

2026

Revitalize Potter County

Strategies for Economic Growth
and Community Development

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● ABOUT THE PROJECT TEAM

ALCHEMY ACCOMPANIED

Headquartered in West Virginia, Alchemy Accompanied specializes in rural community and economic development planning, project design, and funding development. While the firm was formally established in 2024, its principal consultants, Jenny Totten, Spencer Moss, and Melissa Martin, have collaborated for more than 15 years across agriculture-based economic development, food entrepreneurship, tourism, hospitality, strategic planning, market development, youth engagement, and funding strategy.

Alchemy Accompanied is a small, focused firm committed to delivering on expectations by selectively engaging in projects where it can make the greatest impact. The firm intentionally limits its workload to ensure personalized attention and high-quality deliverables. Its flexible management model allows Alchemy Accompanied to bring in adjunct experts when needed, ensuring tailored, high-caliber outcomes for every project. This approach enables the team to bring together the right expertise to problem solve, plan, and strategically develop deliverables alongside, not for, local governments, organizations, and community members. Additionally, the firm prioritizes being on site in the communities it serves and engaging directly with stakeholders.

The firm's work is built on a foundation of participatory research and stakeholder engagement, emphasizing the importance of "meeting people where they are." Alchemy Accompanied approaches each community or organization with humility and adaptability, making continuous micro-adjustments to align with local needs rather than imposing external frameworks.

MW IMPACT

MW Impact is led by Marc Wilken, a U.S. Economic Development Administration Economic Recovery Corps Fellow, and specializes in building entrepreneurial ecosystems. This is accomplished through strategic public-private partnerships and the design of programs that braid diverse capital sources to deliver flexible financing solutions for small businesses and communities. The firm also brings experience launching revenue-generating initiatives that function as public amenities, transforming underutilized spaces into vibrant, high-performing destinations, and navigating complex operational systems within government and nonprofit environments to support sustainable execution and long-term impact.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Revitalize Potter County is a community-driven economic development planning effort designed to translate local priorities into actionable strategies and catalytic projects. The plan responds to two parallel realities facing Potter County today: the county's strong quality-of-life assets that are rooted in natural beauty, outdoor recreation, and small-town character and persistent structural challenges common to rural counties, including population decline, an aging population, and a constrained labor force.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

County-specific demographic data underscores the urgency of strategic action. Potter County experienced an approximate 8.69% decline in population between 2010 and 2025 and is currently estimated to have 15,946 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, as compiled by USAFacts, 2024). According to the Center on Rural PA, the projection for 2050 leaves Potter County at 14,856 residents. The county's median age is 48.2, which is significantly higher than both the Pennsylvania median of 40.9 and the U.S. median of 39.1. This aging population has far-reaching implications for workforce availability, healthcare demand, housing needs, and the long-term stability of the local tax base.

Despite these demographic challenges, several economic indicators suggest relative regional competitiveness. As of 2023, the median household income in Potter County was \$57,850, which is only 0.49 percent lower than the average median household income of neighboring counties in Pennsylvania and New York. In 2025, Potter County's unemployment rate was 4.9%, slightly higher than the average unemployment rate across neighboring Pennsylvania and New York counties. At the time of this report, the county's poverty rate was 12.7%, which is approximately two percentage points lower than the average poverty rate of neighboring counties (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2024).

Population aging presents both opportunity and pressure. Older residents contribute institutional knowledge, civic leadership, volunteerism, and economic stability, particularly through retirement income and property ownership. At the same time, an aging population increases demand for healthcare and supportive services while reducing the size of the working-age population. Resident survey results strongly reflect this reality: when asked what makes a community most livable, healthcare was the most frequently cited factor, followed by housing, safety, and infrastructure.

Youth migration and retention emerged as a critical theme throughout the planning process. While this plan does not include direct migration tracking, survey results and community input indicate a familiar rural pattern: young adults often leave Potter County for education and early-career opportunities and face barriers to returning. Both residents and non-residents identified housing availability, healthcare access, job opportunities, and everyday amenities such as dining, grocery, and retail options as significant factors influencing decisions about whether to stay, return, or relocate. This phenomenon, known as "Hollowing out the middle" ensures that a rural community's best and brightest leave, often to never return even if the desire is there (Carr and Kefalas 2009).

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (continued)

School enrollment trends reinforce these findings. Data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education show that total public-school enrollment in Potter County declined from 2,566 students in the 2010 school year to 1,951 students in the 2024–2025 school year, a reduction of nearly 24% percent (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2025). Declining enrollment not only impacts school funding and staffing, but also signals a shrinking population of families with children. This is an important indicator of future workforce capacity and long-term community sustainability.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DATA

Community survey data provides a clear framework for economic development priorities. A total of 268 resident survey responses revealed strong alignment around sector needs, with healthcare/medical services, retail, manufacturing, construction, tourism, and housing emerging as the most frequently prioritized areas for growth. Notably, a large majority of residents expressed a desire to remain in Potter County long-term, suggesting that strategic investments in core services, housing, healthcare, and employment could meaningfully stabilize population trends.

Non-resident survey data further highlights the county's strengths and challenges. Visitors are primarily attracted by outdoor recreation, natural beauty, and property ownership; many are repeat visitors who stay multiple days. Overall experiences were rated positively, and most respondents indicated they would recommend Potter County to others. However, the same respondents identified gaps in restaurants, retail options, healthcare access, and housing as barriers to longer stays or permanent relocation.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The demographic analysis and community data point to a clear strategic direction: Revitalize Potter County must simultaneously protect and leverage its strongest assets—outdoor recreation, scenic landscapes, and community character, while making strategic investments in the foundational systems that support long-term economic health. These include healthcare access, housing quality and availability, workforce development, and everyday amenities that make communities livable and enjoyable for residents of all ages.

The recommendations that follow in this report are designed to be practical, implementable, and measurable. They prioritize capacity-building, partnership, and balancing near-term actions that build momentum with longer-term strategies that stabilize population, strengthen the labor pipeline, and expand Potter County's economic base.

METHODOLOGY

Alchemy Accompanied led a multi-method data collection process to ensure both community members and visitors had meaningful opportunities to contribute to the Revitalize Potter County strategic plan. By meeting participants where they were most comfortable and offering multiple ways to engage, the process elevated a broad range of voices and perspectives. MW Impact supported these efforts by expanding outreach and strengthening the depth and quality of community engagement.

SURVEY



A community-based online survey instrument was developed utilizing Survey123 to gather data from both current and former county residents as well as visitors to Potter County. This survey gathered information related to the most important potential projects and strategies based on factors such as most likely to attract and retain young families, community well-being, visitors, and short versus long term development potential. Respondents were incentivized with a small gift card for participation. The full survey analysis is provided in Appendix C.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



MW Impact conducted the First Impressions evaluation process, first developed by the University of Wisconsin extension system, for each borough in Potter County, as well as several townships. This tool surfaces both positive areas and areas of concern across many facets affecting specifically visitor experiences. Ten evaluations were then aggregated and sorted by school district and a comprehensive report was developed illustrating each school district's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as they relate to the visitor experience. This report and analysis is provided in Appendix E.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS



Community-based input meetings were held in eight different communities in July, September, and October, 2025. During these two-hour sessions, attendees were facilitated by members of the Alchemy Accompanied team to work together to identify timeline points of importance, areas of Potter County that are positive as well as those that need work, key economic sectors for their communities, and potential projects for the top economic sectors identified. Gift cards were raffled at the end of the meetings to encourage participants to stay for the entire meeting. Community meetings were held in Austin, Coudersport, Galeton, Genesee, Germania, Roulette, Shinglehouse, and Ulysses. The facilitation guide, analysis, and a full list of projects is provided in Appendix A.

METHODOLOGY (continued)

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT



All five Potter County school districts were engaged in community development activities during September and October, 2025. Each middle and high school student was invited to a workshop during school time that was facilitated by members of the Alchemy Accompanied team, MW Impact, and the Potter County Planning Department. Students were introduced to basic community and economic principles, placed in groups of 6-10 students, and asked for input related to their favorite parts of Potter County, areas that needed work, and where they saw opportunity. Additionally, students were asked to choose the top four economic sectors from a list and to design projects related to their top sectors. Districts represented included Austin, Coudersport, Galeton, Oswayo Valley, and Northern Potter. The facilitation guide, analysis, and a complete list of projects by school district and sector is provided in Appendix B.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS



A list of community stakeholders was created initially from the Planning Commission members and consisted of small business owners, organizational leadership, and agency staff who support Potter County activities. These interviews were conducted by phone anonymously by Alchemy Accompanied and MW Impact to gather information related to decision making processes, power mapping, future visioning for Revitalize Potter County, and current and future relationships and collaborations. Care was taken to ensure that stakeholders represented the entire county geographically as well as a large number of different sectors. Please see Appendix D for a list of stakeholder questions as well as the full analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW



A comprehensive review of contemporary literature including theory, best practices, and existing case studies was performed in order to align community focused data and recommendations with current research. This literature review is broken down based on the categories of strategy recommendations and includes journal articles, multi-media publications, and book chapters. The full literature review is included in Appendix F.

RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

The community engagement process described in the Methodology revealed clear and consistent priorities across Potter County. Through surveys, stakeholder interviews, school sessions, and community meetings, residents identified what they value most, where they see challenges, and what must change to secure the county's future. This input shaped seven focus areas. Together, these areas outline practical Strategies for Economic Growth and Development that reflect the voices, concerns, and aspirations of the community, grounded in local data and supported by research.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES



Strengthen transparency, coordination, leadership capacity, and institutional structure so local government and public systems can effectively guide long-term economic growth.

ADULT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



Align training, healthcare, childcare, and support systems with employer demand to strengthen workforce participation and economic mobility.

YOUTH RETENTION



Create meaningful opportunities, leadership pathways, and quality-of-life investments that help young people build their futures in Potter County.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT



Grow tourism in a way that protects rural character while expanding lodging, recreation, branding, and visitor-based economic opportunity.

