

# WELLS COUNTY COMMUNITY REPORT



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wells County's overarching goal is to preserve agricultural integrity while accommodating responsible growth. By consulting county-level comparison data and conducting a countywide survey, the plan identifies the need to diversify local industries, encourage small business development, and support larger-scale employers that fit with the county's rural character. Participants in public meetings repeatedly emphasized the importance of improved roads, updated utilities, and broader broadband coverage, illustrating a strong public desire for dependable infrastructure. From these inputs, Wells County developed Vision Principles that focus on fostering civic engagement, aligning local and regional collaboration, and providing a robust foundation for investment in roads, stormwater management, and rural broadband. In turn, these principles along with ideas from Vision 2035, lead directly to action items such as adopting farmland-preservation zoning, dedicating resources for targeted infrastructure projects, and creating partnerships to advance workforce training initiatives.

## CURRENT CONDITIONS

Understanding the physical and land use characteristics of Wells County is essential for shaping a master plan that supports growth, economic development, and community well-being. This section examines the county's current zoning, infrastructure, environmental assets, and land use patterns, providing a foundation for strategic decision-making.

Land use patterns in Wells County reflect a balance between agricultural, residential, commercial, and industrial development. Agriculture remains the dominant land use, shaping both the economy and the rural character of the county. While commercial and industrial areas are concentrated near major transportation corridors and population centers, maintaining a balance between economic expansion and the preservation of open spaces is key to long-term prosperity.

Infrastructure plays a critical role in supporting growth and connectivity. The county recognizes the need for continued investment in infrastructure improvements, particularly in aging underground utilities and stormwater management systems. Many communities are prioritizing the replacement and upgrading of infrastructure to ensure service reliability and accommodate future growth. Additionally, enhanced drainage solutions for stormwater management will play a vital role in preserving road infrastructure and mitigating flood risks.

Environmental considerations, including floodplains and protected areas, influence land use decisions and development potential. At the same time, the county's natural assets, such as Ouabache State Park and the Wabash River, offer opportunities for recreation, tourism, and environmentally integrated development. These resources contribute to Wells County's appeal, providing both ecological and economic benefits, particularly in communities seeking to blend natural surroundings with development plans.

By assessing these current conditions, this section provides a comprehensive overview of Wells County's development landscape, guiding strategies that balance economic vitality, infrastructure investments, and environmental stewardship to support the county's future growth.

## COUNTY-WIDE

Wells County’s physical landscape, natural resources, and infrastructure play a significant role in shaping its development patterns and long-term growth potential. Understanding the county’s existing conditions provides a foundation for informed decision-making, ensuring that future land use, transportation, and environmental policies align with community priorities and sustainable development goals.

The county’s transportation network consists of a hierarchy of roadways that facilitate local and regional connectivity. Interstates, principal arterials, minor arterials, and collector roads provide access to employment centers, residential areas, and agricultural operations. While Wells County does not have a major interstate running through it, Interstate 69, located just west of the county, serves as a critical transportation corridor connecting the region to Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, and beyond. The presence of state roads, minor roads, and rail infrastructure further enhances connectivity, supporting economic activity and mobility for residents and businesses.

