overall goal of our community planning effort and can articulate this to others getting involved in the process.**

Many planning efforts kick off in response to a particular challenge. Being able to explain what those are and why they matter in your community is essential to building momentum and awareness around community planning.



**I know who needs to be involved in the process and have connected with those stakeholders.**

The process of outreach is where the rubber meets the road: with bringing the earliest group of facilitators together. Be strategic about bringing in voices who will play a productive role and have a team-oriented approach.



**Our core group recognizes the importance of community planning and has an idea of when and how we are meeting and communicating.**

Once your core group has decided to come together around your community planning effort and has a means of communication, you're ready to move on to the next step!

## Worksheet #1

### Kicking Off Community Planning

#### The Need for Community Planning

*The planning process should respond to a particular problem, an ongoing trend in your community, or concerns of the community. Identify your reason for planning or visioning and get others to align around that focus area.*

#### I want to see our community address...

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

#### Initial Outreach

*Connect with other leaders in the community to bring your coordinating committee together. Think about people who are deeply familiar with the community, might contribute valuable insights, and would take a solutions- and team-oriented approach to the process.*

Name	Role in the Community	Contact Info



## Understand the data.

Referencing data about your community allows you to understand current problems, potential opportunities, and your community’s outlook for the future.

The essence of this step is understanding your community and the current challenges and dynamics you’re facing. Digging into relevant data points on key elements of your community, be it demographics or industry trends, helps you understand the nature and scale of the problem.

Compelling data points can also be a rallying point to bring people together around the reality of a problem. At times, community members may have a sense of an ongoing challenge or a specific problem in rural places, but they can’t assemble community members to take on that challenge until they communicate clearly what it is. Compiling data about your community can also be a starting point for applying for grant money to address concerns.

Looking to relevant data points is also foundational for identifying solutions. A thorough data narrative can illuminate both challenges and opportunities and help communities understand how to transform the former into the latter. Data about your community can help paint a picture of the place you’re trying to improve and shed light on nuances and tradeoffs to various approaches you’re considering.

With an understanding of trends in your community, you are better positioned to articulate the need for future planning efforts, identify resources to leverage throughout the process, and plan for the future. Even if you have a strong sense of your community now, you’ll need to look to demographic and economic data points to predict future outcomes. Using data resources empowers you to proactively address those future trends and build a community planning process that generates practical, sustainable solutions.

**TIP:**

Different data points speak to different facets of your community. To build a comprehensive picture of your community, look at a variety of different angles, such as population projections, employment trends by industry, figures about rural schools and hospitals, and demographic indicators.

## What do decision-makers need to know about rural communities?

### 1. Population size and over time trends:

The size of rural communities is also

- the size of the tax base for financing public projects;
- the size of the workforce who can serve local populations and attract new businesses and industries; and
- the number of people in need of housing, utility and broadband connectivity, public services, and other resources.

### 2. The demographic profile of people and households:

Different groups of people, like families or seniors, have distinct needs that should be accounted for in the planning process. Policymakers and local advocates who take the composition of their communities for granted run the risk of overlooking specialized needs that matter most to their constituents.

### 3. The fiscal context of towns and municipalities:

Most places have relatively fixed infrastructure and, as a result, rigid infrastructure costs. Being aware of the evolving picture of local economies and tax revenues enables policymakers to anticipate potential funding challenges and proactively position their communities for fiscal success.

## Sources for Data Collection

*These online sources are a great place to start for understanding trends in your community:*

### POPULATION & DEMOGRAPHICS

- ▶ U.S. Census, including American Community Survey
- ▶ Pennsylvania Department of Education
- ▶ The Center for Rural Pennsylvania

### ECONOMY & WORKFORCE

- ▶ Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry
- ▶ Census OnTheMap
- ▶ Bureau of Labor Statistics

# Rural Pennsylvania Data Snapshot

Many counties in rural Pennsylvania are experiencing no population decreases over time, mirroring national trends and a continued reality for rural communities.

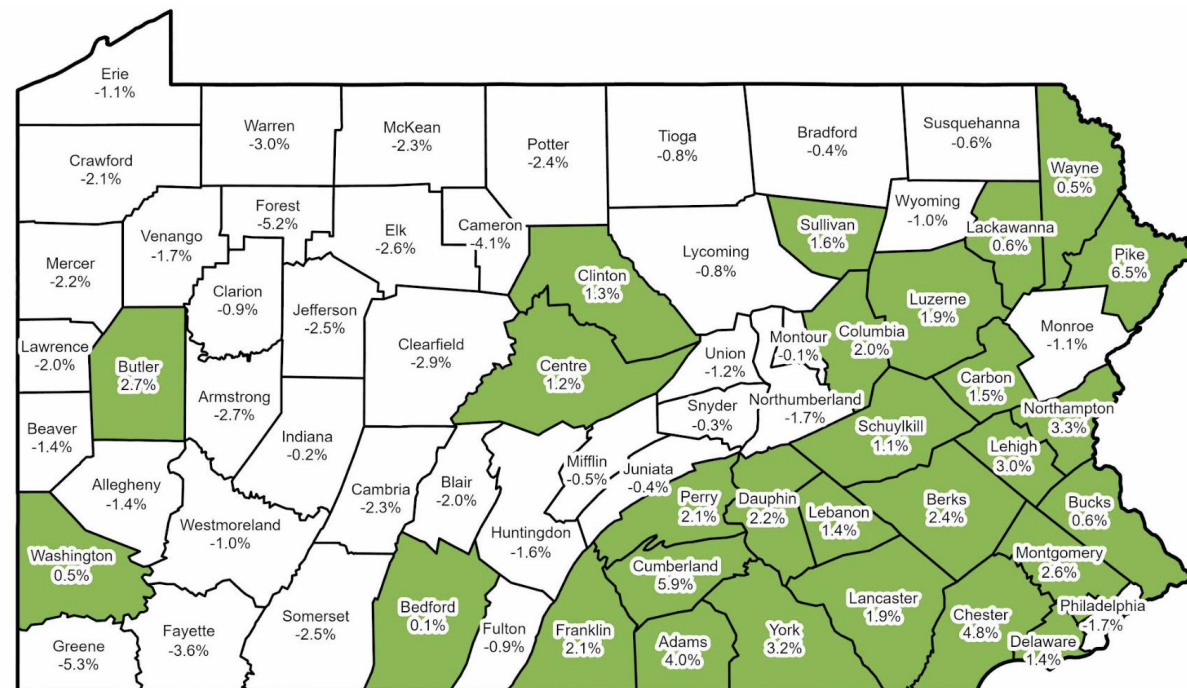
## A DECLINING POPULATION

Communities across rural Pennsylvania are losing population overall. Counties on the western side of the state tend to be losing population, unlike urban counties in the eastern part of the state. Between 2020 and 2024, the typical rural county in Pennsylvania lost 0.36% of its population, opposite the state's total population gain of 0.64%. This decline was as significant as -5.3% in Greene County.

## NATIONAL COMPARISON

Rural population decline is not unique to Pennsylvania. Across the United States, just under half of all counties had a population decrease between 2020 and 2024. Most of these counties, just over 80%, were rural.

## PERCENT CHANGE IN PENNSYLVANIA'S POPULATION ESTIMATES, 2020 TO 2024



Statewide Population Change, 2020 to 2024 = 0.64%

□ Population Decrease or No Change  
 ■ Population Increase

Map credit: Center for Rural PA

Data source: 2024 Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau

## Data Insights

### Why is the population declining?

Population change is caused by a combination of four factors: births, deaths, in-migration, and out-migration. When the sum of births and in-migration exceeds the sum of deaths and out-migration, the population is growing. Conversely, when deaths and out-migration exceed births and in-migration, the population will be decreasing over time. Let's take a look at each of these factors to see what's playing the largest role in rural Pennsylvania.



#### LOW BIRTH RATES

The annual number of births in rural Pennsylvania decreased by 12% from 2010 to 2023. Between 2020 and 2024, only 128,375 babies were born in rural Pennsylvania.



#### DEATH RATES EXCEEDING BIRTH RATES

Starting in 2000, rural counties had more deaths than births. This natural change in population decreased rural Pennsylvania's residents by approximately 189,454 people between 2020 and 2024, a total exceeding the number of births.



#### MIGRATION AWAY FROM RURAL COMMUNITIES

Members of rural communities are relocating to other parts of the state or beyond. Note, however, that incoming migration still exceeds outgoing migration in many of Pennsylvania's counties.



