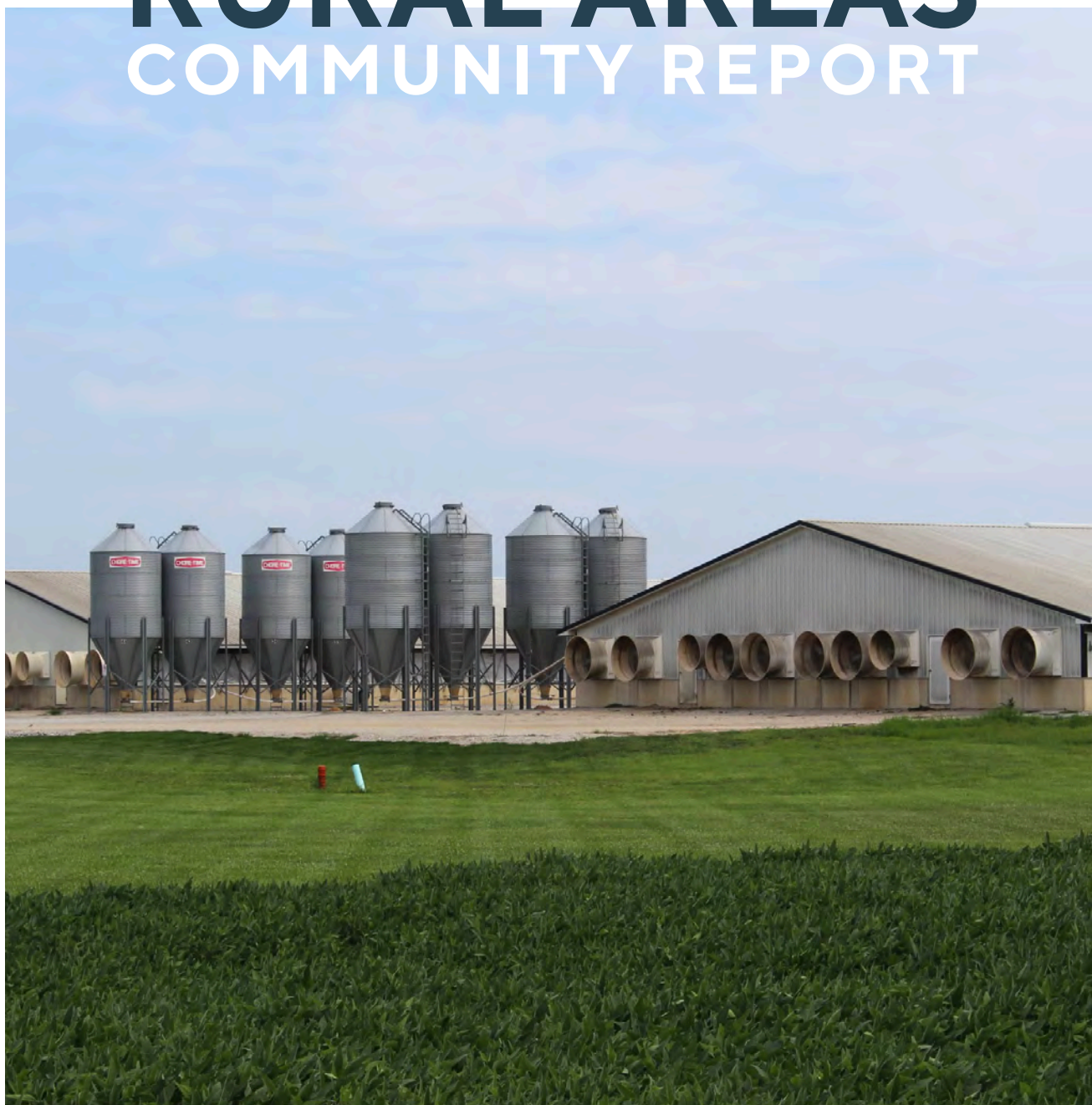


RURAL AREAS COMMUNITY REPORT



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wells County's rural areas are defined by their agricultural heritage, scenic landscapes, and low-density development. Comparisons with neighboring counties and community survey data revealed consistent priorities: protect farmland, modernize essential infrastructure, and selectively guide development toward existing towns. Public meetings highlighted a desire to maintain the distinctive rural character while offering enough housing, internet connectivity, and business-friendly policies to retain and attract residents. The Vision Principles that emerged center on preserving open spaces and supporting local agribusiness while integrating limited residential and commercial expansion only in suitable locations. These principles translate into action items such as more robust road maintenance schedules, new or updated ordinances for solar and wind projects, and incentives for agritourism ventures that align with rural character.