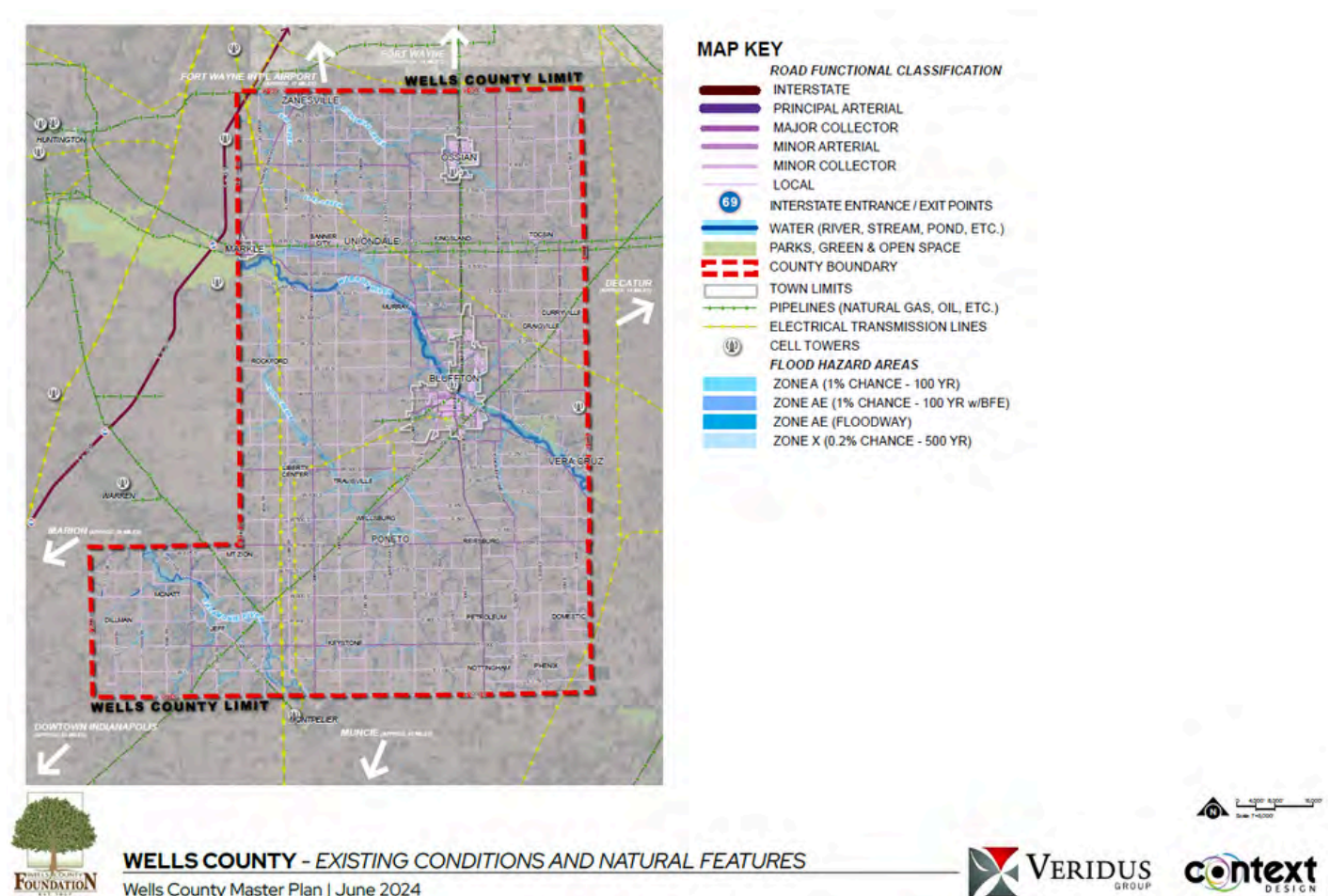


Figure 32: Wells County Existing and Natural Conditions Map; Source: Context Design

Natural features and environmental considerations also influence development opportunities within the county. Water bodies, including rivers, streams, and ponds, are scattered throughout the landscape, providing ecological and recreational benefits while also presenting potential constraints for development in flood-prone areas. Flood hazard zones, as identified by FEMA, highlight areas subject to 100-year and 500-year flood events, emphasizing the need for careful planning to mitigate risk and ensure infrastructure resilience.

In addition to its transportation and environmental characteristics, infrastructure and utilities play a crucial role in supporting both urban and rural development. Pipelines, electrical transmission lines, and cell towers provide essential services to residents and businesses, influencing where and how future development occurs. Ensuring that infrastructure investments align with projected growth will be key to maintaining the county's long-term economic stability and quality of life.

By examining these existing conditions, this section provides a comprehensive overview of the physical, environmental, and infrastructure assets that define Wells County today. These factors will serve as the basis for future planning efforts, guiding strategies that balance growth, conservation, and connectivity to support a resilient and thriving community.

## FUTURE VISION

The future vision for Wells County is shaped by extensive community input, including surveys, public meetings, and stakeholder discussions. This engagement process has provided valuable insight into local priorities, challenges, and aspirations, ensuring the master plan reflects the needs of residents, businesses, and community leaders. From this process, a set of vision principles has emerged, establishing a framework to guide future decision-making and growth across the county, its municipalities, and its rural areas.

The clear statement of objectives and policies for land use and the development of public resources, including public ways, places, lands, structures, and utilities, is to guide Wells County toward a future that reflects the values and aspirations of its residents. These policies aim to support growth that improves quality of life, fosters economic opportunity, attracts and retains residents, expands housing options, and builds active, connected communities. These objectives provide a foundation for responsible development and public investment. The following vision principles further define this direction and establish a shared framework for future decision-making across the county.

This section outlines key vision principles that will shape development and investment throughout Wells County. These principles establish objectives for future land use, infrastructure expansion, and community enhancement, ensuring that growth aligns with the county's long-term goals. Specifically, these principles will inform policy development in key areas such as land use planning, transportation improvements, public spaces, and economic development.

As the county moves forward, these vision principles will serve as a foundation for formal policies, ensuring future growth is balanced, sustainable, and reflective of community values. The implementation section will refine these principles into specific strategies, objectives, and action plans, providing a clear roadmap for Wells County's future. By establishing this vision, the county can ensure that development enhances quality of life, preserves natural resources, and strengthens its unique identity for generations to come.

## VISION PRINCIPLES: COUNTY-WIDE

The following vision principles establish a foundation for Wells County's future, ensuring that growth enhances quality of life, strengthens collaboration, fosters civic engagement, and supports a resilient economy. Rooted in community input and Vision 2035, these principles provide a strategic framework to guide development, encourage partnerships, and create opportunities that benefit all residents.