#### MIGRATION TO RURAL PENNSYLVANIA

Migration from rural areas is not the full story. Between 2020 and 2024, approximately 46,623 more new residents moved to rural communities in the Commonwealth than residents who left the state. Of these new residents, 41% moved to Pennsylvania from another country, increasing the diversity of residents who define rural communities.

# Rural Pennsylvania Data Snapshot

Rural Pennsylvania communities are also shifting in demographic composition, reflecting broader trends in communities across the country.

By 2040, 56 of the 67 rural counties in Pennsylvania will have more people aged 65 or older than those under the age of 20.

Pennsylvania State Data Center

The industry composition is also changing in tandem with demographics. Rural Pennsylvania has seen an uptick in management companies, transportation and warehousing, and professional, scientific, and technical services.

Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry

## CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

Rural Pennsylvania is experiencing an aging population. Residents over the age of 65 now represent a higher share of the total rural population. From 2000 to 2023, the average age of rural Pennsylvania residents increased from 39 to 45, compared to the state median age of 41. In fact, between 2010 and 2023, the number of residents age 65+ in rural Pennsylvania increased by 23%.

Over the past 20 years, the population of rural Pennsylvania has become increasingly diverse in terms of race. In 2000, approximately 5% of the rural population represented non-white and/or Hispanic origin. This share more than doubled by 2023 to 11%. This uptick in diversity reflects new opportunities for rural communities, with new voices to engage in visioning and planning processes and new perspectives that may shift a community's needs and values. Creating inviting and welcoming processes provides a critical inclusiveness vital to changing the community's future.

Household composition in rural Pennsylvania is changing as well. Today, rural households are more likely to be married couples without children and less likely to be growing families with children, signifying a shift in households and family structures. These shifts come with implications for school districts, differences in rural healthcare needs, and changes in the typology, style, and amount of housing needed by the Commonwealth's rural residents.

## How do rural Pennsylvania's population trends affect quality-of-life issues and long-term community health?



### WORKFORCE

Fewer residents and an aging population in rural areas mean a smaller number of potential employees to meet labor needs across rural PA. Community planning will involve finding ways to include people of all ages in local economies and attract and retain younger populations and families.



### HOUSING

Understanding demographic patterns will be essential to meeting community housing needs now and in the future. Sometimes demographic trends can be counterintuitive; if average household size is decreasing, communities may require more housing units even as rural populations decrease overall.



### HEALTHCARE

As the average age of rural PA residents rises, health care needs will increase. Rural communities will need sufficient investment in hospital systems, qualified doctors and personnel, and an understanding of the health needs of rural seniors.



### SCHOOLS

With fewer families locating in rural areas and therefore fewer students in classrooms, rural school districts will have to adapt to operating at different scales. School districts in rural areas will need to adapt their budgets, infrastructure, and staffing levels.



### TAX BASE AND PUBLIC FINANCE

Municipal budgets are being stretched in many different directions. Community input will be central to deciding which programs will be most impactful at bolstering local efforts and directing support to community institutions that support local economies.



### COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Community organizations are likely to draw in fewer volunteers and participants or see lower budgets with declining rural populations. Organizations will have to re-articulate their value proposition to local communities, demonstrating how these institutions serve a vital role in rural places.

As rural communities evolve, participatory planning must continue on an ongoing basis to incorporate the needs and perspectives of new residents into community plans.

## Why is community planning important if...



...your community is growing?

Communities with a growing population are welcoming new community members and need to include those new residents in future planning efforts. This is especially true in places that are growing despite domestic population losses, where immigration more than compensates for the deficit and the true level of population change is masked by the net total. Growing populations have greater resource needs. Population growth is likely to fuel further development, making planning and visioning essential to align further growth with community wants and needs.



...your community is staying the same?

Net zero population change does not mean a population isn't changing. In many cases, the population is aging, with older residents in need of different resources and systems as they age. Places with stagnant populations may also experience stagnation in development, meaning that although there is minimal new construction, the housing stock and public infrastructure are aging, creating a new set of needs and challenges. Population stagnation can also understate the true level of change that is occurring as some populations leave and others arrive; even if the net change is zero, communities still have a host of new residents whose wants and needs need to be incorporated into community planning.



...your community is losing population?

Communities with a shrinking population face yet another set of specific needs. With a smaller population often comes fewer tax dollars. Communities may have fewer resources with which to embark on new developments (or even just maintain their *existing* housing stock and public infrastructure), while infrastructure costs remain high. Communities with shrinking populations often face unique public finance challenges, alongside financing challenges for education and local businesses. Understanding the underlying population dynamics and community needs helps municipalities direct their resources more strategically.

## BRINGING A DATA-DRIVEN PERSPECTIVE

This section outlines many of the common population and economic trends unfolding across Pennsylvania's rural places. These trends can serve as a useful backdrop and relevant context. Communities should consider whether some of the trends identified in this section are relevant to them, and if so, how these patterns will affect their ongoing needs, challenges, and opportunities.

More broadly, this section speaks to the importance of understanding ongoing changes at the community level and responding to those changes proactively. By leveraging localized demographic and economic data, rural places can understand ongoing dynamics, build consensus around whether and how they want to change course, and map out development pathways that make goals for the future possible.

### Quick Takeaway:

## Key Trends to Consider When Helping Your Community Plan for the Future

How are these statewide trends affecting your community? Increasing awareness about demographic and economic shifts can help bring new momentum for visioning in your community.

### SUMMARY OF RURAL PENNSYLVANIA TRENDS



RURAL POPULATION  
DECLINES



AGING POPULATION  
AND WORKFORCE



NEW CHALLENGES  
FOR PUBLIC FINANCE



SHIFTING INDUSTRY AND  
WORKFORCE DYNAMICS



## Thinking Creatively About Asset Mapping Spotlight on Brattleboro, VT

### Understanding Your Community and What's Possible

Brattleboro, Vermont was not necessarily the first place you'd think of as the obvious location for refugee resettlement. As Alexander Beck, Welcoming Communities Manager, put it: "Anything is possible. We went from zero refugee resettlement in 2020 to being the standard bearer for rural economic inclusion in our country."

But communities in Brattleboro wanted to see a growing workforce and had to rethink how to achieve this goal. Leadership in Brattleboro thought through population trends and conducted a thorough asset mapping process to find opportunities to achieve their goals for the future. The solution: the Welcoming Communities Initiative. Southeastern Vermont began welcoming new Americans through the Community Asylum Seekers Project (CASP) and the Ethiopian Community Development Corporation (ECDC) Multicultural Center. Meanwhile, with support from the Vermont Community Foundation, the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation began offering no cost trainings to make local workplaces become more welcoming.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF ASSET MAPPING IN PLANNING

*Asset mapping starts when you consider the various roles, authorities, and resources in your community that you can draw on to activate your community's goals. Especially in rural places, organizers need to think creatively about how to utilize their resources and be empowered to see any and all community strengths as economic development assets.*

#### INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

- Website: [www.brattleborodevelopment.com/](http://www.brattleborodevelopment.com/)
- Email: [info@brattleborodevelopment.com](mailto:info@brattleborodevelopment.com)



"Take a story or feeling in the community, something no one is working on, and then get some data to understand what's happening and go from there."

—Alex Beck, Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation

### Ready to move forward?



**I understand the extent of the problem or challenges we're trying to address through community planning.**

Data is often used to understand the nature of a problem in the community. Where possible, also get a sense of where the problem is heading in the future—will this be an ongoing dynamic or is there a specific future outcome your community is seeking to avoid?



**I have a data-informed understanding of our community: who we are and how our population is changing.**

Understanding the community might include learning about population trends, population ages and household structures, or employment trends in different industries.



**I understand some of the major dynamics and tradeoffs that will come into play in our development strategy.**

As you start to think about solutions in later steps, it's important to be aware of the consequences, financial or otherwise, or different paths forward.