FUTURE VISION

The future vision for rural Wells County is shaped by community input, stakeholder discussions, and regional priorities, ensuring that growth aligns with the agricultural heritage, environmental sustainability, and infrastructure needs of the county's unincorporated areas. Through public engagement, residents and landowners have expressed their desire to preserve farmland, support rural businesses, and maintain high-quality infrastructure while ensuring smart, balanced growth.



This section outlines key vision principles that will guide land use decisions, infrastructure investments, and economic development in rural areas. Agricultural preservation remains a top priority, ensuring that farmland remains productive while allowing for limited, well-planned residential and commercial expansion. Additionally, investments in roadway improvements, rural broadband expansion, and stormwater management will be critical to maintaining the livability and economic viability of the county's rural areas.

These principles will inform future policies focused on land conservation, infrastructure maintenance, and rural development, ensuring that growth is carefully managed to protect natural resources and maintain the rural character of Wells County. As strategies are further refined in the implementation section, the county will work to balance economic opportunities with environmental stewardship, ensuring that rural communities remain strong, connected, and resilient for future generations.

VISION PRINCIPLES: RURAL AREAS OF WELLS COUNTY

The rural areas of Wells County will continue to thrive by preserving agricultural integrity, enhancing quality of life, and supporting balanced growth. By maintaining open spaces, expanding infrastructure, and fostering economic opportunities, these areas will remain vital to the county's identity and long-term success. These vision principles will guide future development, ensuring that rural communities retain their character while adapting to evolving needs and opportunities.

1

Preserve agricultural integrity and open space.

2

Enhance quality of life through balanced growth.

3

Expand infrastructure and connectivity.

4

Promote economic vitality and local business growth.

IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation framework for rural Wells County provides a structured guide for addressing land use, infrastructure, and economic development challenges in the county's unincorporated areas. Through two detailed matrices, this plan ensures that rural priorities are effectively managed.

The first matrix identifies each priority and goal, detailing:

- Responsible Parties: County officials, agricultural stakeholders, and infrastructure agencies.
- Potential Funding Sources: State and federal grants, farmland preservation funds, and infrastructure improvement programs.
- Cost: The estimated total cost for each strategy on a scale of \$ - \$\$\$\$.
- Priority Level: A ranking system for project sequencing.
- Timeline: Estimated completion periods to maintain accountability.

The second matrix breaks down each goal into actionable steps, ensuring measurable progress and effective implementation. These matrices will help guide land use decisions, infrastructure investments, and policy development in rural Wells County, ensuring that growth is balanced with farmland preservation and environmental stewardship.

RURAL AREAS OF WELLS COUNTY VISION 1

Preserve agricultural integrity and open space.

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Protect farm ground and agricultural resources from non-agricultural development by prioritizing the revitalization and maintenance of existing housing stock within established areas, reducing the need for expansion into agricultural lands.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected Officials • Energy Advisory Commission • Wells County Area Planning 	General Fund	\$	High	18 - 24 Months
2	Maintain the rural character and heritage by ensuring farmland remains a priority while allowing compatible growth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected Officials • Energy Advisory Commission • Wells County Area Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected Officials • Energy Advisory Commission • Wells County Area Planning 	\$	Medium	2 - 5 Years

Vision 1, Strategy 1: Protect farm ground and agricultural resources from non-agricultural development by prioritizing the revitalization and maintenance of existing housing stock within established areas, reducing the need for expansion into agricultural lands.

Objectives	Tactics
Revitalize and Maintain Existing Housing Stock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a housing rehabilitation program that provides grants or low-interest loans for home repairs and upgrades in rural communities. • Encourage property owners to renovate and maintain aging homes through tax incentives or permit fee reductions. • Partner with local contractors and workforce training programs to support home renovation efforts and address labor shortages.
Prioritize Infill Development Over Agricultural Expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify underutilized lots and vacant properties in existing rural communities and promote them for residential use. • Adjust zoning policies to encourage redevelopment within established areas rather than expansion into farmland. • Develop a public awareness campaign to educate residents on the benefits of preserving agricultural land by focusing growth in designated areas.
Strengthen Land Use Protections for Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement agricultural zoning policies that limit non-agricultural development in prime farming areas. • Work with landowners to explore voluntary farmland preservation programs, such as conservation easements. • Collaborate with county and state agencies to monitor and enforce land use policies that protect rural character and farming operations.