RURAL FINANCING & INVESTMENT



Expand access to capital, philanthropic support, and creative financing tools to fund catalytic projects and local entrepreneurship.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & SUPPORT



Build a resilient small-business ecosystem by improving site readiness, entrepreneurship support, remote work integration, and local investment capacity.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT



Invest in housing, transportation, environmental resilience, and emergency systems as foundational drivers of long-term economic stability.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Governance refers to how public decisions are made, implemented, and communicated across all levels of local government and public systems. It includes elected officials, county and municipal staff, appointed boards and authorities, planning and zoning bodies, utilities and infrastructure boards, emergency medical services, and other public or quasi-public entities that shape daily life and long-term development. Effective governance matters because these entities collectively influence land use, housing availability, infrastructure investment, workforce systems, public safety, service delivery, and the overall climate for both residents and businesses. When governance is coordinated, transparent, and responsive, it creates the conditions for stable and inclusive economic development that is aligned with community values. Local governments and public bodies have the authority to convene partners, set policy direction, allocate public resources, establish regulatory frameworks, and design systems that either enable or constrain opportunity. As such, governance plays a central role in shaping economic growth.

COMMUNITY-BASED DATA INDICATORS

- During stakeholder interviews, residents consistently pointed to the same individuals/organizations as being responsible for moving projects forward, indicating both strong leadership capacity and concern about over-reliance on the same people.
- Participants expressed a desire for transparent coordination among county government, municipalities, service providers, and regional partners, particularly around economic development, workforce, housing, and tourism.
- Community members noted difficulty understanding how decisions are made, where responsibility lies across different boards and agencies, and how to engage meaningfully in public processes.
- There was repeated interest in governance structures that better reflect local priorities, incorporate community input earlier in decision-making, and build trust through more visible and coordinated leadership.

Governance Strategy 1: Strengthen access to county information and decision-making through clear, resident-focused communication tools.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Board of Commissioners; Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department; Borough Councils; Fire and EMS Service; School Districts; Nonprofits; County Agencies; Chambers of Commerce

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

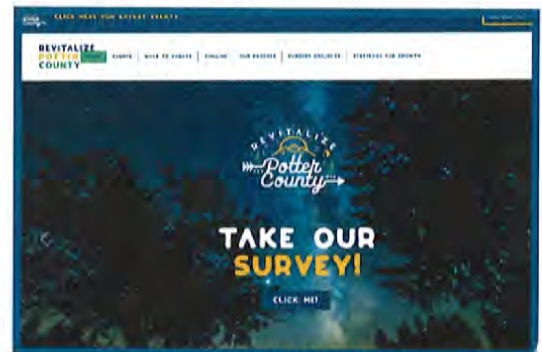
N/A: these strategies should not require additional funding

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 1.1 Develop a simple, public-facing project and funding overview that summarizes the status of major economic development initiatives, active grants, and high-level use of designated development funds, allowing residents to see what projects are underway and how funds are being applied. This should be hosted on the Revitalize Potter website if possible.
- 1.2 Town-hall-style meetings in Potter County communities where county commissioners and county staff provide updates on current initiatives, explain upcoming decisions, and invite questions and feedback related to economic development and community priorities. The host and locations of these meetings can rotate based on a set schedule between the school districts.
- 1.3 Pilot a participatory budgeting process using a defined portion of existing discretionary or externally sourced funds, such as tourism promotion revenues, grant program set-asides, or locally controlled development funds. Through this process, residents would propose and vote on small, clearly scoped community projects, with final selections implemented by the county in accordance with funding requirements and eligibility rules. It is recommended that the county be divided by school district for this process, to allow participants in all communities. Each district would receive its own budget and execute its own individual process.
- 1.4 Promote communication tools through multiple channels so that residents and visitors are informed and reminded where to find the website and social media platforms advertising information about processes, meetings, and decisions made by the community and leadership.

Strengthening access to county information and decision-making through clear, resident-focused communication tools is important because the governance literature defines transparency and participation as core features of effective public administration that help residents understand how resources are managed and how decisions are made (Grindle, 2010; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2009).

Transparency in this context is not limited to making information technically public; it also requires that information be understandable and easy to find so that community members can meaningfully engage with public processes (Cifuentes-Faura, 2024). The literature on participatory budgeting further demonstrates that when governments create accessible channels for residents to understand priorities and help shape defined public investments, it can increase transparency, improve communication between officials and constituents, and strengthen trust in local government (Dias, 2018). Taken together, this body of work supports the practical value of communication systems that translate budgets, projects, and public actions into plain language and consistent formats; those tools directly enable accountability and informed participation.



Revitalize Potter Website

Governance Strategy 2: Establish a structured, countywide leadership development and capacity-building initiative that brings together residents, local governments, agencies, schools, nonprofits, and businesses to strengthen skills related to collaboration, project management, decision-making, and community development.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship; PA Route 6; Penn State Extension; Penn State Sustainable Communities Collaborative; CareerLink; Career and Technical Centers; North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission; WV Community Development Hub; Potter County Ed Council; Potter County School Districts; Chambers of Commerce; and UPMC Cole

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Appalachian Regional Commission READY, Just Transition Fund, The Richard King Mellon Foundation

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 2.1 Implement a structured, curriculum-based capacity-building program that engages residents interested in contributing to community leadership. This program would also guide participants through a sequenced learning experience focused on collaboration, public systems, and community development, paired with applied projects aligned with county priorities.
- 2.2 Form multi-sector task forces made up of representatives from county and municipal governments, service agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and residents to advance specific strategies outlined in this report and coordinate implementation across organizations.
- 2.3 Intentionally expand the pool of people equipped to take on project and committee roles by identifying, mentoring, and supporting residents who have not traditionally been involved in countywide initiatives, including younger residents and individuals from underrepresented communities. This reduces reliance on a small number of community leaders.

This strategy emphasizes increasing practical capacity for carrying out shared projects, navigating public systems, and sustaining long-term initiatives, which the literature identifies as central to rural communities' ability to mobilize resources, implement plans, and adapt to changing economic conditions (Flora & Flora, 2013). Studies further suggest that communities with broader and more diverse pools of civic capacity are better positioned to undertake collaborative planning and respond to complex challenges, especially where population size and institutional capacity are limited (Pigg, 1999; Emery et al., 2006).

In this context, using a recognized, adaptable curriculum with applied learning and real project work supports economic development by strengthening the local civic infrastructure that underpins investment, service delivery, and long-term implementation, rather than relying on a small number of individuals or organizations to carry projects forward (Grindle, 2010; Stojanović et al., 2016).



Austin Community Meeting

Governance Strategy 3: Explore the formalization of Revitalize Potter County as a countywide partnership framework that brings together public agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and private residents around shared goals of this economic development plan to organize and implement projects/programs that propel the county and individual communities forward.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Local Churches; community groups; Fire/EMS; Borough Councils; Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department; Potter County Board of Commissioners; Potter County Ed Council; Potter County School Districts and Chambers of Commerce; UPMC Cole

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Just Transition Fund, USDA Rural Development

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 3.1 Identify four to six anchor organizations representing specific sectors such as local government, economic development, workforce, education, health, or community services to serve as core partners in formalizing Revitalize Potter County, providing stability and shared stewardship of the initiative.
- 3.2 Establish Revitalize Potter County local chapters or working groups within each school district to carry out place-based projects, elevate local priorities, and maintain a consistent two-way feedback loop between community-level efforts and the countywide partnership. Where appropriate, include designated youth seats within chapter structures to ensure younger residents are meaningfully engaged in shaping and implementing community projects.
- 3.3 Explore the creation of shared-risk funding mechanisms that blend county resources, philanthropic contributions, anchor institution investments, private capital, and community development finance tools to support catalytic projects that Revitalize Potter County chapters can access for local projects.
- 3.4 Develop participation agreements or memoranda of understanding that clearly define partner roles, responsibilities, decision-making processes, and shared commitments. This ensures transparency and accountability across participating organizations.

Governance literature consistently shows that complex economic development challenges cannot be addressed effectively by any single organization acting alone. Scholars emphasize that collaborative governance arrangements, in which public agencies work alongside nonprofits, businesses, and residents in shared decision-making and implementation structures, are particularly well suited to coordinating resources, aligning priorities, and sustaining long-term development efforts (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006).

This type of partnership approach allows local governments to use their convening authority and legitimacy while drawing on the expertise, networks, and capacity of non-governmental actors, creating a more resilient and adaptive development system (Grindle, 2010). In the context of economic development, these cross-sector frameworks ensure that investments, programs, and projects are better aligned with community needs and are more likely to produce broadly shared benefits over time (Stojanović et al., 2016). Formalizing Revitalize Potter County as a partnership structure reflects well-established governance principles that support coordinated action, shared ownership, and effective implementation in rural economic development contexts.



Roulette Community Meeting

Governance Strategy 4: Strengthen county capacity for coordinated planning and economic development projects by formally reorganizing the Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department as the Planning and Economic Development Department to align staff roles, authority, and capacity with the county's economic development priorities, including those identified in this plan.

This ensures that staff have the time, mandate, and institutional support needed to lead complex initiatives, coordinate partners, and sustain long-term projects, while also maintaining core planning responsibilities.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department; Potter County Board of Commissioners

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Potter County budget, Appalachian Regional Commission READY

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 4.1 Formally expand the scope of the Planning Department to include economic development coordination, implementation support, and partnership management, including serving as the primary staff lead coordination for Revitalize Potter County.
- 4.2 Review and restructure departmental positions, job descriptions, and reporting relationships to ensure staff have clear authority and sufficient dedicated time to advance planning, economic development, and community engagement initiatives. This may involve hiring new staff or shifting staff responsibilities to other departments to fully engage each staff member's potential.
- 4.3 Evaluate compensation levels for Planning and Economic Development staff relative to comparable positions in Pennsylvania, regionally, and nationally. Adjust pay structures to support staff retention, continuity of projects, and long-term institutional knowledge.
- 4.4 Position the Planning and Economic Development department to pursue regional and place-based initiatives, including participation in programs such as the Appalachian Regional Commission Gateway Communities program when available.
- 4.5 Support the development of coordinated tourism and recreation initiatives, including exploration of "Gateway Designations" tied to county assets such as dark-sky resources, outdoor recreation corridors, or cultural heritage

Literature emphasizes that institutional structure, administrative capacity, and clearly defined roles are central to a government's ability to support economic development effectively. Scholars describe good governance as encompassing the organizational arrangements and public-management practices that enable governments to plan strategically, coordinate across sectors, and implement long-term initiatives, rather than responding in fragmented or reactive ways (Grindle, 2010; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2009). In the context of economic development, these institutional capacities create the enabling environment necessary for investment, infrastructure development, and coordinated service delivery, while helping ensure that public resources are used efficiently and equitably (Stojanović et al., 2016).