**I know some of the costs involved in leaving the problem as it is, as well as have a rough idea of some of the costs involved with different alternatives.**

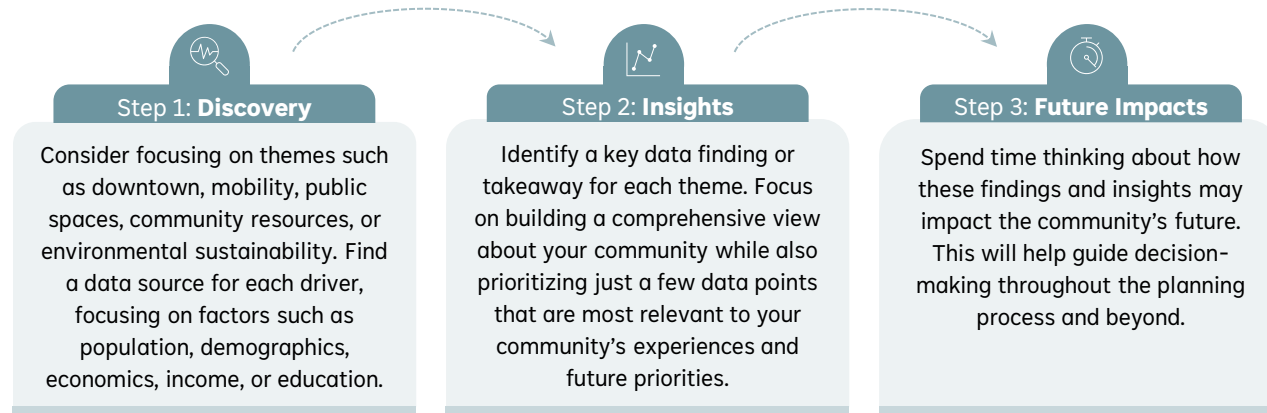
Understanding costs will help you invite other stakeholders into the process to discuss problems in the community, as well as assess future development plans.

Worksheet #2

## Understanding Community Dynamics

### Collecting and Using Data

The visioning process requires not just coming together for community discussions but also understanding what your community looks like and where it's going. Use this framework to investigate current trends in your community and inform your community planning efforts.



### Data Insights

Think about what kinds of issues your community is working on and search for data points that speak to the community's strengths and weaknesses, as well as what your community might look like in the future.

Theme <i>What topics are most important?</i>	Data Source <i>Where can I find this information?</i>	Finding <i>What is the main takeaway(s) about this consideration?</i>	Implication <i>Why is this important for the future of our community?</i>

**▲ Helpful Tip:**

Just as important as identifying data points is recognizing their connection to future needs and changes in your community. Focus not just on getting the facts about the community but gaining insight into the dynamics you'll be navigating through community planning.

### Laying the Groundwork Checklist

## Ready to Move Forward?

Take a look at the items below to make sure you're covered all the steps in Laying the Groundwork. To continue the planning process, you don't need to have all the details figured out now, but you should have a broad understanding of what opportunity or need you're responding to, what geographic area or scale you're working in, and a sense of what you might hope to accomplish.



**I understand the opportunity for future planning in my community.**

There's a particular problem, existing dynamic, or challenge that you want to address. You're noticing something in the community that you think can be made a little better.



**I know what my community has to offer.**

You're invested in this place and its people. You know that the area has special people and places that make it feel like home. You're ready to articulate these things to others to show them why this place is worth investing in.



**I know the general scale of my future planning effort.**

You've determined whether you want to begin planning for an entire region, a municipality, or one neighborhood or corridor. Community planning can be done at any scale, but it helps to know which area you're focusing on.



**I have a sense of what I'm hoping to accomplish.**

You don't need to know the outcome of the process yet, but you're starting to think about what would constitute success, whether it's greater connectedness and engagement among neighbors or an action plan for your neighborhood or town.



**I'm starting to think about potential project partners.**

You've begun brainstorming who else you can connect with to initiate community planning or visioning. You know you're not alone in wanting to strengthen your community and are excited to connect with others who feel the same.

## Phase 2: Creating a Vision



Visioning empowers residents and community members to work toward their collective goals. Visioning can have a broad scope and include goals for the whole community, or it can be a process limited to one topic or project, such as a public park.

### What does it mean to do community visioning?

Community visioning is a process where community members come together to reflect on forward-looking goals for their community. Community-led visioning includes a thoughtful mix of residents, businesses, the workforce, local organizations, local leadership, and key institutions. After bringing these parties together, each participant can contribute their ideas and hopes for their community.

Visioning is important for developing a cohesive picture of what stakeholders want the future to look like for their place. It's not just helpful for communities to contribute to visioning efforts—it's absolutely essential that they play a leading role.

Visioning is critical for developing a future proactively and intentionally in line with place-based strategic goals. These efforts work best when part of a cohesive and community-led process. Community-led visioning helps with both understanding community wants and needs and positioning rural places for future development that enhances their vision.





## Engage the community.

Community engagement is at the heart of the visioning process: bringing in different perspectives to share ideas, provide insights, and build consensus around what community members want to see in their future.

### BEST PRACTICE:

As you consider venues and meeting times, do your best to introduce variation over the course of the process to catch as many segments of the population as possible. Consider and address potential obstacles for attendees, such as working hours, childcare, and mobility constraints.

Engaging the community is about designing a practical and inclusive process for community members to provide input and share ideas about the future of your community. The best community engagement processes find a way to include as many perspectives as possible without getting lost in the weeds listening to too many antagonistic voices. To do this, consider the kinds of opportunities for providing feedback, across in-person, virtual, and hybrid platforms.

Part of facilitating an effective community engagement process is managing expectations for the ongoing conversations and facilitating effectively. Make clear for public audiences and stakeholder engagement groups what their role in the process looks like and how they can contribute most effectively. Understand that some community members will introduce contradictory ideas; while it's expected that there will be disagreements, not all ideas need to be carried forward by the coordinating committee, especially if these ideas don't contribute to moving the process forward.

While conducting community outreach, focus on contacting community members from different positions and roles within the community: some from particular institutions, government bodies, informal citizens groups, or industry-specific backgrounds. Also consider the means you use to contact these audiences to invite them to contribute to the process. Where possible, reach out to community stakeholders across as many various mediums as possible, whether that be email blasts, local newspapers, posted notices, a website or other information hub online, or word of mouth in the community.



*Starting Small  
Spotlight on Wayne Tomorrow!*

## Two People, a Cup of Coffee, and the Desire to Bridge a Divided Community

Wayne County's community visioning started small. Just two community members, a retired NYU professor and a county commissioner, sat down together over coffee to try working together and finding areas they saw eye-to-eye on in a community divided on fracking.

Slowly building capacity, the pair soon started bringing other community stakeholders into those discussions and created a timeline of meeting monthly to discuss community issues on an ongoing basis. These monthly conversations were part of a process of intentional relationship-building and growing trust among community members. Ten years later, the group still meets monthly and continues to tackle community challenges through collaboration and visioning. Recent wins have included the creation of a new Agriculture Development plan for future generations and securing funding for expansion of broadband in Wayne County.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM 10 YEARS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

*Intentional relationship building is critical for community work. Consistent engagement leads to stability and trust.*

*Help everyone invited into visioning conversations to understand how their contributions fit into the visioning process. Teach participants how to contribute and what to get out of the group's efforts.*

### INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Website: [www.waynetomorrow.com](http://www.waynetomorrow.com)

Email: [waynetomorrow@waynecountypa.gov](mailto:waynetomorrow@waynecountypa.gov)



CREATING A VISION

## Community Engagement Methods and Meeting Types

Method	Advantages / Uses	Tips
Public town hall	Sharing an overview of the upcoming process, providing updates and news	Inform participants of the meeting's purpose and their role in contributing
Task force meetings	Gaining specific insights from people close to a specific sector or institution	Come in with an agenda and questions but be open to new directions
Community workshops	Engaging broader numbers of participants, facilitating community conversations	Create opportunities for everyone to interact and write out ideas
Online information hub	Making resources available, providing a mode of asynchronous engagement	Publicize this resource widely to increase its usefulness

Community engagement serves a number of different purposes: from increasing community buy-in to making future plans more effective by understanding a range of goals and concerns. An effective community engagement will raise new ideas, build consensus and relationships, create interpersonal networks to build from in future stages of visioning and planning, and get ahead of potential sources of opposition and concerns that may arise further down the road.

### QUICK ADVICE

In the early stages, it's not about engaging every single member of the community but about finding people who care and bringing them into the process. You may not engage every stakeholder, but if you can bring together a group who is committed to making things better for the community, a coalition of the willing, you're already on the right path.