Vision 1, Strategy 2: Maintain the rural character and heritage by ensuring farmland remains a priority while allowing compatible growth.

Objectives	Tactics
Protect Agricultural Land as a Community Priority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish zoning regulations that limit urban-style development in prime farming areas while allowing for agricultural-related businesses. • Work with landowners to explore farmland preservation programs, such as conservation easements and agricultural districts. • Develop policies that encourage new residential and commercial growth to occur within existing rural towns rather than on active farmland.
Allow Compatible Growth that Supports Rural Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify areas where small-scale residential and commercial development can occur without disrupting agricultural operations. • Support farm-related businesses, such as agri-tourism, farm-to-table ventures, and local markets, to strengthen the rural economy while preserving farmland. • Ensure that infrastructure improvements, such as road expansions and utility extensions, are planned in a way that minimizes the impact on agricultural land.
Celebrate and Preserve Rural Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote historical preservation efforts that highlight the farming traditions and rural identity of the county. • Organize events, such as county fairs and farm tours, that educate residents and visitors about local agriculture. • Work with schools and community organizations to integrate agricultural education programs that foster appreciation for the county's farming heritage.

RURAL AREAS OF WELLS COUNTY VISION 2

Enhance quality of life through balanced growth.

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Prioritize growth that enriches the community fabric while preserving existing values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Redevelopment Commission Wells County Area Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Fund EDIT TIF 	\$	Medium	18 - 24 Months, Ongoing
2	Develop housing, infrastructure, jobs, and recreational amenities that improve the overall quality of life for current and future residents, with a focus on creating a variety of affordable housing options for working families, seniors, and professionals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Redevelopment Commission Wells County Area Planning Volunteer Groups Rotary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Fund EDIT TIF 	\$\$\$	Medium	2 - 5 Years
3	Encourage volunteerism, local events, and community branding to strengthen social connections and local pride.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Volunteer Groups Rotary 4-H 	General Fund	\$	Low	5 - 10 Years

Vision 2, Strategy 1: Prioritize growth that enriches the community fabric while preserving existing values.

Objectives	Tactics
Encourage Growth That Strengthens Rural Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct new residential and commercial development to existing towns and villages to reinforce their role as community hubs. • Support mixed-use development that integrates housing, retail, and services while maintaining the rural character. • Encourage adaptive reuse of historic buildings and vacant structures to provide new opportunities without disrupting the community fabric.
Preserve Local Identity and Values in Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement design and zoning guidelines that ensure new development complements the scale and character of rural communities. • Require community input in major development projects to align growth with resident priorities and values. • Encourage businesses and industries that align with local needs, such as agricultural support services, rural healthcare, and small-scale retail.
Maintain Open Space and Natural Beauty Alongside Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote conservation subdivisions and clustered housing developments that preserve green space while allowing for responsible residential growth. • Invest in parks, trails, and recreational areas that enhance the quality of life without compromising rural landscapes. • Develop policies that balance economic development with environmental stewardship, ensuring that natural resources are protected as the community grows.

Vision 2, Strategy 2: Develop housing, infrastructure, jobs, and recreational amenities that improve the overall quality of life for current and future residents, with a focus on creating a variety of affordable housing options for working families, seniors, and professionals.

Objectives	Tactics
Expand Housing Options for All Residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the development of workforce housing to provide affordable options for working families and young professionals. • Encourage senior-friendly housing developments, such as single-level homes and assisted living facilities, to allow aging residents to stay in the community. • Offer incentives for developers to build a mix of housing types, including townhomes, cottages, and single-family homes, that fit the needs of different income levels and life stages.
Invest in Infrastructure to Support Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade rural roads, water, sewer, and broadband to accommodate new development and improve existing services. • Secure funding for infrastructure expansion in targeted growth areas to ensure long-term sustainability. • Improve public transportation options where feasible to enhance mobility for residents without personal vehicles.
Promote Job Growth and Economic Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attract businesses that provide stable, well-paying jobs for local residents, including manufacturing, healthcare, and skilled trades. • Support entrepreneurship and small business development through grants, co-working spaces, and mentorship programs. • Partner with educational institutions and workforce training programs to equip residents with skills that align with local job opportunities.
Enhance Recreational Amenities for Community Well-Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand parks, trails, and outdoor spaces to encourage healthy lifestyles and community engagement. • Develop new recreational facilities, such as sports complexes or community centers, that cater to residents of all ages. • Organize community events and outdoor activities that foster social connections and enhance quality of life.