- 1** Prioritize growth that enhances the quality of life for current and future residents by developing housing, infrastructure, jobs, and recreational opportunities that enrich the community fabric while preserving existing values.
- 2** Strengthen collaboration among local communities, school systems, and government entities within Wells County to pool resources, share knowledge, and work towards common objectives that benefit all residents.
- 3** Foster communities where residents are actively involved in shaping their surroundings, participating in civic activities, and contributing to the overall well-being of Wells County.
- 4** Develop a vibrant economy that supports local businesses, encourages entrepreneurship, and attracts new industries to create jobs and expand the tax base.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation section for Wells County provides a structured framework to advance the county's long-term vision through two comprehensive matrices. These matrices serve as practical tools to guide decision-making, resource allocation, and project management, ensuring that each priority is effectively addressed in a timely and strategic manner.

The first matrix outlines each priority along with its associated goals, identifying:

- **Responsible Parties:** Key agencies, departments, or organizations leading the effort.
- **Potential Funding Sources:** Grants, public-private partnerships, and local funding opportunities.
- **Cost:** The estimated total cost for each strategy on a scale of \$ - \$\$\$\$.
- **Priority Level:** The urgency of each goal to assist with project sequencing.
- **Timeline:** Estimated timeframes for completion to maintain accountability and progress.

The second matrix provides a detailed breakdown of each goal, identifying the specific action steps necessary for successful implementation. By outlining clear tasks and responsibilities, this matrix ensures that goals outlined in the first matrix lead to measurable progress.

Together, these matrices create a clear and actionable roadmap for implementing Wells County's future vision. They will serve as a reference tool for project coordination, resource management, and progress tracking, helping the county maintain focus and momentum throughout the implementation process.

## COUNTY-WIDE VISION 1

*Prioritize growth that enhances the quality of life for current and future residents by developing housing, infrastructure, jobs, and recreational opportunities that enrich the community fabric while preserving existing values.*

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Create a variety of housing options to accommodate a variety lifestyles and preferences, including those seeking more spacious and upscale residences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan Commission</li> <li>• County Commissioners</li> <li>• County Council</li> <li>• Redevelopment Commission</li> <li>• City and Town Elected Appointed Officials</li> <li>• Developers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tax Increment Financing</li> <li>• Utilities for Expansion</li> <li>• State Grants</li> <li>• Tax Credit Programs</li> </ul>	\$\$\$\$	High	18 Months - 3 Years
2	Prioritize the creation of a connected network of waterways and trails to enhance recreational opportunities and foster a vibrant community that attracts residents and businesses seeking a high quality of life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elected Officials</li> <li>• Park Boards</li> <li>• Redevelopment Commission</li> <li>• Chamber of Commerce/ Business Groups</li> <li>• Upper Wabash River Basin Commission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Fund</li> <li>• Tax Increment Financing</li> <li>• Next Level Trails</li> <li>• Land and Water Conservation Fund</li> </ul>	\$\$\$\$	High	18 Months - 3 Years
3	Establish guidelines for future energy development that align with community priorities, safeguard land use interests, and ensure local decision-making authority over energy projects and infrastructure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elected Officials</li> <li>• Plan Commission</li> <li>• Public Input</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Fund</li> </ul>	\$	High	18 Months - 3 Years

**Vision 1, Strategy 1: Create a variety of housing options to accommodate a variety lifestyles and preferences, including those seeking more spacious and upscale residences.**

Objectives	Tactics
<p>Adopt Flexible Zoning Regulations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Update zoning codes to allow for a mix of housing types, including single-family, multi-family, and estate-style homes.</li> <li>• Establish density incentives to encourage a range of housing options while maintaining community character.</li> <li>• Streamline the approval process for developments that align with community housing goals.</li> </ul>
<p>Encourage Public-Private Partnerships for Housing Development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with developers to create housing options that meet market demand and community needs.</li> <li>• Offer incentives, such as infrastructure assistance or tax abatements, for projects that expand housing choices.</li> <li>• Work with financial institutions to establish homebuyer assistance programs for targeted demographics.</li> </ul>
<p>Expand Housing Availability for a Range of Lifestyles</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop programs that support workforce and senior housing while maintaining space for larger and upscale residences.</li> <li>• Encourage accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and flexible housing models to provide more living options.</li> <li>• Collaborate with builders to integrate home designs that appeal to various household sizes and preferences.</li> </ul>

**Vision 1, Strategy 2: Prioritize the creation of a connected network of waterways and trails to enhance recreational opportunities and foster a vibrant community that attracts residents and businesses seeking a high quality of life.**