## Designing a community engagement approach

### REACHING SPECIFIC POPULATIONS

As you connect with community members to gain their input about the future, consider when and how different groups might be able to engage. Some residents will prefer to look at information online and respond to online surveys; meanwhile, others will engage only through in-person meetings and prefer to receive mailers rather than social media posts. Find ways to connect with community members who are less online, as well as older and younger populations, trying to meet them where they're at and engage through mediums they use most often.

### KEEPING TRACK OF MEETINGS AND DECISIONS

Throughout community meetings, it's important to keep track of decisions that are made and feedback that is received from residents. Often, communities will have a designated note-taker during important meetings or provide a place (in-person or digitally) for community members to follow up with specific feedback in their own words. Recording key decisions and sharing them with the public is an important part of ensuring participants are heard and demonstrating the progress being made throughout the community engagement process.

Lewisburg, PA



Worksheet #3

## Planning Your Engagement Approach

### Community Engagement Methods

Use this worksheet to plan out your engagement strategy, the ways you will connect with community members, and your timeline for outreach and meeting preparations.

Here are the ways and platforms through which I will connect with community members...

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Timeline for Outreach

Connect with other leaders in the community to bring your coordinating committee together. Think about people who are deeply familiar with the community, might contribute valuable insights, and would take a solutions- and team-oriented approach to the process.

Goal Meeting Date	Meeting Purpose/ Participants

### Meeting Preparation Checklist

- Articulate a goal for the meeting
- Create an invitation
- Contact invitees
- Find/book a meeting space
- Set a recurring time
- Designate a facilitator and notetaker



*Bringing Community Members to the Spotlight on Greenwood, MO*

## Creating a Community List-Serv and Gathering Place

The community of Greenwood, Missouri was starting from scratch when they embarked on a comprehensive planning process. Two key tasks surfaced: building a Listserv for community outreach and finding a space for large community visioning sessions.

Building the listserv has been an iterative process. Community leaders began placing sign-up sheets at all kinds of community events and posting opportunities to get involved on the city’s Facebook page. Now, they’re planning an e-newsletter to continue improving community communication and providing service and event updates.

Once community members were recruited to participate in visioning, organizers had to find a space large enough to comfortably host visioning sessions and community meetings. Through local partnerships, the city was able to host a future visioning summit at Fellowship Church.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM GREENWOOD

*To reach as many community members as possible, Greenwood used surveys, newsletters, interviews, and in-person sessions. They also advertised community feedback opportunities through the newsletter, mailed postcards, a new electronic sign in front of City Hall, and social media posts.*

### INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

- Website: [www.greenwoodmo.com/](http://www.greenwoodmo.com/)
- Profile: [www.facebook.com/greenwoodmo](https://www.facebook.com/greenwoodmo)



CREATING A VISION

### Getting Creative: Ways to Reduce Stakeholder Fatigue

- Find ways to celebrate small wins and call them out. Community members should come out of meetings knowing something good that happened as a result of the previous meeting. Practice intentionally recognizing wins and finding ways to share those and celebrate them with broader audiences to keep the momentum going and show participants the value of the public engagement process.
- Demonstrate the value of meetings by introducing variation and including additional learning opportunities for attendees. Having a featured presenter is one great way to make each meeting an occasion. The idea is to ensure that meetings aren't just the same report-out structure every time.
- Think about participants' childcare needs. Consider options for providing childcare or facilitating a children's activity so that community members are free to attend and fully participate. An extra benefit: creatively engaging children can contribute an additional perspective to the process.
- Bring food! Have something that brings people in. Once they're in the room, they will stay and participate.

### Ready to move forward?



#### **We've heard from community members from a wide range of organizations and interests.**

It can be hard to know when you've reached enough people in the community to move ahead. Make sure you have heard from all different perspectives and attracted people in through varying mediums.



#### **We've built consensus around the challenges our community is responding to, and everyone knows their role in visioning.**

You don't need to have complete consensus, but you should have a significant pool of community members bought into the process of visioning who know their role and are excited to consider solutions together.



#### **We've created investment in the process and facilitated both information sharing and celebrating wins.**

As community meetings are held, participants have sustained interest in the visioning process and are being brought together by their early participation in town halls and community meetings.

### Worksheet #4

## Creating a Contact List

### Figuring Out Who to Engage and How

Using a contact list enables you to consider who needs to be included and what role each stakeholder can play. Consider who you'll want to participate in broader public meetings, who you'll invite to any task forces or working groups you create, and who needs to be engaged separately or one-on-one to hear their ideas.

Name	Role in the Community	Contact Info	Role in the Process



## Establish a vision.

### How does community-led visioning work?

The ultimate goal of the community visioning process is to reach a clear understanding of what people's hopes and dreams are for your community. Successful visioning processes also find language, themes, images, and/or examples that summarize those hopes and dreams and can serve as a reference point in future conversations to ground those discussions in the will of the community as decisions are made.

Importantly, community-led visioning can happen at all different scales, from short-term, project-based efforts, to long-term, intensive visioning efforts geared toward comprehensive plan updates. There is no right or wrong level of formality or investment for a visioning process; rather, community visioning approaches should be tailored toward the stakeholders who are involved in articulating a community vision, the scale (financially and otherwise) of the project at hand, and the organizational resources that can be leveraged to facilitate community-led visioning.

### Components of community-led visioning

Establishing a community vision might include some of the following elements:

Inclusive workshops and town hall meetings to engage residents

Visioning materials and resources like interactive websites or public dashboards for the project

Digital engagement tools like online surveys and social media updates

Task force or working group meetings with specific groups of key stakeholders

Partnerships with planning consultants, facilitators, or community engagement experts

Output: a list of community priorities or themes and values that arise from the process



Johnstown, PA

*“Close your eyes and think about what your community looks and feels like. Have people speak it out loud and start walking out assumptions from there.*

*Ask follow-up questions and figure out what’s needed to build that...and write it down.”*

*—Alexander Beck, Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation*

## What does community visioning look like?

Establishing a community vision involves not just bringing people together but actively creating space to share ideas and collectively imagine your future.

Coming together around a vision is all about ideation. Leading up to this step, you've convened community members and explained the need for visioning. Now, it's time to bring together all of the ideas you're hearing from community members.

Prompt your group to consider what they hope the future of your place will look like. Imagine what any downtown areas or main streets will look like, what businesses and community amenities you might have, what new housing development should occur. As you do so, think back on the needs you've identified, community dynamics you've investigated, and perspectives of the voices you've assembled.

Have your assembled community members voice their ideas and provide a forum for them to build off each other's visions. Many communities use a mix of large- and small-group discussions and visioning white boards with sticky notes and shared brainstorming space. Help community members get their ideas out on paper and see what happens when ideas can be built upon and refined.

**TIP:** Coming up with a compelling format for sharing ideas is critical to garnering widespread participation and helping community members think imaginatively. Attempt to weave in visual elements such as maps, photos, and sketches, with a core set of data insights to set the stage for visioning. Help community members share their ideas in a variety of formats; this can include a range of elements: online discussion boards, shared mind maps or brainstorming activities during in-person discussions, small-group conversations, and more.

## Getting Started

As you start to facilitate the visioning process, think about the following key steps:

1. **Help participants understand their role in the process**  
Your community stakeholders will all bring different ideas to the conversation and have different priority concerns. Continue to re-articulate the purpose of your visioning process and the specific issues you are trying to address. Encourage your group to be creative and think big.
2. **Identify common priorities**  
As certain key themes emerge from participants, make space in the conversation for the full group to direct their focus toward these broad themes of importance. For example, if many people are talking about the role of a particular institution in your community, make that institution a focal point of your discussion. Designate a time to talk about it in person or through a digital method, keeping track of community ideas so that people can start coming together around a collective vision.
3. **Create a document or list of written takeaways**  
Ensure that your visioning process and ongoing conversations are driving toward something. Maintain a repository of ideas and encourage folks to get their thoughts down in writing where possible. As you move through the process, begin to share the specific language you're using to sum up the process with community members and refine it using their feedback.
4. **Consider feasibility and the appropriate time horizons**  
Community visioning can start at any scale, large or small. Although it's often helpful to think big picture about the ideal outcomes for your municipality, over time, you can start considering what timelines might be feasible for the ideas being discussed. Consider concrete things you would like to see in 1 year, 5 years, or 10 years.

### THINKING AHEAD

Ideally, visioning is not a one-time process. It can start out around one specific project or initiative, but once you and the community have been through the process, visioning can become part of how you do things in general. Don't think about establishing a vision as a one-time event, but rather, as a core part of the recurring decision-making process in your community.