Vision 2, Strategy 3: Encourage volunteerism, local events, and community branding to strengthen social connections and local pride.

Objectives	Tactics
Promote Volunteerism and Civic Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a community volunteer network to connect residents with local organizations, schools, and service projects. • Organize an annual "Community Service Day" where residents can participate in beautification projects, park cleanups, and public improvements. • Recognize outstanding volunteers with awards or public acknowledgments to encourage ongoing civic participation.
Expand Local Events to Strengthen Social Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop seasonal festivals, farmers' markets, and town-wide celebrations that bring residents together and highlight local culture. • Partner with businesses and organizations to host free or low-cost community activities, such as concerts, outdoor movie nights, and food truck gatherings. • Support neighborhood-based events that encourage residents to connect, such as block parties and heritage celebrations.
Strengthen Community Identity Through Branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a countywide branding campaign that highlights rural charm, agricultural heritage, and recreational assets. • Install branded signage, welcome banners, and murals in town centers to create a sense of place. • Promote local businesses, attractions, and events through a dedicated website, social media presence, and printed guides to enhance tourism and economic growth.

RURAL AREAS OF WELLS COUNTY VISION 3

Expand infrastructure and connectivity.

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Improve rural infrastructure such as paving gravel roads, expanding broadband access, and ensuring safe, reliable transportation networks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Redevelopment Commission Wells County Area Planning County Highway Utility Providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Fund Grants TIF Utility Funds 	\$\$\$\$	High	18 - 24 Months, Ongoing
2	Develop a connected network of trails and waterways for both recreational use and community connectivity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Redevelopment Commission Wells County Area Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Fund Grants TIF EDIT 	\$\$\$\$	Medium	2 - 5 Years
3	Strengthen collaboration among local communities, school systems, and government entities to pool resources and share knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Informal Leaders 	General Fund	\$	High	18 - 24 Months

Vision 3, Strategy 1: Improve rural infrastructure such as paving gravel roads, expanding broadband access, and ensuring safe, reliable transportation networks.

Objectives	Tactics
Upgrade Rural Roads for Safety and Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize the paving of high-traffic gravel roads and improve maintenance schedules for existing rural roadways. • Secure state and federal funding for road improvements, including resurfacing and widening where needed. • Install better signage, reflectors, and lighting on rural roads to enhance visibility and safety, especially in high-risk areas.
Expand High-Speed Broadband Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with internet service providers to bring reliable broadband to underserved areas, ensuring residents and businesses have access to modern digital infrastructure. • Seek grant funding and public-private partnerships to support broadband expansion efforts. • Develop free public Wi-Fi hotspots in key community areas, such as libraries, parks, and town centers, to increase connectivity.
Ensure Safe and Reliable Transportation Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve road connections between rural communities and major highways to support economic development and ease commuter access. • Work with local and regional transit organizations to explore transportation options for residents without personal vehicles, such as ride-sharing or demand-based transit. • Upgrade bridges and culverts to ensure long-term reliability and resilience against flooding and extreme weather conditions.

Vision 3, Strategy 2: Develop a connected network of trails and waterways for both recreational use and community connectivity.

Objectives	Tactics
Expand and Connect Trail Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key areas for new trails and work with landowners to secure easements for connections between towns, parks, and natural areas. • Develop multi-use trails that accommodate walkers, cyclists, and equestrians to encourage outdoor recreation and active transportation. • Install wayfinding signage, rest areas, and safety features along trails to enhance usability and accessibility.
Improve Waterway Access for Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish new canoe and kayak launch points along local rivers and streams, making it easier for residents and visitors to enjoy paddling. • Partner with White River Canoe Company or similar outfitters to provide rental services and guided tours along the Wabash River. • Implement river cleanup initiatives and conservation programs to protect waterways while promoting eco-tourism.
Integrate Trails and Waterways with Community Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design trail systems that connect residential neighborhoods to schools, parks, and commercial areas to encourage walking and biking. • Incorporate bridges and safe crossings where trails intersect with roads or waterways to improve access and safety. • Promote trails and water recreation as economic drivers by encouraging businesses such as outfitters, restaurants, and lodging near key access points.