The literature on collaborative governance further notes that public agencies must have sufficient internal authority, staffing capacity, and clarity of mandate in order to convene partners, manage cross-sector initiatives, and sustain complex projects over time (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006). Aligning planning and economic development functions within a single departmental structure reflects established governance principles that link organizational capacity, continuity of staff, and institutional leadership with more effective coordination, implementation, and long-term economic development outcomes in rural communities.

Governance Strategy 4: Strengthen county capacity for coordinated planning and economic development projects by formally reorganizing the Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Department as the Planning and Economic Development Department to align staff roles, authority, and capacity with the county's economic development priorities, including those identified in this plan.

SUB-STRATEGIES (Continued)

- 4.6 Develop informal zoning and land-use guidance to help municipalities identify appropriate locations for recreation-based activities and supporting businesses, reduce land-use conflicts, and anticipate future development pressures. When appropriate, explore formal zoning structures .
- 4.7 Compile and maintain a shared library of rural zoning and land-use case studies to inform local decision-making and support municipalities considering zoning or zoning updates.
- 4.8 Facilitate community education and engagement related to planning and zoning tools, and, where there is local interest, support municipalities in establishing zoning boards or initiating tailored rural zoning processes aligned with local priorities and capacity.



Genessee Community Meeting



Local School Workshop



Galeton Community Meeting

Governance Strategy 5: Strengthen Potter County's ability to pursue, compete for, and successfully manage federal, state, and philanthropic funding by creating shared tools, training, and coordination structures that support local governments, nonprofits, and community partners throughout the full grant lifecycle so that funding opportunities can be pursued efficiently and translated into implemented projects.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department; Potter County Board of Commissioners; PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship; Penn State Extension; CareerLink; North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission; WV Grant Resource Center; Grant Ready KY; Texas Rural Funders; Wisconsin Office of Rural Prosperity

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

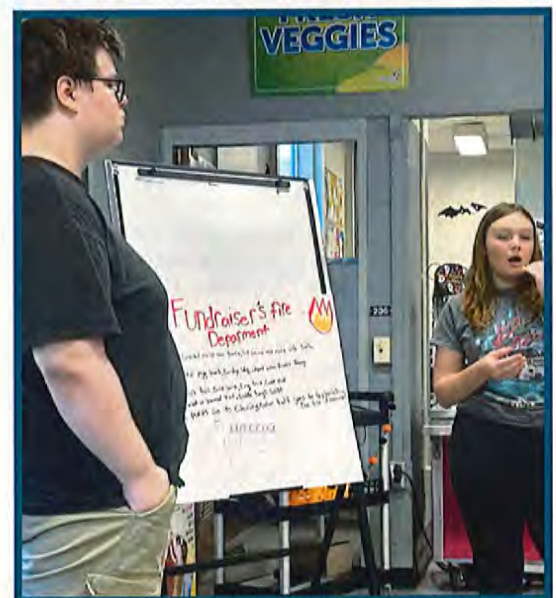
Appalachian Regional Commission READY, Just Transition Fund, USDA Rural Development, Appalachian Regional Commission State Funding

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 5.1 Develop and maintain a comprehensive, public-facing inventory of federal, state, philanthropic, and foundation funding opportunities as part of the Revitalize Potter County initiative, aligning potential funding sources with priority strategies and projects identified through the planning process. Include a listing of potential grant writers to consult with on specific topics.
- 5.2 Host regular grant-readiness and grant-writing workshops for municipalities, nonprofits, small organizations, and community leaders, with a focus on understanding eligibility, strengthening applications, and preparing for reporting and compliance requirements. Look to other models in WV, KY, TX, or WI for assistance in designing this.
- 5.3 Work with Revitalize Potter County sector teams and partner organizations to develop and routinely update a prioritized list of shovel-ready projects and programs that are positioned to respond quickly to funding opportunities as they arise.
- 5.4 Support coalition-building among municipalities, nonprofits, school districts, and anchor institutions to pursue larger, multi-partner funding opportunities that exceed the capacity of individual applicants and require coordinated implementation.
- 5.5 County government hires a grants management specialist that is highly qualified to both manage grant funding and build the capacity of partners to hold and manage grant funding.
- 5.6 Advocate at the state and federal level for waivers or lowered match requirements based on community capacity.

In the context of economic development, this capacity creates the enabling environment necessary for large, trajectory-altering projects that often require capital stacking, multi-year funding streams, and sustained project management across agencies and partners (Stojanović et al., 2016). The collaborative governance literature further notes that effective pursuit and implementation of complex, multi-source funding depends on clear coordination structures, shared tools, and defined roles that allow public agencies and partners to align priorities, manage compliance requirements, and jointly implement projects that exceed the capacity of any single organization (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006).

This supports the importance of building countywide grant readiness and management capacity as a core governance function that enables strategic investment, coordinated implementation, and long-term economic development outcomes.



Local School Workshop

Governance Strategy 6: Generate additional county revenue by capturing a greater share of tourism, outdoor recreation, and short-term lodging activity through coordinated legislative, intergovernmental, and administrative actions, while minimizing impacts on local residents and businesses.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department; Potter County Board of Commissioners; PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship; PA Wilds Planning Team; Penn State Extension; CareerLink; Career and Technical Centers; North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission; DCNR; PA Rural Population Revitalization Commission.

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Just Transition Fund, USDA Rural Community Development, Appalachian Regional Commission State Funds, PA DCED Municipal Assistance Planning Grants

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 6.1 Advocate for Pennsylvania General Assembly legislation authorizing a regional ATV or outdoor recreation authority that would allow participating counties to jointly issue permits, coordinate management, and share revenues generated from motorized recreation activity across county boundaries and/or explore county and state-level mechanisms to assess modest visitor-focused vehicle or recreation-related fees associated with the use of county roads, connectors, and staging areas. This may include advocating for DCNR-administered supplemental ATV or trail permit fees, similar in structure to existing PennDOT vehicle fee processes, with revenues returned to Potter County for eligible local uses.
- 6.2 Work with DCNR and regional partners to review existing motorized recreation permit structures, including NRAT and similar programs, such as the Hatfield-McCoy Regional Trail System, to evaluate opportunities for fee adjustments or revenue-sharing arrangements. Where appropriate, coordinate the administration of permit revenues through a council of governments to support consistent management, maintenance, signage, dust suppression, enforcement coordination, and emergency services support.

This strategy is well supported in the tourism and rural development literature as a way for aligning public revenues with visitor-generated costs. Research on rural recreation and tourism economies shows that visitor activity places real demands on local infrastructure, emergency services, natural resources, and housing markets. This happens even as many tourism-related jobs remain seasonal and lower wage, which limits the extent to which local residents benefit directly from visitor spending (Reeder & Brown, 2005; English et al., 2000).

Visitor-paid mechanisms such as occupancy taxes, recreation access fees, and permit systems can be used as tools that allow communities to offset these costs, fund maintenance and public services, and reinvest in community priorities without increasing the tax burden on local households or businesses (Ap Gwilym et al., 2022; Maráková et al., 2025). The literature also highlights that short-term rentals and tourism growth can intensify housing pressure in high-amenity rural places, suggesting that revenues generated from visitor activity can play a critical role when deliberately reinvested into housing stabilization, infrastructure, and enforcement systems (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018; Curran & Phibbs, 2017; White & Thor, 2024).

Case studies from recreation-dependent regions further demonstrate that coordinated, regionally administered permit systems and visitor fees can generate sustainable, locally controlled revenue streams that support roads, emergency services, and resource management while strengthening the overall tourism economy (Reeder & Brown, 2005; Ap Gwilym et al., 2022).

Governance Strategy 6: Generate additional county revenue by capturing a greater share of tourism, outdoor recreation, and short-term lodging activity through coordinated legislative, intergovernmental, and administrative actions, while minimizing impacts on local residents and businesses.

SUB-STRATEGIES (Continued)

- 6.3 Create a countywide or borough-level short-term rental registration and licensing framework that clarifies owner-occupancy rules and compliance requirements. Support participating boroughs and townships by providing shared monitoring tools, such as third-party or AI-based short-term rental tracking software, while structuring cost-sharing arrangements that allow municipalities to retain local control and remit a county fee to support shared administrative capacity.
- 6.4 Lobby the Pennsylvania General Assembly to authorize recreation-based counties to increase short-term rental or hotel occupancy tax surcharges beyond current statutory limits, with any additional revenues earmarked specifically for affordable and workforce housing, emergency services, and enforcement needs associated with tourism growth. This advocacy may also include legislative changes to ensure campground and similar lodging uses are treated consistently within occupancy tax frameworks. Pennsylvania as a state levies a 6% occupancy tax, while Potter County levies an additional 5% occupancy tax. Across the country, total occupancy taxes vary considerably, with 10% to 12% common in small rural communities, 14% to 16% more typical in rural outdoor-recreation destinations, and 20% to 22% found on the high end in mountain-west ski towns.

CASE STUDY

In Cascais, Portugal, the municipal government implemented a participatory budgeting process that allowed residents to directly decide how a defined portion of municipal revenues would be allocated, including funds influenced by tourism activity (Dias, 2018). Residents were invited to submit project proposals, deliberate on priorities, and vote on which initiatives should receive funding, with winning projects implemented by the municipality.

According to Dias (2018), the process resulted in increased transparency around public spending, improved communication between local officials and residents, and higher levels of trust in municipal decision-making. The visibility of funded projects helped residents make a clearer connection between revenue sources, including tourism-related income, and tangible community improvements. The Cascais experience demonstrates how participatory budgeting can be used as a governance tool to legitimize the use of tourism-related revenues, reduce public skepticism about taxation, and strengthen residents' sense of ownership over local development outcomes.



Shinglehouse Community Meeting



Ulysses Community Meeting



Germania Community Meeting

YOUTH RETENTION

In many rural Appalachian communities, youth are leaving immediately after high school for better opportunities in larger cities. This phenomenon, known as rural brain drain, results in the best and brightest future problem solvers and community leaders utilizing their talents elsewhere (Carr, P. and Kefalas, M., 2009). A large concern of the planning team as well as many respondents in this study has been population stabilization and retention of youth in the community. Rural communities must adapt to attract new residents, and create ways for their current residents to remain in the county. A significant strategic investment in youth retention strategies would aid this goal: if youth feel like they belong and they have a say in their communities, then they become adults who continue to engage with community and economic development, take on government roles, and generate community pride. For students who leave for college or other training opportunities, if they can picture themselves returning to Potter County, they are more likely to move back and engage with their home communities.

