Rebuilding a Resilient Heartland

Rural America must self-determine a way forward that rebuilds social capital, makes rural places and people more resilient, and local institutions more self-reliant. A ‘pessimism of place’ must be replaced with communities of health, hope, and opportunity. Local solutions need to drive regional betterment.

Our planning must be fresh, innovative, and directed at place-making to create a destination where young families want to live, talent can thrive, local businesses may grow, and everyone is able to prosper.

Rural America has a great deal to offer with affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, and a small-town authenticity. Success will require all of us working together around a common effort.

The Illinois River Valley: Rural Corridor of Opportunity

The Illinois River flows diagonally across the State of Illinois, beginning southeast of Chicago and joining the Mississippi River at Grafton, IL near St. Louis, MO. More than 90 percent of the state’s population lives in this watershed area.

Transformative investment combined with thoughtfully conceived initiatives could spark real and rapid change in Illinois’ rural core. Building local capacity to meet the challenges and opportunities of our 21st century society will be crucial. Local institutions will be central to this effort serving as listeners, conveners, and consensus-builders, empowering individual entrepreneurs, local investment, and collective actions to drive real impact.

Establishing a Foothold for Prosperity in the Lower Illinois River Valley

Applying local capacity strategically and assembling the right mix of resources – human, institutional, and financial – will be crucial to driving real change. The Lower Illinois River Valley corridor is ready for targeted investment and transformative change. This struggling region could become a corridor of opportunity.

In 2017, Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) and John Wood Community College (JWCC) began an exploratory effort in the rural core of their adjoining service areas, a nine-county corridor along the lower 80 miles of the Illinois River. This effort is seeking ways to better serve rural segments of their adjoining community college districts and improve the livability of Illinois River Valley communities, overall.

Early on, LCCC and JWCC communicated with a number of community leaders and local capacity-building institutions to initially scope a path forward. This ad hoc group included the Illinois Electric Cooperative, the Illinois Farm Bureau, University of Illinois Extension, and the Great Rivers Land Trust.
White House Takes Aim at Rural Prosperity

In April 2017, the White House announced creation of the Federal Interagency Task Force for Agriculture and Rural Prosperity. In January 2018, the Task Force presented its recommendations, organized around five key indicators of rural prosperity: E-Connectivity, Quality of Life, Rural Workforce, Technological Innovation, and Economic Development. The Task Force called for regional solutions to be set in motion, and the development of implementation metrics to guide the overall effort and measure success.

During the remainder of 2018, the Lower Illinois River Valley ad hoc group discussed and framed regional challenges and opportunities, utilizing the five focus areas put forth by the Task Force. The concept for a rural prosperity initiative, its focus, and geographic coverage were defined, initially directed at the counties along the lower 80 miles of the Illinois River.

Launch of Lower Illinois River Valley–Rural Prosperity Initiative

Formally incorporated in early 2019, the Lower Illinois River Valley–Rural Prosperity Initiative (LIRV-RPI) seeks to immediately leverage the capacity-building strength of local institutions to assist leaders in unleashing a wave of rural innovation and entrepreneurship across the Lower Illinois River Valley.

Key ‘Impact’ Objectives

- Increase local entrepreneurship and jobs.
- Develop catalytic projects that seed future investments.
- Develop supportive environment needed for economic development to thrive.
- Formulate actionable place-making strategies that build community vibrancy and social capital.

Actionable Strategies

- Support legislation providing opportunities for enhancing the culture and economy of rural areas.
- Build a dynamic agricultural economy, with sustainable conservation business practices.
- Encourage rural small business growth and development of infrastructure in water, sewer, power, broadband, and transportation.
- Support transformative improvements to rural health care.
- Invigorate historic town centers and restore their position as hubs of local commerce and community.
- Celebrate the region’s open space and natural assets toward development of a strong outdoor recreation economy.

Our Partners

For more information about LIRV-RPI, visit www.lirv-rpi.org | Email: info@lirv-rpi.org