Objectives	Tactics
Expand and Improve Trail Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify key gaps in the existing trail network and develop a phased plan to connect them.</li> <li>• Work with property owners and stakeholders to secure easements for new trail segments.</li> <li>• Install wayfinding signage and amenities such as rest areas, bike racks, and lighting to enhance usability.</li> <li>• <i>Use already planned/on-going trail projects as momentum:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ <i>SR 124 Trail Project (East Bluffton)</i></li> <li>◦ <i>Ossian Linear Parkway</i></li> <li>◦ <i>Rose Rd - Kayak Launch (Wabash River)</i></li> <li>◦ <i>Pokabache Trail Project</i></li> <li>◦ <i>Salamonie River - Kayak Launch Projects</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Enhance Waterway Access and Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop canoe and kayak launch sites along key waterways to encourage outdoor activity.</li> <li>• Improve shoreline access and fishing areas to create more recreational opportunities.</li> <li>• Partner with White River Canoe Company to establish a second company location on the Wabash River near Vera Cruz and Bluffton, expanding recreational offerings and tourism potential.</li> </ul>
Integrate Trails and Waterways with Economic Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage businesses, such as cafes, outfitters, and lodging, to locate near trails and waterways.</li> <li>• Develop programming and events, such as races, festivals, and guided tours, to activate these spaces.</li> <li>• Establish design standards for new developments that promote pedestrian and cyclist access to trails and waterways.</li> </ul>
Secure Funding and Partnerships for Expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with local organizations, businesses, and volunteers to assist with maintenance and programming.</li> <li>• Create a long-term funding strategy to ensure continued investment in outdoor recreation infrastructure.</li> </ul>

**Vision 1, Strategy 3: Establish guidelines for future energy development that align with community priorities, safeguard land use interests, and ensure local decision-making authority over energy projects and infrastructure.**

Objectives	Tactics
Establish a Local Energy Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appoint a group of stakeholders, including residents, business leaders, and local officials, to oversee energy-related matters.</li> <li>• Develop a structured meeting schedule and clear objectives for evaluating energy proposals.</li> </ul>
Conduct a Countywide Energy Impact Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with industry experts to analyze economic, environmental, and infrastructure impacts of potential energy developments.</li> <li>• Compile data on existing energy infrastructure and future needs to inform decision-making.</li> </ul>
Pass a Local Energy Ordinance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draft and propose an ordinance outlining specific guidelines for energy development approvals.</li> <li>• Work with legal and planning experts to ensure enforceability and alignment with state laws.</li> </ul>
Adopt Local Energy Siting Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and update zoning regulations to define appropriate locations for energy projects.</li> <li>• Establish setback requirements and land use protections to minimize impacts on residents and agricultural land.</li> <li>• Conduct public workshops to gather input before finalizing siting standards.</li> </ul>

## COUNTY-WIDE VISION 2

*Strengthen collaboration among local communities, school systems, and government entities within Wells County to share expertise, coordinate services, and align efforts toward common objectives that benefit all residents.*

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Fostering strong internal partnerships will help address challenges more effectively, leverage shared opportunities, and create a cohesive approach to regional development that maximizes community potential.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elected Officials</li> <li>• Appointed Boards and Officials</li> <li>• Community Foundation</li> <li>• Economic Development Corp</li> </ul>	General Fund	\$	High	18 Months - 3 Years
2	Building a unified vision among residents, businesses, and government entities ensures that all actors in the county are working towards common goals, promoting a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public</li> <li>• Elected Officials</li> <li>• Chamber of Commerce</li> <li>• Active County Groups</li> <li>• Schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Fund</li> <li>• Annual Budgets</li> </ul>	\$	High	3 - 6 Years

**Vision 2, Strategy 1: Fostering strong internal partnerships will help address challenges more effectively, leverage shared opportunities, and create a cohesive approach to regional development that maximizes community potential.**

Objectives	Tactics
Establish a Countywide Leadership Roundtable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a recurring meeting for representatives from municipalities, schools, and county government to discuss shared priorities and challenges.</li> <li>• Develop a framework for collaborative decision-making and resource-sharing agreements.</li> <li>• Identify joint initiatives that enhance regional development and improve efficiency.</li> </ul>
Expand Educational and Workforce Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen collaboration between schools, local businesses, and government entities to align education with workforce needs.</li> <li>• Develop internship and apprenticeship programs that connect students with local industries.</li> <li>• Explore joint training initiatives that equip residents with skills for in-demand careers.</li> </ul>
Enhance Communication and Resource Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement a centralized platform for sharing data, reports, and best practices among local governments and schools.</li> <li>• Develop joint public outreach efforts to ensure residents are informed about regional initiatives.</li> <li>• Establish a crisis coordination network for emergency response and disaster preparedness across jurisdictions.</li> </ul>

**Vision 2, Strategy 2: Building a unified vision among residents, businesses, and government entities ensures that all actors in the county are working towards common goals, promoting a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility.**

Objectives	Tactics
Strengthen Business and Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form a public-private partnership that includes local businesses, government leaders, and community organizations to align efforts toward economic and social growth.</li> <li>• Develop a countywide branding and messaging campaign that reinforces a shared identity and sense of place.</li> <li>• Encourage businesses to participate in community initiatives, such as mentorship programs, sponsorships, and volunteer opportunities.</li> </ul>
Align Government Policies with Community Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and update local policies and regulations to support the county’s unified vision and economic development strategy.</li> <li>• Establish cross-jurisdictional collaboration between municipalities to ensure cohesive planning and resource allocation.</li> <li>• Implement an annual State of the County report that tracks progress toward vision goals and informs residents and stakeholders.</li> </ul>
Establish a Countywide Vision Review Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form a vision review committee composed of local leaders, business representatives, and residents to evaluate implementation efforts and recommend adjustments.</li> <li>• Develop an annual progress report that tracks key performance indicators and communicates updates to the public, ensuring transparency and accountability.</li> <li>• Create a formal review cycle, revisiting the countywide vision every five years to assess progress and update goals based on changing community needs.</li> </ul>