## Articulating the takeaways of visioning

Depending on the specific purpose of your visioning process, you might be targeting different kinds of written output from the process. As you continue to work on having productive conversation and bringing community members together around their shared vision, also consider what kind of written collateral will be the helpful output from your process. Here are some examples of what you might be aiming for in the case of various types of visioning projects.

VISIONING FOCUS	→	HELPFUL OUTPUT
Visioning for a comprehensive plan	→	Full read-out of your takeaways, identifying focus areas and main pillars
Designing a redevelopment plan for a specific site or project	→	A list of elements to be included, goals for the new site, possibly site drawings
Planning areas for new development in your municipality	→	A map of your community with specific zones labelled for various uses and projects
Re-imagining a community program or initiative	→	A summary of different stakeholder needs and a list of ideas for events or programming

### Ready to move forward?



#### We have a core list of aspirations to inspire us moving forward.

By the end of this step, you should have a clear list of what matters most to the community and the aspirational goals you will work toward. Being able to clearly articulate your collective vision will be a key part of maintaining momentum and moving the process forward in later steps.



#### We've created buy-in around our core list of aspirations.

Visioning is not just about soliciting ideas but identifying how all those ideas can come together into one vision. There should be general consensus around your community's priorities and a shared sense of what you want the future to look like before you can figure out how to make it happen.



#### We've identified ways for visioning to continue.

Because visioning isn't just a one-and-done effort, it's crucial that you have a plan for how it can continue. Are there certain online forums, public meetings, or other spaces where visioning will continue as your process for this current project advances into the implementation phase?



*Reimagining What a Place Can Be  
Spotlight on Hicksville, OH*

### INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Website: <https://www.klepperbuilding.com/>  
Email: [taylor@klepperbuilding.com](mailto:taylor@klepperbuilding.com)

## Starting New Conversations and Showing What's Possible

Hicksville, Ohio, is a community looking to draw in younger residents and keep recent graduates in the area. The challenge: not enough housing supply and low levels of current investment and momentum. For developers, it's difficult to find comparable properties, set market rate rents, and justify new construction financially. The city also lacks some of the new units, quality of life investments, and urban amenities that prospective new residents coming from bigger cities might be expecting.

Klepper Building Company is changing this dynamic. By developing new Airbnb units, it's helping to demonstrate the demand for new hospitality construction. These Airbnb units, which feature a mixed-use orientation with retail spaces on the ground floor, serve as proof of concept for future development, taking a risk to alter market dynamics. In Hicksville, change is starting with a community member showing what's possible and kicking off a process that larger developers might not be willing to initiate.

*"You have to have someone beating the drum of 'hey, we can have nice places too... Everybody likes nice things, so once you show people what's possible, it's easier to pull people together and create that gravitational pull... We're gonna build a town that our kids want to move back to."*

—Taylor Klepper, Owner of Klepper Building Company

Worksheet #5

## Making Community Values a Reality

### Community Values

The visioning process should help shed light on what matters most to the community and what they want to see in terms of future development. Capture those high-priority values here.

#### It matters to us that our community is...

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_



#### Helpful Tip:

Think about the themes you focused on in earlier pages and connect these to broad statements about what you want to see for the future.

### Goals for the Future

The next step is articulating what bringing these visions to life might entail. Focus on answering the question “What does that look like?” to identify goals for the community to meet in service of its values. Think about how to measure success for these goals and what success may look like.

#### In the next \_\_\_\_ years, I would like to see our community...

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_



#### Ideas to Get Going:

Imagine how your values could be realized in practice and what concrete changes would have to happen to bring your ideal future to life.

### Action Readiness Assessment

## Ready to Bring Your Vision to Life?

Now that you’ve worked with your community to understand the opportunity at hand, consider the direction you’re hoping to take and what it will take to get there. Double check the steps below to ensure that you understand the community need and the local dynamics at play. Then turn the page and start building your roadmap for carrying out the vision.



#### We’ve learned from a variety of perspectives in the community.

Through the community engagement process, you’ve heard many different ideas for how your area could look in the future. Now, you’re informed by a variety of perspectives from across your community.



#### We’ve identified a direction for our future.

After discussing the current direction of your community, you’ve come together around a set of shared ideas and goals for the future. You can clearly imagine your goals and principles for what the future should be.



#### We’ve built buy-in around the direction we want to take.

Throughout the discussion and visioning process, you’ve made core stakeholders feel heard. There’s alignment around where you want to go and the value of investing in your community to make it happen.



#### We have the support of key partners.

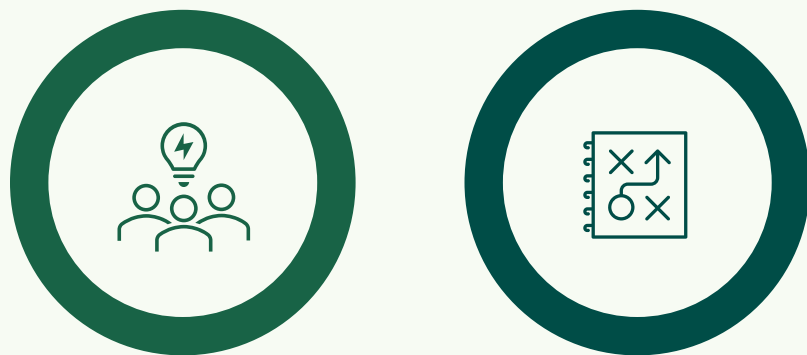
You’ve considered who needs to be involved in the process to make it a success. This core group of partners has been included in the visioning process and is on board with the direction being taken.



#### We understand our community’s strengths and assets.

As you think about the goals you want to pursue, you’re also considering the particular strengths and assets of your community to leverage along the way. Now you’re ready to start planning out how to use them!

Phase 3:  
**Taking Action**



Rural Pennsylvania communities have unique strengths to leverage as you go about making your community's vision a reality. Consider all of the local amenities, partnerships, volunteers, public spaces, and municipal resources you'll be able to draw on as you create your roadmap for future actions.

**How does a community bring its vision to life?**

Through the community planning process, community stakeholders have worked with local partners to identify what residents want the future of their town or city to look like. There is a preliminary consensus emerging about what comes next and who needs to be involved to make it happen.

The next steps are all about figuring out the steps involved in actualizing your goals. You'll need to consider your local strengths and assets, community partnership opportunities, volunteers and staff who can execute on the plan, timelines for action and next steps, how to break down large phases of your project into smaller pieces for implementation, and more. The main thing is to find ways to keep momentum up and keep engaging your community and getting them involved with your community planning effort. Keep in mind that every community's action plan will look different, but the following pages of best practices, tips, and case studies should be widely applicable to many of the projects you'll be undertaking.



Johnstown, PA



## Translate vision into action.

You can begin bringing your vision to life by working backward and connecting the dots between your community's strengths and where you want to go.

To operationalize your plans, you'll need to consider ways to make incremental progress and bring together the stakeholders and resources who can execute on your community's goals.

The first step is to get as specific as possible about what the community's aspirations look like in reality. Set targets for specific built environment improvements, programming components, economic objectives to meet, projects to kick off, or other components of your community's plan. Work backward from your ultimate goals, thinking through the components necessary to progress toward that end result. Also consider what resources your community can leverage, thinking back to initial conversations about your community's challenges and opportunities from earlier steps. From there, try to understand what might be a reasonable timeline for your intended projects and map out your incremental steps chronologically.

### Best Practice: Creating a Mix of Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

The most successful communities set goals with both long and short timelines so that the community can stay grounded in their overarching goals and big-picture aspirations, while also working toward smaller-scale projects. By prioritizing the most impactful short-term projects, you can build momentum in your community and generate results early in the process. When you create short-term wins, everyone involved in the process can see the payoff of investing their time and energy in community planning and will be more likely to stay involved in the process and keep contributing.

## Bringing Your Plan to Life

Use these steps to build a plan for your community step by step.