COMMUNITY-BASED DATA INDICATORS

- During school-based programming, it was found that students were heavily concerned about their ability to stay in Potter County once they graduate.
- Students reported needing both decent jobs and a place to live in order to return home after college or trade school.
- Additionally, both youth and adults have reported a need for a third-space, community center, or safe spaces for youth and families in the county to continue to build social ties to the community.
- Many stakeholder conversations mention the need for good paying jobs, healthcare services, decent housing stock, and things for families to do in order to recruit recent graduates back to the community.

Youth Retention 1: Create Youth Engagement Teams with each school district and the county as a whole.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Schools; Potter County students; Potter County Ed Council; Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

ARC State Funding, PA Agriculture and Youth Development Program, Local Civic Groups, Ed Council Funding, Cole Foundation, Galeton Foundation, NEPDA, Local Banks, Local Businesses

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 1.1 Youth leadership development programming geared towards community outreach, civic engagement, and community development.
- 1.2 Establish youth community and economic development clubs at each secondary school.
- 1.3 Create youth advisory councils for the county and for key sectors (health care, tourism, entrepreneurship, outdoor recreation) so students can help shape local policies and projects and build civic skills.
- 1.4 Develop a slate of youth-led projects at each school for communities.
- 1.5 Secure funding to support youth-generated economic development projects identified through the Revitalize Potter County planning process and empower students to lead their implementation.
- 1.6 Youth, in partnership with identified organizations, execute youth-determined projects.

Structured youth advisory groups and leadership councils help young people build civic skills and strengthen community attachment—both factors associated with long-term retention in rural areas (Youniss, et al., 1997). Similarly, research on career pathways and youth apprenticeship programs in rural regions suggests that early exposure to leadership, entrepreneurship, and community-based problem solving contributes to stronger local workforce pipelines and improved perceptions of future opportunity (Rothwell et al., 2019).

This supports the idea that intentional leadership development across generations, through youth councils, resident leadership programs, and community-based mentorship, can strengthen the civic infrastructure needed for sustainable economic development in rural counties and create pathways for young people to stay in or return to their home communities.



Local School Workshop

Youth Retention 2: Help Potter County youth see themselves as belonging in Potter County throughout their lifetime.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County School Districts, leadership clubs at each secondary school, civic organizations

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Regional Foundations, John Templeton Foundation, Anne E. Casey Foundation, PA Creative Communities Initiative, Cole Foundation, Galetton Foundation, NEPDA, Local Civic Groups, Local Banks, Local Businesses

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 2.1 Create a 'Why Stay' or 'Why Return Home' campaign for youth and young adults.
- 2.2 Collect and publish stories of young people who have stayed, utilizing the RevitalizePotter.com platform.
- 2.3 Create mentorship program of young adults who have stayed or returned to Potter County to regularly volunteer with secondary schools.

CASE STUDY

West Virginia University Extension's "My Hometown is Cool" is an open-source curriculum which combines the aspects of bottom-up community and economic development practices with mini-grant funding opportunities for students in West Virginia communities. Through two cohorts, participating groups of teenagers identified their community assets, developed a team, presented to civic leadership, and developed a project for their communities.

Participants then created a video introducing their community and their project idea, which was scored by community and economic development professionals. The top 6 teams were invited to a final round of presentations and questions and answers. Winning projects have included a pop-up coffee shop concept in conjunction with existing ATV trails, tourism focused wayfinding signage in a flat-water kayaking community, and a youth-owned cooperative business focused on supporting new artisans.

If young people can take part in telling the story of their own communities and documenting the individuals who have stayed, then they are more likely to see themselves as members of a community. (Khebbaz, 2016.) By creating a campaign aimed specifically at young people and young adults in the community, this could showcase ways that they can be involved, career options in the county, and leadership opportunities. This creates a shared narrative for youth to return to Potter County.



Local School Workshop



Local School Workshop

Youth Retention 3: Develop youth career pathway exploration specific to industry clusters identified in Potter County.

TIMELINE:

Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Penn State University Extension and 4H, Potter County School Districts, Local business owners, county and municipal agencies, Potter County Ed Council/Career Mentor Program, Seneca Highlands Career and Technical Center, Northwest Industrial Resource Center, Penn-York Camp and Retreat Center, Workforce Solutions for North Central Pennsylvania

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

PA Agriculture and Youth Development Program, USDA CYFAR funds (in partnership with Penn State), ARC POWER, ARC Workforce Ecosystem, USDA Rural Business Development Grants (RBDG), PA Schools-to-Work Grants, PA Industry Partnership Grants, U.S. DOL apprenticeship grants, PA Education Income Tax Credits, PA Local Share Accounts, PA Creative Asset Program, PA Creative Catalyst Grants, PA Neighborhood Assistance Program

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 3.1 Agricultural, forestry, and outdoor recreation career exploration beginning in K-5 education to encourage careers in the sector.
- 3.2 Develop recruitment and outreach materials tailored to high school students and prospective junior members of emergency response teams, fire departments, search and rescue, etc.
- 3.3 Create integrated youth career navigation and work-based learning: start career exploration in middle school and build paid local internships, job shadows, and mentorship with alumni and employers. Support youth leadership programs to build community attachment.
- 3.4 Build hometown workforce pipelines: develop local training pathways with schools, Career & Technical Centers (CTCs), CareerLink, employers, and community colleges. "Grow-your-own" models improve retention, reduce outmigration, and fill high-need occupations.

In order for youth to be excited about staying in Potter County, many reported needing job training for the jobs and industries in Potter County. Youth who are exposed to industries that are current or projected for growth in rural areas are much more likely to feel comfortable studying in those fields after graduation, either at a traditional university or vo-tech setting, and then return to their home communities. (Chen, 2023). Industry clusters which are highlighted for Potter County include agriculture, forestry, tourism, the medical field, construction, and the service industry. Highly technical fields such as computer programming and engineering are not as prevalent in the county, but remote work opportunities make these options viable for interested students.



Local School Workshop



Local School Workshop

Youth Retention 4: Develop spaces specifically for youth and families to recreate and gather in Potter County. Invest in the research, design, and development of a dedicated youth retention space supported by targeted interventions that encourage young people to stay in or return to Potter County after high school graduation.

TIMELINE:

Long-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County students, local business leaders, youth pastors, county and municipal leaders

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, USDA Community Facilities Program, EDA, EPA Brownfields, ARC State Grants, North Central RPDC (for planning and feasibility work), PA Department of Community and Economic Development, PA DCNR

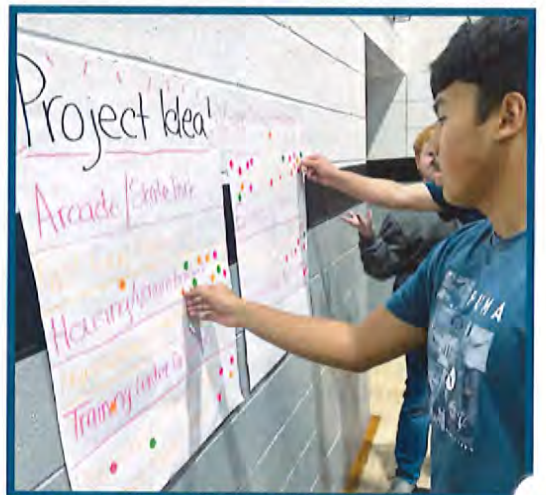
SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 4.1 Invest in municipally owned and operated youth recreation spaces – such as a skating rink, bowling alley, arcade, or other social venues – to ensure young people have safe, affordable, year-round activities. Municipal ownership allows the county or borough to absorb insurance and liability costs that typically make these amenities prohibitive for private operators.
- 4.2 Once facilities are stable and profitable, create a structured pathway for local entrepreneurs or youth-led enterprises to assume operations, ensuring continued community benefit while reducing long-term public management responsibilities.
- 4.3 When public recreation facilities are transferred to private operators, negotiate revenue-sharing or long-term return-on-investment agreements that ensure the county or municipality receives ongoing financial benefit from its initial investment. At a minimum, the transfer of management should reduce municipal costs by eliminating the responsibility for facility operations and maintenance.

The development of third-spaces is key to a community's growth, but more so to young people's development. (Srivastava, 2024). Spaces that are not considered the family home or school allow for young people to mature socially, take appropriate risk in safe spaces, and learn independence. These coffee shops, recreation areas, bookstores, and other potential businesses become anchors to an active and vibrant community for young families as well.



Coudersport Community Meeting



Local School Workshop

RURAL FINANCING & INVESTMENT

Appalachia is one of the most under-invested regions of the United States. Average grant and philanthropic investment in the mid-Atlantic Appalachian areas (including Pennsylvania) is roughly \$77 per person in rural areas, while in Silicon Valley it hovers around \$1,013 per person annually. (Fulton, 2025). While this differential is startling, Appalachian communities do ensure that more dollars are spent locally than other parts of the country. Innovative solutions are needed to help bridge this funding gap. In order for Potter County to take on larger business support and downtown development projects such as vacant building rehab or aiding manufacturing start-ups, a sustainable financing model must be sought or developed to support the county as a whole. In larger urban areas of the state, such as Pittsburgh, Lancaster, Harrisburg, and Philadelphia, traditional lenders, local foundations, and alternative financing solutions are plentiful. The low population density and lack of interstate access make traditional lending models riskier in Potter County, so solutions must be focused on creating investment potential from what is already in place.

COMMUNITY-BASED DATA INDICATORS

- Community members expressed strong interest in completing large, capital-intensive projects.
- Various youth projects were suggested centered around building rehabilitation, creating third spaces, and investing in new businesses.
- During the community meetings, participants described wanting abandoned properties fixed and in use, programs created to retain jobs, and business support, which also aligned with what was said during stakeholder interviews and in the survey data as well.