### COUNTY-WIDE VISION 3

*Develop a vibrant economy that supports local businesses, encourages entrepreneurship, and attracts new industries to create jobs and expand the tax base.*

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Focus on cultivating sectors that align with Wells County’s strengths, including agriculture, technology, and manufacturing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public</li> <li>• Developers</li> <li>• Economic Development Corp</li> <li>• Elected Officials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual Budgets</li> <li>• General Fund</li> </ul>	\$\$	Medium	3 - 6 Years
2	Strengthen Wells County’s economic resilience by diversifying industry sectors, investing in workforce development, and cultivating conditions that allow residents and businesses to thrive amid economic change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic Development Corp</li> <li>• Elected Officials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual Budget</li> <li>• Tax Increment Financing</li> <li>• Federal and State incentive programs</li> </ul>	\$\$\$	Medium	3 - 6 Years

**Vision 3, Strategy 1: Focus on cultivating sectors that align with Wells County’s strengths, including agriculture, technology, and manufacturing.**

Objectives	Tactics
Support Agricultural Innovation and Expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage agribusiness development by providing resources for value-added production, ag-tech advancements, and farm-to-market initiatives.</li> <li>• Partner with local educational institutions to create training programs that prepare workers for modern agricultural careers.</li> <li>• Promote agritourism opportunities that highlight Wells County’s agricultural heritage and create new revenue streams.</li> </ul>
Strengthen the Technology and Manufacturing Ecosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish partnerships with regional workforce organizations to align training programs with the needs of advanced manufacturing and technology sectors.</li> <li>• Invest in infrastructure improvements, such as high-speed internet and business parks, to support high-tech and industrial growth.</li> </ul>
Leverage Regional Partnerships for Economic Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate with neighboring counties and regional organizations to market Wells County as a prime location for targeted industries.</li> <li>• Pursue state and federal grants to support sector-specific economic development initiatives.</li> <li>• Facilitate networking events, business incubators, and mentorship programs to strengthen the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.</li> </ul>
Identify and Promote Key Industry Growth Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a market analysis to determine specific opportunities within agriculture, technology, and manufacturing that align with Wells County’s workforce and resources.</li> <li>• Develop targeted business attraction strategies to recruit companies that complement existing industries and fill market gaps.</li> <li>• Establish industry roundtables with local businesses and stakeholders to assess needs and opportunities for sector growth.</li> </ul>

**Vision 3, Strategy 2: A dynamic economy provides stability and resilience against economic shifts, offering residents a wide range of opportunities to thrive and prosper within the county.**

Objectives	Tactics
Diversify the Local Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify emerging industries and create a targeted strategy to attract businesses that complement existing sectors while expanding job opportunities.</li> <li>• Support small business development by offering resources such as funding assistance, mentorship programs, and streamlined permitting processes.</li> <li>• Encourage mixed-use developments that combine commercial, residential, and retail spaces to create vibrant economic hubs.</li> </ul>
Strengthen Workforce Development and Retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with local schools, colleges, and workforce training centers to align education and job skills with industry needs.</li> <li>• Develop apprenticeship and internship programs with local businesses to provide hands-on training and career pathways for residents.</li> <li>• Launch a workforce attraction campaign highlighting Wells County’s quality of life and career opportunities to retain and recruit skilled workers.</li> </ul>
Encourage Entrepreneurship and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a business incubator or coworking space to support startups and foster innovation.</li> <li>• Establish a local investment fund to provide seed capital for entrepreneurs launching new ventures.</li> <li>• Organize networking events, pitch competitions, and industry roundtables to connect entrepreneurs with mentors, investors, and resources.</li> </ul>

## COUNTY-WIDE VISION 4

*Foster communities where residents are actively involved in shaping their surroundings, participating in civic activities, and contributing to the overall well-being of Wells County.*

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Encourage civic pride and ownership among residents through volunteerism, local events, community branding, and community-driven initiatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elected Officials</li> <li>School Officials</li> <li>Chamber of Commerce</li> <li>Other active civic organizations</li> </ul>	Annual Budgets	\$\$	Medium	3 - 6 Years
2	Strengthen community well-being by promoting civic engagement, supporting local initiatives, and creating opportunities for residents to participate in and contribute to community life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elected Officials</li> <li>School Officials</li> <li>Chamber of Commerce</li> <li>Other active civic organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual Budget</li> <li>Tax Increment Financing</li> <li>Federal and State incentive programs</li> </ul>	\$\$	Low	7 - 10 Years

**Vision 4, Strategy 1: Encourage civic pride and ownership among residents through volunteerism, local events, community branding, and community-driven initiatives.**