- ➡ **Big picture goals:** State the long-term goals for your project as clearly as possible, building out what's required from the perspective of development, investment, and personnel. Get as specific as you can in laying out all the components of your vision for the project at hand.
- ➡ **Benchmarks and phases of the project:** Thinking about the overall project, consider whether there might be various phases with different purposes and types of stakeholders who need to be involved. Breaking up the process into smaller pieces can also help you set expectations within the community for how things will unfold and when different aspects of the project might kick off.
- ➡ **Consider short term wins:** Looking at the potential phases of your project, consider what the most tangible wins might be from each phase. Figure out how you can drive progress toward those short-term wins. Also worth thinking about, even at an early phase, is where you can generate community enthusiasm and energy around those wins to keep the energy up and demonstrate the impact of community planning early on.
- ➡ **Staffing needs:** For each phase, assess what expertise and areas of authority are needed to make progress toward the community's goals. Build a list of core stakeholders and understand who is responsible for advancing progress on that phase, aside from the main coordinating committee of the planning effort.
- ➡ **Finding volunteers:** Understand where volunteers can create the most value throughout the process. Also consider where volunteers might be found—are there existing community groups or local organizations excited to get involved? Or are there untapped residents who might be interested in volunteering but don't currently have an outlet for finding opportunities to do so?
- ➡ **Identifying funding needs:** Investigate state and federal grant programs that might be relevant to various phases of your project. Where possible, connect with personnel in state and federal grant management offices to help you understand what resources are available and how your community can best position itself to apply for them. Also consider possible corporate partnerships and create an outreach plan for connecting with potential corporate sponsors.



## Finding Short-Term Wins Spotlight on Kane, PA

### “Wouldn’t it be great if we had a children’s museum?”

This is what community members in Kane were thinking in 2021. A group of volunteers in Kane formed a Board of Directors and created a business plan. Community members and nonprofit partners raised \$20K in funds the first week using a Facebook Live video. In spring 2025, Kane presented the business plan and celebrated progress at a community mixer at the site of the museum.

#### WHAT’S THE SECRET TO KANE’S APPROACH?

Kane knows how to think long term and short term at the same time. Kane conducted a large-scale formal visioning process to identify overarching goals for the community. But even more importantly, Kane convenes annual meetings of the full boards of community organizations to discuss smaller actions that their groups can do to promote Kane’s goals in just one year. The children’s museum is a long-term process, but volunteers and community members remain excited and optimistic when they see positive results in other parts of Kane through the one-year goals approach.

Executive Director at the Kane Area Development Center Kate Kennedy explained that it’s critical to look for 1-year action-oriented projects to see the impact of your efforts and keep the momentum going: “At those meetings, we’re asking ‘What’s next? What are the needs for this year that we’re going to conquer?’”

#### INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Website: <https://kanepa.com/>

Email: [director@kanepa.com](mailto:director@kanepa.com)



#### GETTING CREATIVE

Acknowledging that the Children’s Museum will be in the previous location of Kane’s elementary school, Kane event organizers are drawing on community nostalgia. Event guests even had the opportunity to take photos and read a book in a re-creation of the elementary school’s widely appreciated library bathtub reading nook!



### Ready to move forward?



#### We know the next steps for advancing our goals into reality.

By breaking out the phases and steps of realizing your goals, you should be beginning to see how to progress the community’s aspirations. Focus especially on the early actions required in the first stage and begin building community buy-in around those actions.



#### We have a broad sense of our short-term and long-term goals.

You might not have an exact timeline for your full process yet, but you’ve identified essential intermediate steps and understand the importance of short-term wins. You have ideas for initial, short-term wins to work toward and are committed to celebrating those wins once you achieve them.




#### We know who is needed to implement the plan.

This might be a mix of funders, municipal leadership, private partnerships, staff and key personnel, and volunteers. Start connecting with these stakeholders around timelines for enacting the early phases of your community’s project.

Worksheet #6

## Bringing Your Vision to Life

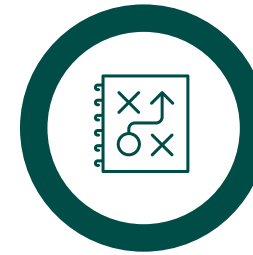
This worksheet is designed to help you begin planning and operationalizing the ideas that have emerged through your community planning process up to this point. Think back on all the major themes and priorities that have arisen in earlier steps and begin to build out the specific details of how you'll progress toward short-term and long-term goals.

<p><b>Our priority project will look like...</b></p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>		<p><b>The phases of the process might be...</b></p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. _____</p>
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### Resources to Leverage

Consider the full range of community assets, key stakeholders, funding strategies, volunteer and staff capacity, and other resources that might be involved in each phase of your project.

Project Component	Phase	Financial and Physical Resources	Staff and Volunteer Work Required



## Create a roadmap.

The roadmap will be an essential tool to actualizing your goals and seeing them come to life step by step.

Building a roadmap is the first step to implementing your community's goals. Having a roadmap will enable you to visualize where you are in the process, see how your current endeavors will feed into future efforts, and show off your broader progress to community members and other stakeholders.

A successful roadmap will show how each phase of the project unfolds from the ones before it and identifies a feasible timeline for each step. Including a mix of short-term and long-term projects at all phases in your roadmap is a great best practice for maintaining momentum and building enthusiasm around early community planning wins.

As you progress through your implementation plan, consider ways to keep visioning going. Also consider where there might be ways to formalize the community planning process further with dedicated committees, additional staff members, or formal task forces or working groups to continue iterating on the programs you're developing. Although many planning processes will start in a highly grassroots-driven, informal process, creating some formalized structure around continuously engaging the community will help you build on early efforts to address key priorities and keep the community engaged as you iterate on further solutions.

**TIP:**

Many communities reach a point where they decide to engage a paid staff member to take responsibility for pushing their planning project forward. Consider whether this might be appropriate for your community to maintain accountability for advancing your community's objectives.

Note that the timeline and exact steps of your project are likely to change as you continue refining your approach and dealing with new obstacles in the process. The value of a roadmap isn't that it exactly predicts all outcomes, but that it guides your efforts in a cohesive and well-considered set of steps to advance your community's vision.

## How to Create an Implementation Plan

Use these steps to figure out your process, step by step.

- ➡ **List out your action steps:** Drawing on your ideas in Step 5, write out the full list of action steps you've created. Organize these by theme. Sometimes your action steps may fall into different phases in the process; where you can, set benchmarks for incremental progress.
  
- ➡ **Consider the time horizon of each step:** Understand the time commitment involved in each step and how long it might take to carry out each action. Categorize each step into short-term, medium-term, or long-term depending on how much time will be needed to make each step happen.
  
- ➡ **Reflect on the resource intensity of each step:** Label each action step according to the amount of resources it will require to carry out. Consider factors such as staff capacity, funding requirements, volunteer bandwidth, and the level of coordination between different organizations. Assign each action a ranking: low, medium, or high resource intensity.
  
- ➡ **Identify partners and responsible parties:** Each step will need to be carried out by a specific point person or organization. Determine who this will be for each action and consider whether any additional partners are needed. List out all the partner organizations or individuals who may be needed for their knowledge, capacity, or resources available to them. Also consider which steps may require volunteer efforts or additional coordination with outside authorities for approval or sign-off.
  
- ➡ **Populate your Implementation Matrix:** Fill in your action steps first and then label the time horizon, resource intensity, and partners/personnel you've assigned each step. (See the implementation matrix outline on the next page for reference.) Create additional columns in your implementation matrix as necessary.
  
- ➡ **Begin prioritizing appropriate next steps:** Based on the level of resourcing and the time horizon of each proposed action step, reflect on which steps will be easiest or most difficult to accomplish. Also consider which steps will have the highest payoff. Pay attention to steps that will have especially visible results or garner appreciation from the community. Decide on a handful of priority next steps that will have a high return on investment. Remember to select a few short-term steps that will generate some early wins but also begin working toward your high-priority medium- and long-term action steps.

### Worksheet #7

## Project Roadmap

### Planning a Course of Action

Now that you've generated action steps to actualize your community's goals, use this space to plan out your full process. Using the action steps that you've generated, identify the priority level, timing, and resource costs of each, rating these action steps as low, medium, or high (or short-term, mid-term, long-term). Organizing your action steps in this way will help you prioritize action steps on a timeline that is feasible for your community.

**Implementation Matrix**

Action Step	Priority	Timing	Resource Cost	Partners



**Helpful Tip:**

Embrace the possibility of bringing in all different kinds of action steps, small and large. The most effective community plans feature a mix of big-picture, long-term projects and more bite-sized initiatives that can sustain the momentum generated through community planning.