CASE STUDY

The Old Prices Fork Elementary School Redevelopment Project in Blacksburg, VA began in 2012 with a vision of transforming a vacant school into a community asset featuring shared-use facilities, housing, and space for local businesses. The project began with a Town of Blacksburg funded feasibility study. Project coordinators then formed a cooperative organizational structure, Live, Work, Eat, Grow, and secured funding from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's Vibrant Communities Fund to convert several classrooms into 16 two-bedroom apartments: 10 market-rate units and 6 dedicated to low-income seniors. After completing this initial phase, the project moved into a second phase that leveraged additional funding from the Vibrant Communities Initiative, federal Appalachian Regional Commission POWER funds, and private investment to establish a shared-use commercial kitchen for food manufacturing and catering. The team partnered with Virginia Tech Food Safety to host food manufacturing classes in the space, and at one point at least 25 food-based businesses were actively using the facility. Two of those businesses have since expanded by opening restaurants in other areas of the school, investing private capital for renovations and becoming part of the cooperative ownership structure. Today, the facility includes additional space available for future development and operates as a true cooperative partnership among the Town of Blacksburg, Live, Work, Eat, Grow, apartment residents, and local community businesses.

Rural Financing and Investment 1: Build strong, long-term relationships with local, regional, and national foundations so philanthropic dollars can help launch priority projects and attract additional public and private funding to Potter County.

TIMELINE:

Long-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Government, small foundations that serve the county, regional foundations, former residents with capital who want to support the community, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship (for education component), Elk County Community Foundation and Centre Foundation (for giving circle education component), Crowdfund Better and the National Coalition for Community Capital (for crowdsourcing education)

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Local and Regional Foundations, federal and state EDA funds, PA DCED for feasibility studies, local banks for foundation start-up

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 1.1 Provide ongoing education and training to small nonprofits on engaging foundations, building donor relationships, and implementing best practices in fundraising and grants management.
- 1.2 Identify foundations with an existing history of supporting Potter County or similar rural regions and develop targeted outreach strategies to strengthen those relationships.
- 1.3 Build long-term relationships with philanthropic partners interested in establishing dedicated or donor-advised funds to support community and economic development priorities in Potter County.
- 1.4 Explore the feasibility of creating a Potter County Community Foundation.
- 1.5 Engage community members, local leaders, and organizations in conversations with foundations to ensure funding strategies reflect local priorities, lived experience, and community-defined needs.
- 1.6 Leverage philanthropic funding to establish a micro-grant program that supports small-scale community, placemaking, and economic development activities across Potter County.

In many rural Appalachian counties, foundation or giving circle funds make up a very small but important section of the funding recipe for organizations and projects alike. Foundation funds can be utilized to access larger pools of funding, get projects and programs started, and provide potentially unrestricted funding to organizations. Often foundation funds are the “first funding in” meaning that they take the initial risk, and that funding is then utilized to leverage additional local, state, or federal dollars (Fulton, 2025). It should also be noted that Potter County does not currently have a designated community foundation which geographically serves it.

Engaging a foundation or giving circle looks very different than preparing a grant application for the federal or state government. These funding streams are most often dependent on relationship building and prioritize those that have reached out to them to build the relationship 1-2 years prior to a formal funding request. Because of the smaller population density, approaching the project or work as regional or with an opportunity to scale to other areas is important. Although in the past, giving has been based on gap-filling and identifying missing components in communities, current foundation giving is aligned more with the program or project's ability to leverage additional support and grow from what is already working in community (Reid et al., 2024).

Rural Financing and Investment 2: Utilize capital stacking methods and creative capital financing options for larger projects in Potter County.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department; local business owners (current and potential); CDFIs, including The Progress Fund, and banks; workforce development; North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission; Mid-Atlantic TAB and PennTAP for energy or environmental impact projects

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, ARC State and Federal programs, banks and alternative lending structures, PA DCED Main Street Matters, Neighborhood Assistance Program and PennCAP, PA Creative Industries/Bridgeway Capital, EPA and PA DEP (if energy or environmental impact projects), Pennsylvania Economic Development Financing Authority, North Central Regional Planning & Development Commission

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 2.1 Maintain a prioritized inventory of redevelopment and building rehabilitation projects most likely to succeed using capital-stacking and blended finance approaches.
- 2.2 Create a capital-stacking support team or workshop series to assist property owners and developers with complex building rehabilitation projects, in partnership with CDFIs or other creative financing entities.
- 2.3 Explore cooperative ownership and financing models for essential services where traditional private capital is unlikely to invest, including grocery stores, childcare, broadband, pharmacies, and shared commercial kitchens. Draw on successful rural cooperative examples from Appalachia and the Midwest and work with USDA Rural Development, Seed Commons, and the Pennsylvania Center for Employee Ownership for guidance.
- 2.4 Explore redevelopment and fiscal models for anchor properties, such as the Hotel Crittenden and Olga's to build community confidence and visible early successes.

Larger projects such as building redevelopment, broadband infrastructure, and industrial/manufacturing facilities require far more funding than grants can provide and often require a longer timeline. In this case, it is useful to stack several different kinds of funding together to increase the likelihood of additional investment (Fulton, 2025).

A sample stack for a larger project (such as an outdoor recreation equipment manufacturing facility) could look like first approaching the Appalachian Regional Commission for planning and a feasibility study in the community to ensure that the project idea can work. The output of this study, if favorable, would be utilized to apply for state or local funds to hire an architect for design work and a community charette. Both documents with the addition of a business plan can then be utilized to apply for more traditional EDA funding, approach investors both within and outside the region, and secure additional in-kind resources such as the creation of a training program at the school system.

Loan funds can be incorporated as needed by the end-user, but these investments are sometimes seen as risky given that the business may still be in the building stages. In this case, community development financial institutions (CDFIs) often provide more favorable results than traditional bank lenders. If the intended site is a rehabilitation project of a previous structure and the final project will be income-producing, historic and new market tax credits managed through the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development should be explored for potential easy investment entry points (Rubin, 2005).

Rural Financing and Investment 3: Explore establishing a revolving loan fund to provide flexible, small-scale capital for start-ups and expanding businesses in Potter County.

TIMELINE:

Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Government, local and regional banks, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, CDFIs, including the PA CDFI Network, PA Creative Industries/Bridgeway Capital, Honeycomb Credit, Crowdfund Better, and the National Coalition for Community Capital, North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Federal and state EDA funding, USDA Rural Development, USDA Intermediary Relending Program, ARC State Funding, ARC POWER, PA DCED Main Street Matters, EPA and PA DEP (if energy or environmental impact projects), Grow America, North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 3.1 Identify and engage Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) with experience serving rural communities and a demonstrated interest in Potter County, such as The Progress Fund.
- 3.2 Once CDFI partners are engaged, expand the role of CDFIs in Potter County to address gaps in traditional banking by supporting small-dollar commercial lending, microloans, and relationship-based underwriting paired with technical assistance. Explore interest rate buy-down options and loan-loss reserve funds with identified partners.
- 3.3 Pursue participation in or creation of a regional revolving loan fund dedicated to Potter County entrepreneurs and small business owners, focused on start-up and expansion capital and aligned with PA Wilds placemaking strategies.
- 3.4 Establish a locally focused lending mechanism or revolving loan structure exclusively for Potter County residents that incorporates relationship-based and social-collateral lending models.
- 3.5 Develop a youth-focused lending and micro-investment structure to support youth-led entrepreneurial projects and small business ideas in Potter County communities.

In many communities, revolving loan funds are first seeded by federal or state economic development funding and then capitalized into the loan fund with the assistance of a financial partner such as a bank or community development financial institution. Typically, the fund administrator sets the requirements and allowable risk for applicants. Loans can be made based on traditional credit score and collateral models, or utilizing more creative methods such as relationship or social capital in the community, such as the Kiva financing model piloted in southwest Virginia through their Opportunity SWVA program. Loans made from these funds are usually small (under \$100,000) and serve as start-up capital for new businesses. Revolving loan funds often fill in the gaps between start up grants and what is fully needed in rural communities (Fitzgerald, 2024).



Galeton Community Meeting



Roulette Community Meeting

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Infrastructure investment in rural communities works best when it is approached as a long-term economic development strategy, not just a series of stand-alone construction projects. Research shows that housing availability and quality, reliable water and wastewater systems, safe roads, transportation access, environmental stability, and emergency preparedness all shape whether businesses can grow, workers can participate in the labor force, and families choose to stay (Twiss & Mueller, 2004; Rephann, 1993; Mattson & Quayson, 2023).

COMMUNITY-BASED DATA INDICATORS

- Survey results, stakeholder interviews, and community meetings show residents value Potter County's rural character, safety, natural beauty, and family-oriented lifestyle and want those qualities preserved.
- Across all engagement methods, tourism was identified as an important economic asset, alongside concern about protecting natural resources and rural character through managed growth.
- Interviews and meetings frequently cited long travel distances, road conditions, limited public transportation, and barriers to healthcare, groceries, and employment, positioning transportation as enabling infrastructure.
- Participants also raised concerns about healthcare access, limited family-serving amenities, flood vulnerability, and emergency preparedness, including EMT recruitment and retention.

Infrastructure Development 1: Advance housing development and rehabilitation in Potter County as a coordinated economic development strategy to increase the supply of safe, affordable, and workforce-aligned housing.

TIMELINE:

Medium-Term to Long-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Housing and Redevelopment Authority, municipal governments, North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission, Northern Tier Community Action, local employers and healthcare providers, Community Development Financial Institutions, local and regional banks, local contractors and builders, Career and Technical Education programs and apprenticeship sponsors, CareerLink, Penn State Extension, Housing Assistance Council, Housing Alliance of PA

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

PHARE (Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement) Program, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME), DCED Mixed-Use Housing Development Pilot Program, USDA Rural Housing Service Programs, USDA Rural Community Development Initiative Grants, Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) INSPIRE Initiative, EPA Brownfields Program, Federal Home Loan Bank (FHLBank) Affordable Housing Program, US DOE Weatherization Innovation Grants, DCED Weatherization Assistance Program, Grow America, Housing Assistance Council

SUB-STRATEGIES:

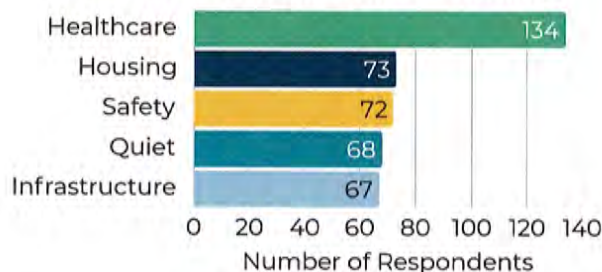
- 1.1 Conduct a housing study to assess needs of current residents, workforce housing needs aligned with priority industry clusters, and remote work trends.
- 1.2 Connect housing and workforce planning by prioritizing housing development and rehabilitation near major employers, schools, and workforce training sites to reduce commute barriers and strengthen workforce stability.
- 1.3 Invest in repair, weatherization, code compliance, and accessibility upgrades to quickly expand the supply of safe, affordable housing in a county with aging housing stock. This may require targeted technical assistance from construction and weatherization specialists.