Objectives	Tactics
Strengthen Community Identity Through Branding and Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a countywide branding campaign that highlights Wells County’s unique character, history, and community spirit.</li> <li>• Create welcome programs for new residents to introduce them to local resources, organizations, and opportunities to get involved.</li> <li>• Implement a community storytelling initiative that showcases resident contributions and local success stories.</li> </ul>
Enhance Public Spaces and Community Gathering Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize neighborhood beautification projects, including park cleanups, mural installations, and streetscape improvements.</li> <li>• Support the development of community gardens, public art displays, and interactive installations that foster engagement.</li> <li>• Encourage local businesses and organizations to sponsor and maintain public spaces, strengthening community investment and pride.</li> </ul>
Increase Resident Involvement in Local Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish citizen advisory boards to provide input on key community initiatives and development projects.</li> <li>• Host regular town hall meetings and public forums to encourage dialogue between residents and local leaders.</li> <li>• Develop an online civic engagement portal where residents can track projects, provide feedback, and stay informed on local issues.</li> </ul>

**Vision 4, Strategy 2: Engaged and active communities lead to a vibrant social environment, encouraging residents to take pride in their hometowns and contribute positively to communal life, thus strengthening the social fabric and enhancing overall community well-being.**

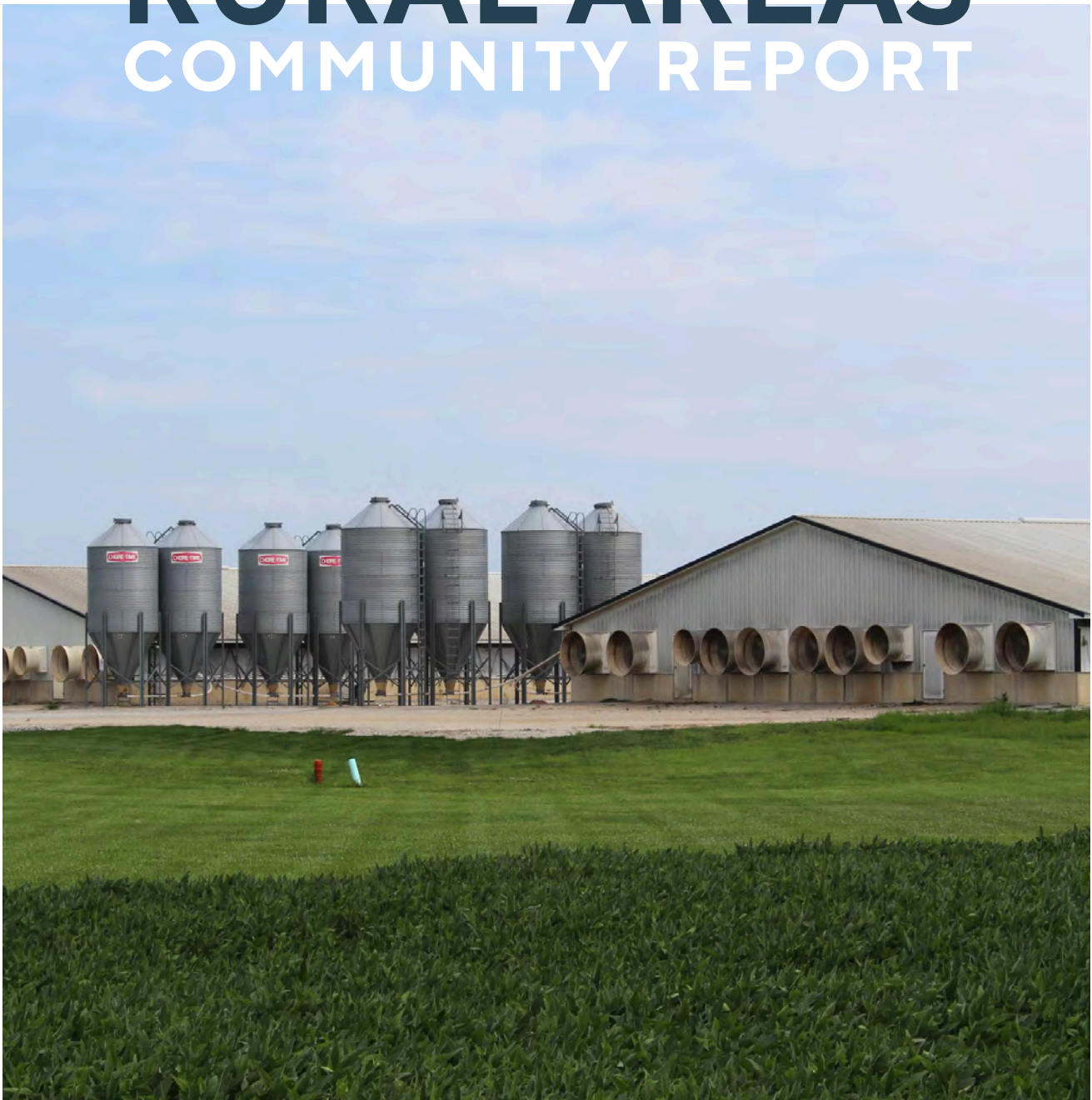
Objectives	Tactics
Cultivate a Culture of Community Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a “Pride in Place” initiative that encourages residents to participate in community improvement projects, such as beautification efforts and public space enhancements.</li> <li>• Launch a recognition program that highlights individuals and groups making a positive impact in their communities.</li> <li>• Establish mentorship programs that connect longtime residents with newcomers to strengthen social connections and civic participation.</li> </ul>
Expand Events and Programming to Strengthen Social Bonds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize year-round community events, such as festivals, farmers' markets, and neighborhood gatherings, that celebrate local culture and bring people together.</li> <li>• Support grassroots efforts to create block parties, public art installations, and social clubs that foster stronger local connections.</li> <li>• Encourage collaboration between local businesses, schools, and organizations to sponsor and host community-driven activities.</li> </ul>
Improve Accessibility to Civic Engagement Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an online engagement platform where residents can learn about upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, and ways to participate in local governance.</li> <li>• Create an outreach program to engage underrepresented groups and ensure all voices are heard in community decision-making.</li> <li>• Host leadership development workshops to empower residents to take active roles in civic initiatives and local boards.</li> </ul>