*Iterating on Your Approach  
Spotlight on Friends of Spring Township*



## Finding a Fundraising Approach for the Lynn Shaeffer Dum Memorial Park

The Friends of Spring Township began with three initial members going to the township for funds and starting a nonprofit organization to collect funds. With no money to kick off fundraising, the group had to start from scratch. They began with raffle and live music events, raising funds slowly but surely. Then, the Friends of Spring Township found their biggest earner: bingo.

Now, the Friends of Spring Township have two flagship events every year: the Monster Mash Bingo Bash and the spring “A Day in the Park” event. Every year, these events feature new offerings, which have included a costume contest, new raffle prizes, branded merchandise, food trucks, community vendors, a dime pitch, bake sales—you name it. The Friends of Spring Township are continuing to collect more funds for improvements to the Lynn Dum Memorial Park, such as the new pavilion completed in March 2025.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FRIENDS

*Finding and retaining volunteers is essential. Start with a community survey to get people engaged, and put in the survey: would you be willing to volunteer? Partner with people who have a good grasp of what’s going on in the community. Find businesses and partners who can supply you with event spaces and key services such as web design. Retain your volunteers by giving them meaningful projects to do, not just attending monthly meetings.*

### INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

- Website: <https://www.friendsofspringtwp.org/>
- Email: [friendsofspringtwp.2017@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofspringtwp.2017@gmail.com)

## Remember to celebrate your wins, large and small

Celebrating your wins is key to keeping spirits up and volunteers and community members engaged. Appreciating your wins could look like having a positive shoutout at the beginning of each meeting or having food and drinks after an event or volunteer day. When you create memorable moments around appreciating the efforts of those around you and recognizing how far you’ve come, community members are more likely to stick around and continue being part of the process. During a long planning process, it’s easy to feel like there are still so many steps ahead of you to get where you want to go, so taking time to look back is critical for keeping the momentum going. Even when times are busy, you won’t regret making time to call out your wins with the hard-working community members around you.

## Find ways to share your planning process, goals, and approaches with other communities

Knowing that other communities may be facing very similar issues and responding to similar dynamics in their communities, sharing best practices can be invaluable for everyone involved. As you continuously reflect on your community planning efforts, consider what the main surprises and takeaways have been, and where you feel others could learn from your community. Build the habit of connecting with leading stakeholders in other communities however possible, in person or over the phone, to share solutions. This is likely to include things such as

- telling the story of your planning or visioning project,
- finding ways to share resources with neighboring communities (can potentially include staff members as well), and
- identifying places to advocate for policy or funding resources in tandem with other rural communities.

“Active and attractive place attract people. Let’s take care of our residents because then they’ll speak well of the place and that’s what will make others want to be part of it. Realize that if you’re trying to lead something and it’s not working at first, you have to keep going because it will catch on.”

—Kate Kennedy, Kane Area Development Center



TAKING ACTION



### Continue leveraging data throughout your process

Just as data was able to help you set your approach and get started with the community planning process at the beginning, looking at data at the end of the process can also be beneficial. Look at some of the metrics you examined at the outset of the process and see how these measures have changed over the course of your project. Highlight achievements you've made using local data such as downtown vacancy, resident participation in a community project, or spending at businesses on a commercial corridor. This can help you identify and celebrate additional wins you may not have considered!

### Find ways to keep volunteers and community members engaged in the planning process and beyond

While it's understandable that some volunteers will come and go, or potentially lose interest over time, keep looking for ways to stay connected. Make use of email updates or mailers sharing the progress made so far. Bring fun or social elements into community planning meetings or volunteer days. Give volunteers tasks that feel meaningful and facilitate building stronger connections with their neighbors. Keep track of residents who keep participating in meetings and events and keep them informed about future projects and ways to stay involved. Even the most successful projects can still find a place for ongoing involvement of volunteers and neighbors!



*“If you see an issue that needs to be addressed, don't assume you're the only one working on it. Pick up the phone and see who else is dealing with it.”*

We feel like we're all islands in central PA, but these issues have been faced before and there are answers to this stuff that are out there.”

—Robert Forcey  
Executive Director of Vision Together, Johnstown, PA

## Want to keep going with community planning and visioning?

Many communities start planning in an informal or grassroots way at first, but as momentum grows, find ways to formalize their planning process. Sometimes, this means hiring a permanent paid staff member or creating an official coordinating nonprofit organization or foundation. Here are some other components that can help formalize community planning and keep it part of your municipality's process in years to come.

- ➡ **Organize and name a central group to organize future planning and visioning:** This can be the same group of core facilitators in your community who guided this round of community planning efforts, but there are simple ways to elevate their role. Create a formal point of contact and information, maybe just a gmail account and a simple website, for community members looking to get in touch. Also consider renaming this group—having a formal name like the “Coordinating Committee” or “Steering Committee” communicates professionalism, strong organizational abilities, and investment in the community.
- ➡ **Set up standing meetings at a cadence that works for your community:** Having a consistent meeting demonstrates to everyone involved that you're serious about continuing to involve the community in ongoing initiatives and planning efforts. Community members will know how and when they'll have the opportunity to engage with each other around specific issues. Setting a recurring meeting doesn't mean you have to be rigid about time, place, activities offered, or issues discussed. Continue to create variation month to month to maintain interest and engagement, but show people that you're here to stay and where they can find you.
- ➡ **Create neighborhood or issue-focused teams:** Most likely, a huge number of various goals surfaced in your visioning process. Maybe you didn't have the ability to address them all through this project, but they're still important and can benefit from the energy you've created through this round of planning. Find neighbors to lead specific teams focusing on particular goals or geographic areas that you identified through the process as target areas for more community brainpower.
- ➡ **Remember to keep celebrating wins and appreciating your neighbors:** Even if you don't have specific goals you're pushing toward in the next few weeks or months, find ways to keep in touch with partnerships you've forged throughout the process. If this is your end point for community planning, bring people together to celebrate the successes you've achieved thus far!



# Resources

## Statewide Resources

Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development Technical assistance: The Office of Community Planning provides technical assistance on a variety of planning, land use, and development matters to planning commissions, zoning officers, zoning hearing boards, and other local government officials and staff. Their [map](#) can be used to find contact information for assistance, or you can request planning and technical assistance through a [submission form](#).

Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development State Land Use and Growth Management Report: The Governor's Center for Local Government Services is required to prepare a State Land Use and Growth Management Report every five years. These reports include information, data, and conclusions regarding growth and development patterns in Pennsylvania, as well as recommendations for coordination of executive action and programs among Commonwealth agencies. Visit the [State Land Use and Growth Management Report Library](#) for past reports.

[Pennsylvania Downtown Center Outreach and Technical Assistance](#): PDC is positioned to provide your community or project with an unbiased and experienced perspective to help meet your revitalization goals. Additionally, PDC is committed to providing professional services at a fair and reasonable rate. PDC's comprehensive field outreach assists members across the state with training and technical assistance tailored to a community's unique needs. Its field outreach staff visits and consults with hundreds of communities each year, giving them a broad menu of tools, training, and workshops to revitalize their downtown.

[Keystone Community Oriented Real Estate \(C.O.R.E.\) Services](#): The mission of Keystone Core Services (KCS) is to act as a redevelopment partner for the reclamation and rehabilitation of blighted and deteriorated properties in which the private sector has not reinvested or redeveloped. KCS will work to carry out its mission through two general services categories—pre-development and development. Examples of activities that KCS will undertake as a partner with a local revitalization organization include site assessments, site feasibility studies, acting conservator, site acquisition, and project adviser.

## Other Guides to Community Planning

[Guide to Community Mapping](#): This guide explains the goals and methods of community asset mapping, helping readers understand how data about their community can contribute to an improved understanding of the community's strengths and opportunities. The guide also explores community engagement methods that are helpful for community mapping and supplies examples of helpful case studies of successful projects.

[Community Engagement Planning Guide](#): This guide relates best practices for community engagement, focusing on engagement methods, strategies for connecting with community members, and metrics for measuring success. The guide also includes a series of worksheets to help you plan your community engagement process.

[NRPA Community Engagement Resource Guide](#): This guide shares community engagement strategies related to public spaces and planning for public parks, giving into core elements of community planning, including internal assessment (i.e. capacity, funding strategies, building support and consensus, creating community goals), building trust with communities, communication and engagement strategies, and data-based evaluation strategies.

[AARP's Handbook for Improved Neighborhoods](#): This handbook collaboration by AARP and the Congress for New Urbanism has been created as a reference for discussions among local leaders and community members interested in improving where they live. It is designed to help local leaders and community advocates learn about how small-scale land use and zoning changes can help communities revitalize and thrive.