Rural communities with stronger workforce outcomes implement coordinated strategies that link housing development with workforce investment, recognizing housing as a core component of economic development. Limited affordable housing and aging housing stock constrain labor supply and hinder employer expansion, particularly in rural areas (Stoney, 2022; Moss & Schnitkey, 2024; National Center for Healthy Housing, 2023).

Rehabilitation of existing housing is often more effective than new construction because it is faster and more cost-efficient, especially where older or substandard units are common (National Center for Healthy Housing, 2023). Research also highlights zoning reforms that allow diverse housing types, such as duplexes and accessory dwelling units, as tools to expand supply in low-growth markets (Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, 2025), alongside employer-assisted housing and adaptive reuse of underutilized buildings.

These research findings align with results from the 2025 Potter County Community Survey.

What Makes a Community Most Livable: Potter County Survey (2025) Top Five Responses



Source: Potter County Community Survey (2025), n = 268 respondents.

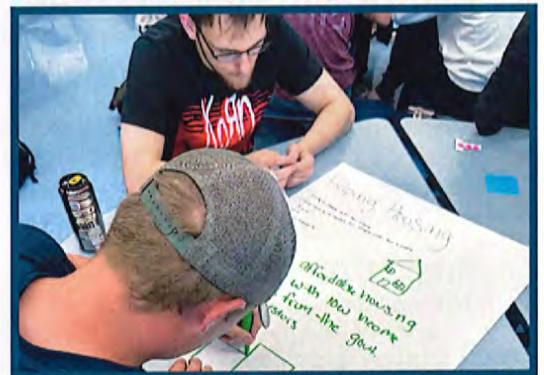
Infrastructure Development 1: Advance housing development and rehabilitation in Potter County as a coordinated economic development strategy to increase the supply of safe, affordable, and workforce-aligned housing.

SUB-STRATEGIES (Continued)

- 1.4 Leverage state and local housing incentives, including PHARE and local tax tools, to support mixed-income and workforce housing development.
- 1.5 Support the conversion of vacant or underutilized residential, commercial, and institutional buildings into housing units where feasible. This may require technical assistance providers not listed as potential partners, such as those who offer specialized construction services.
- 1.6 Increase capacity for housing rehabilitation by partnering with local contractors, CTE programs, and apprenticeship initiatives to address housing needs while providing hands-on training opportunities for students and apprentices.



Shinglehouse Community Meeting



Local School Workshop



Local School Workshop

Infrastructure Development 2: Implement Coordinated Countywide Transportation Strategies to Improve Access to Employment, Healthcare, and Essential Services.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

North Central Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, PennDOT, Potter County Human Services, Potter County Education Council, PA CareerLink, school districts and career and technical centers, healthcare providers and pharmacies, major local employers, reentry and recovery organizations, senior centers and aging services, faith-based organizations, volunteer driver programs

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDOT Rural and Tribal Assistance Pilot Program, PennDOT, Federal Transit Administration, Appalachian Regional Commission, Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, USDA Rural Development, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 2.1 Improve rural road conditions to support economic activity and reliable access to employment, healthcare, education, and essential services, informed by resident input and employer needs.
- 2.2 Collect and analyze data on transportation barriers facing youth, seniors, workers, and residents without personal vehicles to guide targeted investment in effective mobility solutions.
- 2.3 Design and implement a county-level transportation framework that connects workers, seniors, and individuals in recovery to jobs, training, healthcare, and community services across Potter County.
- 2.4 Test demand-response vans or scheduled shuttle services focused on employment, medical, and recovery-related trips, using braided funding from transportation, workforce, and health programs. Work with local organizations to expand and/or create this informal network.
- 2.5 Create a cross-sector working group to coordinate transportation, workforce, housing, and treatment support specifically for residents returning from incarceration or substance use treatment, improving access and long-term stability.

Research consistently identifies transportation access as a foundational driver of economic opportunity in rural communities. Limited transit options and deteriorating rural road conditions restrict access to employment, healthcare, and education, particularly in low-density counties such as Potter (Kruger et al., 2012; Rephann, 1993, 1994).

Studies show that coordinated rural transit systems and targeted road maintenance improve access to medical care, reduce missed appointments, and support job growth when integrated with broader economic development planning (Mattson & Quayson, 2023; Choi & Schonfeld, 2022). Evidence further demonstrates that linking transportation with workforce strategies through coordinated services and flexible mobility options improves job retention and reduces absenteeism, while shared-use and cross-agency transportation systems increase efficiency in resource-constrained rural settings (Blumenberg & Manville, 2004; Transportation Research Board, 2014). In Pennsylvania, formal and informal shared-ride transportation models provide additional tools to mitigate rural mobility challenges (PennDOT, 2025).



Local School Workshop

Infrastructure Development 3: Strengthen forest health, watershed stability, and coordinated resource management as a countywide economic development strategy that protects natural assets, reduces environmental and flood risks, and sustains key industries such as timber and outdoor recreation.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Conservation District, municipal governments and public works departments, Penn State Extension, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, CleanScapes, local watershed associations, volunteer and civic groups, schools and youth organizations, timber and forestry professionals, refuse and recycling authorities

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Environmental Protection Agency

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 3.1 Develop and deliver workshops for private landowners focused on forest conservation, sustainable timber management, and best practices that protect soil health, water quality, and long-term forest productivity.
- 3.2 Establish coordinated watershed stewardship initiatives, including regular water quality monitoring and inter-municipal collaboration to reduce runoff, erosion, and flood vulnerability.
- 3.3 Implement an annual countywide tire collection and illegal dumping mitigation program to reduce environmental hazards and protect rural landscapes and waterways.
- 3.4 Create and maintain coordinated beautification and clean-up schedules across municipalities in partnership with public works and refuse services to strengthen environmental stewardship and community pride.

Research demonstrates that long-term protection of forested lands and watershed systems is essential to environmental stability, economic resilience, and intergenerational sustainability. In regions such as the PA Wilds, coordinated conservation practices and responsible land management support recreation economies, timber production, and overall community well-being (Ran et al., 2018).

Clear and transparent zoning ordinances, regular water quality monitoring, and proactive land stewardship practices strengthen resource management systems and reduce environmental degradation (Ran et al., 2018). Sustainable timber management practices, including selective harvesting, allow forests to remain productive while protecting soil health, nutrient cycles, and watershed integrity, ensuring continued economic contribution from the timber industry.

Taken together, the literature supports a coordinated approach that integrates conservation, industry support, and risk mitigation as foundational components of long-term economic and community resilience.



Germania Community Meeting

Infrastructure Development 4: Implement coordinated flood and emergency preparedness strategies to reduce risk, protect infrastructure, and strengthen long-term community and economic stability in Potter County.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Department of Emergency Services, Potter County Conservation District, school districts, volunteer fire departments and EMS agencies, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, churches, local watershed associations

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Federal Emergency Management Agency Hazard Mitigation Assistance, Federal Emergency Management Agency BRIC Program, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency Mitigation Grants, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection Flood and Watershed Grants, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Watershed Programs, U.S. EDA Disaster Supplemental Grants (due to 2024 disaster designation)

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 4.1 Support the creation and adoption of flood management and mitigation plans for all townships to strengthen preparedness, reduce risk to people and infrastructure, and improve long-term community resilience.
- 4.2 Establish or designate a countywide floodplain management lead to identify and maintain an inventory of facilities, equipment, and resources available within each school district and community to support response during flooding or extreme weather events.
- 4.3 Map and strengthen coordination among nonprofits, human-service agencies, and volunteer organizations that provide assistance during flooding or extreme weather emergencies to ensure efficient deployment of resources and clear communication during response efforts.
- 4.4 Create and maintain a locally controlled emergency recovery fund to provide rapid financial assistance following disasters, prioritizing small businesses and vulnerable economic sectors to accelerate recovery.

With climate change, extreme weather conditions are becoming more prevalent. What was once snow load has become heavy late winter and early spring rains, stressing watershed and flood management plans, especially in heavily agricultural and rural communities like Potter County (Swain, et. al 2020).

Identifying high-risk flood areas, protecting or relocating vulnerable infrastructure, and implementing coordinated flood management plans can reduce long-term community and economic risk. Having a protocol and plan in place for when flooding does happen related to who is in charge in each community, where resources will be deployed, and which organizations are available for assistance can help mitigate community stress during high water events. Additionally, it is important to ensure EMT and fire departments are trained in swift-water rescue techniques, especially in communities prone to flooding.



Ulysses Community Meeting

Infrastructure Development 5: Strengthen Emergency Response through a coordinated strategy that builds responder capacity, improves training and equipment, supports volunteer recruitment and retention, and ensures readiness to meet the demands of a rural, recreation-oriented community.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Department of Emergency Management, volunteer fire departments and EMS agencies across Potter County, municipal governments and townships, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, Pennsylvania Department of Health, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Penn-York Camp and Retreat Center

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Federal Emergency Management Agency Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG), Federal Emergency Management Agency SAFER Grants, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency Emergency, Pennsylvania Department of Health Sub-strategies

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 5.1 Implement targeted recruitment and retention strategies for fire, EMS, and rescue organizations through structured outreach, incentives, training support, and volunteer engagement, with particular attention to the demands of outdoor recreation and seasonal visitor activity.
- 5.2 Develop and deliver EMT, fire, and rescue training programs focused on specialized skills needed in wilderness, water, remote-area, and recreation-related emergency response.
- 5.3 Ensure fire, EMS, and rescue departments have access to specialized equipment and gear required for outdoor recreation-related emergencies and rescues.
- 5.4 Establish stipends or incentive programs and implement regular volunteer appreciation and engagement activities to offset costs, recognize service, and improve long-term retention of volunteer emergency responders.
- 5.5 Encourage emergency response organizations to participate in and host community events to strengthen public trust, visibility, and civic engagement while reinforcing recruitment efforts.

Rural emergency response times vary widely based on terrain and road access, a challenge that is particularly acute in areas like Potter County and the Pennsylvania Wilds region where outdoor recreation increases exposure to higher-risk activities (Mell et al., 2017). While the county's geography cannot be changed, research and best practice emphasize the importance of specialized training for first responders in recreation-related emergencies, familiarity with navigating remote areas with and without location services, and advance coordination around large events to ensure adequate staffing.