Vision 3, Strategy 3: Strengthen collaboration among local communities, school systems, and government entities to pool resources and share knowledge.

Objectives	Tactics
Establish a Regional Collaboration Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a formal coalition of local governments, school districts, and community organizations to discuss shared challenges and opportunities. • Hold quarterly meetings to coordinate efforts on infrastructure, economic development, and public services. • Develop a shared resource database where municipalities and schools can access grant opportunities, policy templates, and best practices.
Enhance School and Community Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster collaboration between schools and local governments to address workforce development, student engagement, and educational needs. • Support joint-use agreements that allow schools and community organizations to share facilities for events, recreation, and training programs. • Develop mentorship and internship programs connecting students with local businesses, government offices, and community projects.
Improve Efficiency Through Shared Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore cost-sharing agreements between municipalities for public works, emergency services, and infrastructure improvements. • Implement joint purchasing programs to reduce costs for equipment, maintenance, and essential services across multiple jurisdictions. • Develop regional training programs for municipal staff and educators to improve professional development and operational efficiency.

RURAL AREAS OF WELLS COUNTY VISION 4

Promote economic vitality and local business growth.

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Support a vibrant economy by encouraging local businesses, entrepreneurship, and industries that align with Wells County's strengths, such as agriculture and small-scale manufacturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Wells County Economic Development Wells County Redevelopment Commission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Fund TIF EDIT 	\$\$\$	High	18 - 24 Months
2	Attract businesses that complement the rural character and provide well-paying jobs without compromising farmland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Officials Wells County Economic Development Wells County Redevelopment Commission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Fund TIF EDIT 	\$\$\$	Medium	2 - 5 Years

Vision 4, Strategy 1: Support a vibrant economy by encouraging local businesses, entrepreneurship, and industries that align with Wells County’s strengths, such as agriculture and small-scale manufacturing.

Objectives	Tactics
Encourage Local Business Development and Entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a small business support program that provides grants, low-interest loans, and mentorship opportunities for local entrepreneurs. • Develop a business incubator or co-working space to support startups and home-based businesses in rural areas. • Streamline permitting and licensing processes to make it easier for small businesses to launch and expand.
Strengthen Agriculture and Agri-Business Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support farm-to-market initiatives that connect local farmers with restaurants, schools, and grocery stores. • Encourage value-added agricultural businesses, such as food processing, specialty crop production, and agritourism. • Develop educational programs and partnerships to equip farmers with knowledge about emerging trends, sustainable practices, and direct-to-consumer sales models.
Expand Small-Scale Manufacturing and Rural Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and promote industrial sites suited for small-scale manufacturing operations, ensuring necessary infrastructure is in place. • Offer tax incentives or workforce training programs to attract and retain businesses in key industries. • Partner with regional economic development agencies to market Wells County as a prime location for niche manufacturing and rural industry growth.

Vision 4, Strategy 2: Attract businesses that complement the rural character and provide well-paying jobs without compromising farmland.

Objectives	Tactics
Target Businesses That Align with Rural Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit companies in industries such as agricultural technology, specialty food production, and outdoor recreation equipment manufacturing that fit the county's rural identity. Promote Wells County as a destination for eco-tourism and agritourism businesses, such as farm stays, vineyards, and equestrian facilities. Develop incentives for businesses that prioritize sustainable land use and low-impact development.
Encourage Job Creation Without Disrupting Farmland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct new business development to existing commercial and industrial areas rather than converting agricultural land. Implement zoning regulations that protect prime farmland while allowing for appropriate rural business growth. Support home-based and small-scale businesses that provide employment opportunities while maintaining the area's rural character.
Strengthen Workforce Development for Rural Industries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with vocational schools and trade programs to train residents for careers in agriculture, skilled trades, and rural-based manufacturing. Develop internship and apprenticeship programs that connect students with local businesses. Promote remote work opportunities by expanding broadband access and creating co-working spaces in rural hubs.