## COUNTY-WIDE AIRPORTS

*Prior to the completion of this report, additional actions regarding airports were required to be added. This matrix will outline the strategy and responsibility to cover those requirements. Since the strategies are more straightforward than previous ones, there will not be a secondary objective and tactic matrix.*

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Create an overlay district for the Fort Wayne International Airport 5-Mile Airport Influence Area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan Commission</li> <li>County Commissioners</li> <li>County Council</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual Budgets</li> </ul>	\$	High	1 - 2 Years
2	Study the need for a local airport within Wells County.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>County Commissioners</li> <li>County Council</li> <li>Chamber of Commerce</li> <li>Consultant firm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual Budgets</li> </ul>	\$\$	Low	3 - 6 Years
3	Consider creating a Wells County Board of Aviation Commissioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>County Commissioners</li> <li>County</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual Budget</li> </ul>	\$	Low	1 - 3 Years

# 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.

# MARKLE CALL OUT

Although the Town of Markle was not a primary focus of the new Wells County Master Plan, the County planning team completed a side-by-side review of the Markle Comprehensive Plan to ensure the County-wide policies embrace, not override, the aspirations of this key gateway community. That comparison confirmed that Markle’s objectives dovetail with the County’s long-term vision for balanced growth, infrastructure resilience and quality of place. In effect, the County plan supplies the regional framework, while the Markle plan offers parcel-level insights that sharpen implementation priorities .

## POINTS OF STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

### 1. Downtown & Corridor Vitality

Markle’s plan calls for extending and repairing sidewalks from Tracy Street into the central business district, paired with a downtown fast-charging station to draw I-69 and U.S. 224 travelers into local shops . The County plan already targets these same corridors for façade grants and way-finding. Adopting Markle’s shovel-ready sidewalk alignment and EV-charging concept allows the County to launch an early demonstration project that proves the corridor strategy for other towns.

### 2. Housing Diversity and Infill

To preserve a small-town feel while meeting new demand, Markle proposes reducing minimum lot sizes, relaxing floor-area thresholds, and partnering with County planning staff to attract duplex and multifamily products . Those tools match the County’s infill toolkit and model PUD language. Designating Markle’s Residential TIF district as a pilot site gives both plans an immediate testbed for mixed-income infill.

### 3. Industrial & Logistics Competitiveness

Situated at the I-69/US-224 interchange, Markle markets a rail-served industrial park that puts eighty of the nation’s top one hundred markets within a one-day truck drive . The County plan promotes the same advanced-logistics cluster. Merging Markle’s TIF fact sheet and prospectus into the County’s marketing packet lets local and County economic-development teams speak to site-selectors with one unified voice.

### 4. Broadband & Digital Equity

Both plans rank universal, affordable fiber as critical infrastructure. Markle outlines a task-force model to close remaining gaps while the County plan introduces a “Dig-Once” ordinance and provider roundtables. A joint grant calendar (OCRA, BEAD, READI) will help both jurisdictions compete more effectively for state and federal funds.

### 5. Parks, Recreation & Active Mobility

Markle recommends preparing an IDNR-compliant five-year park plan and extending Walkway Park’s trail network . Because the County plan is already updating its own park master plan and identifying a regional trail spine, incorporating Markle as an “early-action site” meets IDNR requirements for the town and strengthens the County’s grant narrative.

## NEXT STEPS AND FURTHER READING

For readers who need parcel-level data, detailed survey findings or the complete goal-objective-strategy tables for Markle, please consult the “Town of Markle Comprehensive Plan (2022 Draft)” prepared by Region 3-A. That document remains the definitive source for town-specific policies and is reviewed every five years to stay current.



To access the “Town of Markle Comprehensive Plan (2022 Draft),” scan the QR Code or visit: <https://wellscounty.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Markle-Comp-Plan-Draft.pdf>.