In communities that rely heavily on volunteer fire and EMS services, sustained training, recognition, and engagement are critical to retention, with community meetings, student input, and stakeholder interviews consistently highlighting concerns about local response capacity. Together, this evidence underscores the need for a targeted recruitment and retention strategy for volunteer emergency personnel to ensure residents and visitors are adequately supported during emergencies.



Austin Community Meeting

Infrastructure Development 5: Strengthen Emergency Response through a coordinated strategy that builds responder capacity, improves training and equipment, supports volunteer recruitment and retention, and ensures readiness to meet the demands of a rural, recreation-oriented community.

CASE STUDY

Rebirth of the Loudendale Volunteer Fire Department

Loudendale, WV a community of roughly 250 families has relied on an all-volunteer fire and EMS response team since its inception in 1937. While community involvement was very high with a force averaging over 30 individuals up through the early 1990s, recent mismanagement and poor leadership decisions had the engagement dwindling to less than 10 regularly engaged volunteers. This presented a community safety issue as this emergency response team was responsible not only for the community of Loudendale but also all rescues in nearby Kanawha State Forest. When the new fire chief took over in 2024, he made volunteer recruitment and retention a first priority and transparency to the community a second priority. The small team began hosting regular events in and around the community, participating in events at the state forest, and opening up the firehouse to any and all visitors. The chief also engaged in relationship repair with the local civic group. With a current volunteer team of well over 40 engaged, the department has begun to give monthly awards to members, continued to support the community with regular events, and become a fixture in the larger city of Charleston fairs and festivals.

ADULT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Workforce development in rural communities is most effective when it is implemented as a coordinated economic development strategy rather than a stand-alone training initiative. Research consistently demonstrates that job training alone does not improve long-term employment outcomes when structural barriers limit participation and retention. In rural areas, access to stable housing, reliable transportation, broadband, affordable childcare, and healthcare is closely linked to labor force participation, job stability, and earnings outcomes (Driscoll et al., 2023; Hege, 2018).

In Potter County, these barriers intersect with population decline, an aging workforce, limited housing supply, and healthcare workforce shortages, constraining both labor availability and business growth. Best practice in rural economic development supports place-based workforce strategies that align skills development with employer demand, supportive services, and essential infrastructure, recognizing that strengthening workforce participation requires improving the broader conditions that enable residents to live, work, and remain in the community over the long term.

COMMUNITY-BASED DATA INDICATORS

- Stakeholder interviews identified skilled trades, apprenticeships, and career and technical education as the top workforce priorities, with more than half of respondents emphasizing the need to strengthen these pathways.
- Across interviews and community meetings, participants consistently called for practical, skills-based workshops and technical assistance to support entrepreneurship, small business development, and stronger connections to existing local resources.
- Survey data indicate strong support for a targeted adult workforce strategy, with over 60% of respondents identifying healthcare and retail as priority sectors, followed by manufacturing. Residents also noted the importance of strengthening locally owned businesses that serve as anchors in the community.
- Community meetings further highlighted workforce gaps in healthcare, construction trades, childcare, and manufacturing, reinforcing the need for coordinated training, employer engagement, and sector-specific workforce pathways across the county.

Adult Workforce Development 1: Implement a coordinated, place-based adult workforce development strategy that aligns skills training with employer demand, support services, and essential infrastructure to strengthen labor force participation and long-term economic stability in Potter County.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

CareerLink, Potter County Education Council, Workforce Solutions, Small Business Development Center at PennWest Clarion, Reentry Coalition, Penn State Extension, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, Libraries, Seneca Highlands, PA Department of Labor & Industry's Apprentice and Training Office, SkillUp PA, Erie Vocational Rehabilitation Services, WEDnetPA, Northern Tier Community Action, North Central Regional Planning and Development Council, Northwest Industrial Resource Center, North Central Workforce Development Board

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

DCED Foundations in Industry Training, DCED WEDnetPA, PA Schools-to-Work Program, PA Industry Partnership Grants, ARC POWER, ARC-DOL WORC (Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities, HRSA Rural Health Workforce and Rural Health Grants, PA Department of Labor & Industry Work Opportunity Tax Credit

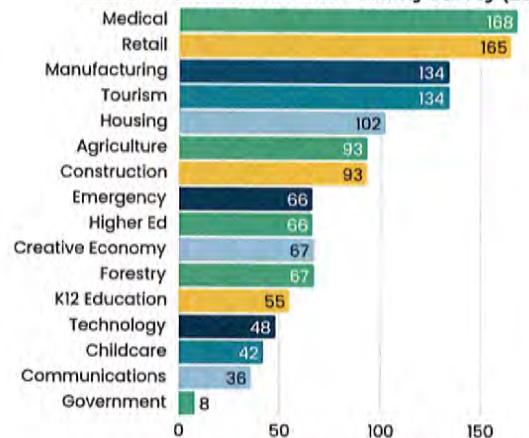
SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 1.1 Expand and actively promote pre-apprenticeship and registered apprenticeship opportunities in healthcare, skilled trades, and manufacturing through PA CareerLink.
- 1.2 Use employer interviews, job vacancy data, and labor market analysis to ensure workforce training and education programs are directly aligned with regional High Priority Occupations.
- 1.3 Increase access to adult education, GED preparation, and short-term credentialing by promoting offerings through Northern Pennsylvania Regional College and exploring a satellite or rotating instructional presence in the county.
- 1.4 Form sector-based employer collaboratives in healthcare, manufacturing, and the building trades to jointly design training programs, coordinate recruitment, share learning opportunities, and align curriculum with current and projected industry needs.

Research demonstrates that rural workforce shortages, particularly in healthcare, construction trades, and childcare, are driven by aging and declining populations, outmigration of younger workers, and barriers related to transportation, childcare, and healthcare access (Driscoll et al., 2023; Srygley, 2024; Ziliak, 2007). Evidence supports grow-your-own talent pipelines, including Career and Technical Education, registered apprenticeships, and employer-aligned training tied to high-priority occupations, as effective tools for improving job placement, retention, and long-term workforce stability in rural regions (Children First, 2024; Herzenberg et al., 2019; Gibbons et al., 2019).

The literature further demonstrates that these approaches are most effective when paired with integrated supports such as childcare access, transportation solutions, and healthcare availability, which increase labor force participation and reduce turnover (Driscoll et al., 2023). Taken together, the literature supports a coordinated, sector-focused workforce strategy in Potter County that strengthens both training pathways and the conditions necessary for sustained employment and long-term economic stability.

Sector Prioritization: Potter County Survey (2025)



Number of Respondents
Source: Potter County Community Survey (2025), n = 268 respondents.

Adult Workforce Development 2: Implement a coordinated, countywide healthcare strategy that expands access to primary care, behavioral health, and pharmacy services; strengthens workforce recruitment and retention; and improves transportation and service delivery coordination.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

UPMC Cole, Potter County Human Services, Potter County Education Council, Potter County Commissioners, Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, Pennsylvania Department of Health, Pennsylvania Direct Primary Care Association, Pennsylvania Association of Community Health Centers, Pennsylvania Pharmacists Association, Northern Pennsylvania Regional College, Penn State College of Medicine, Volunteers That Care, Area Transportation Authority of North Central PA, United Way, North Central Rural Health Transformation Partners, Tug River Health Clinic for FQHC assistance

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Medical Assistance Transportation Program, PennDOT's senior shared-ride program, Human Services Development Fund (HSDF), FTA Section 5310, HRSA Rural Health grants, USDA Community Facilities, Rural Health Outreach Program, Small Health Care Provider Quality Improvement Program, Rural Residency Planning & Development Program, Telehealth Network Grant Program, Telehealth Technology Enabled Learning Program, National Health Service Corps (NHSC) Loan Repayment Program, Nurse Corps Loan Repayment & Scholarship Programs, Rural Health Transformation Program

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 2.1 Invest in strengthening local primary care, behavioral health, and pharmacy infrastructure to support population health, workforce participation, and long-term economic stability.
- 2.2 Implement recruitment and retention incentives for healthcare providers, including loan repayment assistance, housing support, relocation stipends, and defined career advancement pathways. Prioritize strategies that encourage providers to live and work locally, strengthening continuity of care and workforce stability.
- 2.3 Expand telehealth capacity to improve access to behavioral health services, specialty care, chronic disease management, and follow-up visits. Leverage virtual care to reduce travel barriers, increase appointment adherence, and support working-age adults' ability to remain employed while managing health needs.

Potter County residents across all age groups identified healthcare as the top sector that must be prioritized, underscoring its importance to workforce participation, youth retention, and long-term economic stability.

Research shows that rural healthcare shortages, driven by hospital department closures, limited training pipelines, and an aging clinical workforce, reduce service capacity and constrain economic growth (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025; Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, 2022). In Appalachia, chronic disease, aging populations, and transportation barriers further depress labor force participation and increase workforce vacancies (Driscoll et al., 2023).

The literature supports a coordinated healthcare strategy that strengthens primary care, behavioral health, and pharmacy services; expands telehealth; improves transportation access; and advances provider recruitment and retention through locally aligned incentives (Children First, 2024; Gibbons et al., 2019; Herzenberg et al., 2019; Driscoll et al., 2023). These investments generate documented economic multiplier effects and reinforce long-term workforce and community stability (Upjohn Institute, 2023).

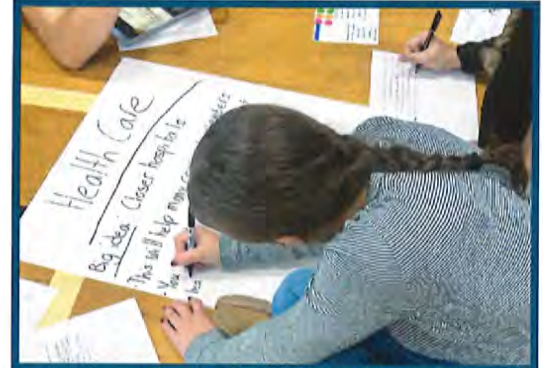


Local School Workshop

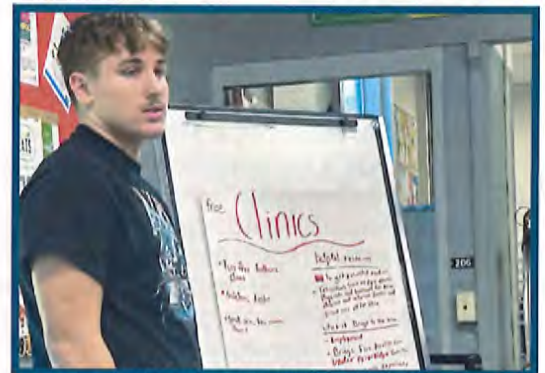
Adult Workforce Development 2: Implement a coordinated, countywide healthcare strategy that expands access to primary care, behavioral health, and pharmacy services; strengthens workforce recruitment and retention; and improves transportation and service delivery coordination.