[Smart Growth America's Choosing Our Community's Future](#): Choosing Our Community's Future is designed for citizens who want to make a positive contribution to shaping the growth and development of their neighborhoods, towns, and regions. The guidebook is intended as a helpful companion to participants in design charrettes, community planning processes, symposia and seminars on planning issues, education programs for newly elected officials and civic leaders, or for anyone who wants to get a leg up on development.

[Georgia Main Street's Guide to Hosting a Community Visioning Session](#): The ideas expressed in this guide will serve as a framework for community visioning that encourages citizen buy-in and support, grows stakeholder engagement, and leverages financial resources.

## Guides for Rural Economic Development

[USDA Rural Development resources](#): The USDA has guides on specific topics such as Business, Electric and Telecom Section Loan Servicing Support, and Disaster Resiliency and Recovery. It also maintains the [Rural Data Gateway](#) and the [Rural Health Inventory](#) as helpful tools for communities.

[AARP Rural Livability Workshop Report](#): Learn how and why small towns and remote communities are working to become more livable for older adults and people of all ages. This guide features a data spotlight on rural American communities as well as segments on individual topics such as transportation, housing, health, and public spaces.

[USDA Resource Guide for Rural Workforce Development](#): This guide was created for community leaders and other local entities to help them access resources to create jobs, train talent, expand educational opportunities, and provide technical assistance. The guide outlines programs and services available at USDA and other federal departments and agencies that support workforce development in rural communities, highlighting four key assistance types necessary to building a stronger rural workforce: workforce development planning; infrastructure and equipment financing; industry and employer engagement, entrepreneurship, and local business development; and education, training, and apprenticeship.

[Grant Application Guide for Rural Communities](#): This guide explains the federal funding application process by walking readers through the application stages and providing tips to make their applications more competitive.

[U.S. Census Guide to Using American Community Survey Data for Rural Communities](#): This guide provides an overview of what data users need to know about working with ACS data for rural areas and helps readers find data that will be most relevant for their community.

## Reports on Key Topics for Rural Communities

### Engagement and Resiliency

[FEMA Guide to Supporting Engagement and Resiliency in Rural Communities](#): This guide is a step toward designing outreach and engagement activities that are authentic and right sized for a particular community to make every community more resilient. The insight and guidance take into account community- and culture-based considerations, including, but not limited to: accessibility to high-speed internet, driving distance and accessibility to commonly used community meeting spaces, importance of established trust, accessibility of resources, and the value of community champions.

### Transportation

[U.S. D.O.T. Resources for Rural Communities](#): This page highlights a selection of the resources available to rural communities, including the Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success (ROUTES) Initiative, Federal Highway Administration programs and resources for road repair and construction, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) traffic safety measures resource, and the FHWA's Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks guide.

[Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks](#): This document is intended to be a resource for transportation practitioners in small towns and rural communities. It applies existing national design guidelines in a rural setting and highlights small town and rural case studies. It addresses challenges specific to rural areas, recognizes how many rural roadways are operating today, and focuses on opportunities to make incremental improvements despite the geographic, fiscal, and other challenges that many rural communities face.

### Housing

[HAC Primer for Beginning Rural Housing Developers](#): This guide is specifically geared to development of affordable housing in rural areas, since rural housing developers face unique obstacles, such as fewer housing development professionals from which to choose, fewer commercial banks to approach for funding, and limited public water and sewer infrastructure. However, the rural development organization also enjoys certain benefits, including U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Housing Service (RHS) programs that provide funding only to projects in rural areas.

### Smart Growth

[EPA Smart Growth Resources](#): Through its work in partnership with small towns and rural communities, the EPA has identified several smart growth strategies for communities to consider. The [Framework for Creating a Smart Growth Economic Development Strategy: A Tool for Small Cities and Towns](#) is a step-by-step guide to building a place-based economic development strategy. EPA's Office of Community Revitalization offers [technical assistance](#) to help all types of communities, including rural places, learn about and implement inclusive planning and development approaches that promote revitalization and smart growth. The EPA website also features relevant rural case studies and a list of other smart growth publications for reference.

## Grants and Funding Sources

**Keystone Communities Program:** The Keystone Communities Program (KCP) is designed to encourage the creation of partnerships between the public and private sectors that jointly support local initiatives such as the growth and stability of neighborhoods and communities; social and economic diversity; and a strong and secure quality of life. A flexible tool for use in community and economic development for a variety of purposes including planning activities, façade grant programs, accessible housing programs, and development grants.

**Community Development Block Grant (CDBG):** Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds strengthen Pennsylvania communities by assisting with housing improvements, building sui living environments, expanding economic opportunities geared to low- and moderate-income individuals, and improving critical community health and welfare infrastructure.

**Creative Communities Initiative:** The Creative Communities Initiative (CCI) provides multi-year funding for place-based, community-driven, arts-based projects that serve as catalysts for social cohesion, livability, and community and economic development.

**Strategic Management Planning Program (STMP):** Provides matching grant funds to assist municipalities experiencing fiscal difficulties to develop comprehensive multi-year financial plans and establish short- and long-term financial objectives. Pennsylvania local governments are eligible for grants up to \$200,000 for 50% of total project cost to develop and implement multi-year financial management programs and strategies.

**Neighborhood Assistance Program (NAP):** Tax credit program to encourage businesses to invest in projects that improve distressed areas. A project must serve distressed areas or support neighborhood conservation. Projects must fall under one of the following categories: affordable housing programs, community services, crime prevention, education, job training, or neighborhood assistance. A tax credit of up to 65% can be awarded.

**AARP Community Challenge Grants:** AARP Livable Communities supports the efforts of neighborhoods, towns, cities, and counties nationwide to become more livable for all. In 2017 AARP launched the AARP Community Challenge to fund projects that build momentum for change. Applicants are eligible for grants across three different categories: Flagship Grants, Capacity-Building Microgrants, and Demonstration Grants.

**Local Government Capital Project Loan Program (LGCPL):** Low-interest loans to local governments for equipment and facility needs. Can be used by local governments with populations of 12,000 or less for equipment purchases or the purchase, construction, renovation or rehabilitation of municipal facilities.

**Municipal Assistance Program (MAP):** MAP provides funding to assist local governments to plan for and efficiently implement a variety of policies, programs, or projects, and soundly manage development with an emphasis on intergovernmental approaches. Funding is available for two groups of activities: shared services and community planning.

**Greenways, Trails, and Recreation Program (GTRP):** This program includes grants for projects that involve development, rehabilitation and improvements to public parks, recreation areas, greenways, trails, and river conservation. Funds are allocated for the planning, acquisition, development, rehabilitation, and repair of greenways, recreational trails, open space, parks, and beautification projects.

**Marketing to Attract Tourists Program:** This program provides funding to support the tourism sector throughout Pennsylvania. Funds may be used for the development of marketing and sales assets; and, for the creation of multi-channel marketing campaigns that increase awareness of a destination, experience, and/or event. Funds may also be used to support event operations that attract visitors and result in significant economic impact.

**USDA Rural Community Development Initiative Grants:** RCDI grants are awarded to help nonprofit housing and community development organizations, low-income rural communities, and federally recognized tribes support housing, community facilities, and community and economic development projects in rural areas. Funds may be used to improve housing, community facilities, and community and economic development projects in rural areas.

**Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program:** USDA's Rural Business-Cooperative Service administers RMAP. The program provides loan capital and technical assistance funding to local and regional organizations that qualify as Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDOs), which in turn provide microloans and business development technical assistance to rural microentrepreneurs. RMAP funds can be loan capital to MDOs, technical assistance grants to MDOs, or technical assistance-only grants.

**Rural Business Development Grant Program:** The Rural Business Development Grant Program is a federal grant program administered by state USDA Rural Development offices. Program grants fall under two categories: Enterprise Grants and Opportunity Grants. Since launching in March 2015, RBDG has been used to provide technical assistance and training to farmers and other small business owners, start revolving loan funds, and spur new business opportunities in rural communities.

**Farm Credit Horizon Community Investment Grant:** Pennsylvania nonprofit organizations working to enhance their communities through one of the focus areas may qualify: Agriculture Innovation, Agriculture Education, Diversity in Agriculture, Environmental Stewardship, and Strengthening Communities. Grant amounts may be up to \$10,000.