



Facilitating Rural Economic Development

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Challenge: Create digital tools that help rural communities access and use data to implement solutions to economic, environmental, and human health challenges, taking care to reach places that have limited professional capacity and small budgets.

Executive champion: Matthew Dalbey, Office Director, Office of Community Revitalization, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Problem: In a rural Delaware community, a much-needed new health center is built in an open space designated as coastal land along a six-lane highway. Less than a quarter mile away, the walkable historic downtown is experiencing growing business vacancies. How might public data have led local decision makers to choose a more accessible site that could have catalyzed new business opportunities on Main Street? How much additional coastal open space could be conserved? Considering far-reaching challenges like loss of industry, extreme weather events, other economic shocks, and even lack of access to data and broadband internet, small towns and rural communities are struggling to strengthen their economies and revive downtowns while providing healthier lifestyles and cleaner environments for their residents. By taking advantage of walkable street grids and historic architecture built by generations gone, rural communities can also improve air quality, protect local watersheds, conserve open space, and reduce waste. However, rural communities often lack the capacity, data, strategies, or financial resources to tackle downtown revitalization, as they often have limited resources dedicated to comprehensive planning and regional collaboration. What's more, rural communities may lack access to private and public capital for sustainable economic development and revitalization. Lack of or limited access to broadband internet also takes a toll on a community's ability to access economic opportunity. The result can be development that fails to take advantage of the communities' assets, creates long-term maintenance costs, and undermines health and environmental goals.

Why this problem matters: Rural economies must maintain a fine balance between economic competitiveness and agricultural and natural land conservation, as well as between maintaining existing roads, sewers, and buildings and funding for services needed to help residents maintain a good quality of life. In particular, rural communities located close to metropolitan areas or amenities (e.g., ski areas, national parks) may struggle to preserve their rural character in the face of growth pressures, as they experience conversion of farmland and natural land to development. Rural communities can achieve their goals for growth and development while maintaining their distinctive rural character by encouraging growth in town, where businesses can thrive on a walkable main street and families can live close to their daily destinations, protect rural landscapes, improve air and water quality, provide places for recreation, and create tourist attractions that bring investments into the local economy.



Vision for sprint outcomes: Rural communities can quickly and easily access curated datasets and implementation strategies to support sustainable economic growth—growth that is community-driven, leverages existing local assets, and provides walkable, compact downtowns to support the health of residents and ecosystems.

Target end users: Local officials or other local decision makers; regional planning groups; rural or tribal communities; communities that have been impacted by recent pandemic outfall, loss of key industry, and/or extreme weather events are suggested.

Related open data sets:

- Demographic and socioeconomic data (e.g., human capital, labor force characteristics) – U.S.Census ([link](#))
- Walkability and transit access – EPA Smart Location Database ([link](#))
- Environmental, geographic, climatic, cultural, and natural resource profiles – EPA EnviroAtlas, Fish & Wildlife Service ([link](#))
- Social Vulnerability Index, CDC ([link](#))
- Food security and food access – USDA Food Environment Atlas ([link](#))
- USDA Atlas of Rural and Small Towns ([link](#))
- Economic performance factors (e.g., housing, health services, educational, cultural and recreational resources, public safety)
- Assets such as anchor institutions, access to nature amenities, new and emerging economic drivers
- Infrastructure assets (e.g., water, sewer, telecommunications/broadband, energy distribution systems, transportation)
- Emerging or declining clusters or industry sectors
- Workforce factors (e.g., innovation, supply chains, state and local laws, financial resources, transportation, energy cost, taxes, bonding capacity, land use patterns)

Lead POCs:

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