# ZANESVILLE CALL OUT

Although the Town of Zanesville was not a core work product of the County's 2025 comprehensive-planning effort, the County team audited the draft to be sure that county-wide policies reinforce, rather than override, the aspirations of this bi-county gateway community as shown in their Thrive Zanesville Master Plan . That review confirmed that Zanesville's goals for compact growth, corridor-based reinvestment, and infrastructure stewardship mesh cleanly with the County vision for balanced development, connectivity and small-town quality of life. In practice, the County plan provides the regional frame, while Thrive Zanesville supplies parcel-level tactics that can be lifted directly into County programs.

## POINTS OF STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

### 1. Active Mobility & Complete Streets

Thrive Zanesville prioritizes a cohesive sidewalk network, ADA retrofits, an ordinance assigning upkeep to abutting owners, and a missing-link connection from Town Center to Dollar General along SR-3/Indianapolis-Marzane Road. It also identifies a shared-use trail that strings together Lions Park, Hoverstock Cemetery, and downtown blocks. These projects slot neatly into the County's Complete Streets policy and county-wide trail spine. Adopting Zanesville's alignments gives the County shovel-ready pilot segments for its regional active-transportation map.

### 2. Housing Diversity & Growth Targets

Zanesville sets a clear milestone - 800-900 residents and 325-365 units by 2041 - and acknowledges the 65-105 new dwellings still needed. The plan leans on mixed-type infill (duplexes, accessory units, small rentals) to keep homes attainable as construction costs climb. Those prescriptions mirror the County's infill toolkit and model PUD language. Designating Zanesville's vacant in-town lots as a fast-track demonstration area lets both plans prove out missing-middle prototypes without greenfield extension.

### 3. Corridor-Based Economic Development

Both plans pin commercial growth to traffic corridors. Thrive Zanesville calls for a convenience-fuel cluster and small local retail on Indianapolis/Marzane Road, citing rising counts from the I-69/Airport logistics hub. The County plan already treats SR-3 and US-224 as priority façade/way-finding corridors. By embedding Zanesville's ED-1 action steps in the County's corridor program, the County gains a ready-made case study while Zanesville secures marketing muscle and façade-grant eligibility.

### 4. Digital Equity & Remote-Work Readiness

Zanesville elevates universal, affordable broadband, specifically Next Level Connections grants and last-mile fiber, to a high-priority housing tactic because 50% of survey respondents said they would work remotely if reliable service were available. The County's dig-once ordinance and provider roundtables give that effort regional scale while Zanesville's data offer a pilot market for demand aggregation.

### 5. Asset Management & Capital Planning

Thrive Zanesville expands its roadway Asset Management Plan to cover sidewalks, stormwater, and town buildings, tying repairs to a five-year capital schedule. Embedding those schedules into the County's infrastructure-resilience chapter strengthens grant narratives (Community Crossings, OCRA SIP) and models the life-cycle budgeting practices the County wants every municipality to adopt.

## NEXT STEPS AND FURTHER READING

For parcel-level zoning recommendations, full survey cross-tabs, detailed growth-scenario modeling and the complete table of goals, and action steps and tasks, consult the “Thrive Zanesville 2022 Master Plan” prepared by Abonmarche. The Town Council revisits this document every five years, and it remains the authoritative source for all Zanesville-specific data and implementation procedures.



To access the “Thrive Zanesville 2022 Master Plan,” scan the QR Code or visit <https://wellscounty.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Thrive-Zanesville-2022-Master-Plan-FINAL-DRAFT.pdf>.

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

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

## 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"> <li>• Elected Officials</li> <li>• Redevelopment Commission</li> <li>• Wells County Area Planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Fund</li> <li>• EDIT</li> <li>• TIF</li> </ul>	\$	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"> <li>• Elected Officials</li> <li>• Redevelopment Commission</li> <li>• Wells County Area Planning</li> <li>• Volunteer Groups</li> <li>• Rotary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Fund</li> <li>• EDIT</li> <li>• TIF</li> </ul>	\$\$\$	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"> <li>• Elected Officials</li> <li>• Volunteer Groups</li> <li>• Rotary</li> <li>• 4-H</li> </ul>	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"> <li>• Direct new residential and commercial development to existing towns and villages to reinforce their role as community hubs.</li> <li>• Support mixed-use development that integrates housing, retail, and services while maintaining the rural character.</li> <li>• Encourage adaptive reuse of historic buildings and vacant structures to provide new opportunities without disrupting the community fabric.</li> </ul>
Preserve Local Identity and Values in Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement design and zoning guidelines that ensure new development complements the scale and character of rural communities.</li> <li>• Require community input in major development projects to align growth with resident priorities and values.</li> <li>• Encourage businesses and industries that align with local needs, such as agricultural support services, rural healthcare, and small-scale retail.</li> </ul>
Maintain Open Space and Natural Beauty Alongside Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote conservation subdivisions and clustered housing developments that preserve green space while allowing for responsible residential growth.</li> <li>• Invest in parks, trails, and recreational areas that enhance the quality of life without compromising rural landscapes.</li> <li>• Develop policies that balance economic development with environmental stewardship, ensuring that natural resources are protected as the community grows.</li> </ul>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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