SUB-STRATEGIES (Continued)

- 2.4 Support the transition of rural hospital services from an inpatient-centric model to a diversified mix of inpatient, outpatient, and community-based service lines. Expand primary care, urgent care, behavioral health, substance use treatment, and specialty clinics to better match rural demand patterns, stabilize hospital finances, and improve access to care.
- 2.5 Develop partnerships with transit agencies, voucher programs, volunteer driver networks, and coordinated transportation providers to improve access to outpatient care.
- 2.6 Encourage pharmacies to adopt broader clinical service offerings that improve both patient access and financial sustainability, including immunizations, and point-of-care testing.
- 2.7 Expand the use of telepharmacy models to extend pharmacist coverage, improve medication access, and reduce staffing and operational costs.
- 2.8 Support cooperative or shared-services models that allow rural pharmacies to remain viable by pooling resources. These models may include shared purchasing power, back-office operations, billing and credentialing, IT and telepharmacy infrastructure, and coordinated marketing and health promotion efforts.
- 2.9 Explore the creation of a Federally Qualified Healthcare Center (FQHC) which supports Potter County residents.



Local School Workshop

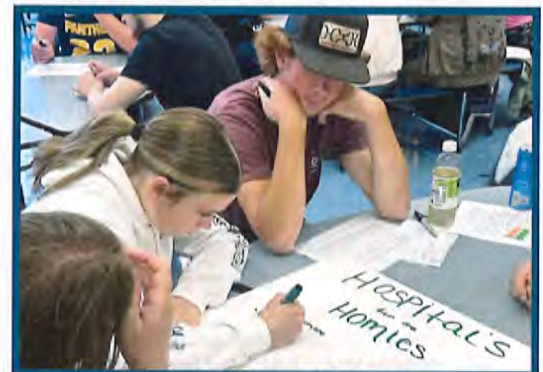


Local School Workshop

CASE STUDY

Grow Your Own Workforce Development Program in McDowell County, WV

McDowell County, WV is a community of around 17,000 residents with large outmigration of youth and young adults, largely due to the collapse of the coal industry resulting in very few employment options. Many of the opportunities left are filled by individuals with low or no qualifications. For example, the county had zero certified educators at the secondary school level from 2008 until 2024. In 2019, the county began a program with secondary students who were interested in teaching where they were guaranteed employment and loan repayment if they agreed to return to the district for 5 years. Additionally, cohorts of students were able to receive real educator experience by teaching lessons at the elementary and middle school level. This opportunity is made possible by a partnership between the WV Department of Education and the McDowell CTE who created the program.



Local School Workshop

Adult Workforce Development 3: Expand access to affordable, high-quality childcare through center-based, home-based, school-based, and employer-partner models.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term to Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Potter County Board of Commissioners, Potter County Education Council, Potter County School Districts, Local Childcare Providers, Local Employers, Churches, Potter County Human Services, Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning, CareerLink, Northern Pennsylvania Regional College, Penn State Extension, Headstart Potter County, Northern Tier Community Action, Early Learning Resource Center

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

Hospital or Health-System Community Benefit Funds, Child Care Works / Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Keystone STARS Incentive and Quality Improvement Funding, Appalachian Regional Commission – POWER / Workforce Ecosystem Grants, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, USDA Rural Development (rural business development grants, rural community development initiatives, community facilities, and direct loan/grant program)

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 3.1 Conduct a countywide childcare supply and demand assessment, including employer and parent input. Develop a childcare mapping tool to identify gaps by type, capacity, and location.
- 3.2 Identify and prepare potential childcare sites by assessing community facilities, churches, and existing buildings for zoning compliance, facility readiness, and licensing feasibility.
- 3.3 Align childcare expansion with workforce training locations and major employment centers to reduce transportation and scheduling barriers for working parents and adult learners.
- 3.4 Leverage school facilities to develop full-day and extended-hour childcare programs that support working families and improve continuity of care.
- 3.5 Provide targeted technical assistance to home-based and small childcare providers on licensing, business planning, and mixed funding models to expand capacity and improve sustainability.
- 3.6 Develop shared-services models to centralize billing, subsidy navigation, professional development, purchasing, and administrative support.

Childcare is a critical economic development strategy for workforce development in rural communities because it directly determines whether parents and caregivers are able to participate in employment and training. Research on rural workforce participation consistently identifies childcare availability as a key social determinant shaping an individual's ability to work, (Driscoll et al., 2023, Hege, 2018).

In rural counties such as Potter County, limited childcare options, population decline, and an aging workforce constrain parents' employment choices and reduce community attractiveness to young families. Strengthening childcare access therefore operates as a foundational economic development investment, supporting workforce participation, improving job stability, and enhancing a community's capacity to attract and retain working-age households.



Shinglehouse Community Meeting



Ulysses Community Meeting

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

In rural communities facing population loss with significant natural and cultural assets, tourism represents a viable primary economic development sector. In 2024, visitors to the PA Wilds region spent roughly 2.1 billion dollars, resulting in over 13,000 jobs related to the industry in the 13 county region. Potter County, being in the Pennsylvania Wilds Region, with a culture of outdoor recreation of many different kinds including hunting and fishing, kayaking, hiking, skiing, and snowmobiling and ATVing, is well positioned to leverage these assets as part of a diversified economic development strategy.

COMMUNITY-BASED DATA INDICATORS

- Community meetings and interviews consistently emphasized that these natural amenities are the county's primary tourism draw, with residents frequently describing the quiet pace of life, scenic views, wildlife access, and solitude as qualities that define the region's identity.
- Both the literature and residents caution that tourism development must be carefully managed to avoid unintended economic, environmental, and social impacts.
- Studies indicate that tourism can contribute to community division when residents perceive unequal benefits, rising costs of living, or cultural displacement (George and Reid, 2005). Revitalize Potter community meetings reflected this tension, with residents expressing both support for economic opportunity and concern about strain on rural character and local resources.
- Many youth participate in tourism-related activities but do not recognize associated economic or entrepreneurial opportunities.
- First Impressions Assessment data indicates that most communities in Potter County do not have welcoming signage and branding.

Tourism Development 1: Create an opportunity to establish a shared vision for tourism as a key economic driver, supported by cohesive community branding that positions Potter County as a destination. Consider Gateway Communities or similar programs, paired with a coordinated marketing campaign to promote the new brand to both visitors and residents.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Visit Potter-Tioga, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship/PA Wilds Design Guide for Community Character Stewardship, PA Route 6, Lumber Heritage Region, DCED Business PA, PA DCNR/Office of Outdoor Recreation, Potter County ATV COG, Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development | National Extension Tourism Network/Penn State Extension, municipal and community leadership, local businesses

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

ARC Gateway Communities, North Central RPDC, USDA Rural Development, PA DCED, PA DCNR, PA Downtown Center

SUB-STRATEGIES

- 1.1 Develop a comprehensive outdoor recreation and tourism vision that balances growth with preserving Potter County's rural character.
- 1.2 Create a countywide tourism plan, including a new promotional video, that positions Potter County as part of a fully developed PA Wilds tourism region rather than a day-trip stop.
- 1.3 Create a clear and compelling tourism brand for Potter County that captures the county's sense of place, celebrates its dark skies, trails, forests, waterways, and rural communities, and unites all tourism partners under a shared identity that resonates with visitors seeking outdoor adventure, quiet, and authenticity. Look at the branding for "Pure Michigan" as an example.
- 1.4 Work with individual communities to define gateway communities
- 1.5 Establish a visitor profile for each gateway community to identify target markets and priority amenities.
- 1.6 Create a distinct brand for each gateway community that aligns with and builds upon the broader Potter County brand to maintain continuity. Encourage adoption by local businesses through storefront decals and promotional materials.

Gateway Communities are found at entrances to existing outdoor or cultural tourism areas, such as National Parks, state forests, or other areas of interest. These communities often provide lodging, food, additional experiences, or other important amenities for visitors and increase opportunities for visitors to spend additional nights in an area. If appropriate controls are placed on these communities such as zoning and planning principles, they become central economic hubs with immense cultural identity in otherwise very rural and isolated areas which can also be enjoyed by local residents year-round (McMahon, 1999).

Many of Potter County's communities are situated to be considered a "gateway" to a natural or cultural asset. Coudersport, the county seat, is ideal as the main entrance for visitors who are focused on Cherry Springs State Park and the dark sky offerings. To transition to be a true gateway community destination, businesses focused on astronomy and outdoor recreation, rentals geared towards weekend visitors, and themed events could draw additional tourists to the area.

Austin is situated to be a traditional gateway trail town for Susquehanna State Park and its trail system. Here, businesses may thrive which are focused on cycling, hiking, and backpacking. Rental units which feature support for these activities and local events during the high season could draw more visitors. By providing a "Potter County" tourism brand, visitors and residents will both begin to recognize the many amenities in the area that are ready for tourism.

Tourism Development 1: Create an opportunity to establish a shared vision for tourism as a key economic driver, supported by cohesive community branding that positions Potter County as a destination. Consider Gateway Communities or similar programs, paired with a coordinated marketing campaign to promote the new brand to both visitors and residents.

SUB-STRATEGIES (Continued)

- 1.7 Build a visitor guide that showcases both the county and its communities. Partner with Visit Potter-Tioga to update and align digital platforms.
- 1.8 Update the visitor information system with maps, trail and water access details, business hours, and lodging options.
- 1.9 Position and promote existing establishments, such as campgrounds, country stores, and artisan centers as “visitor hubs”.
- 1.10 Leverage regional partners such as the PA Wilds Center, Lumber Museum, and nearby dark sky parks for joint promotion and package development.

CASE STUDY

Fayetteville, Smithers, Summersville, Montgomery, Hinton, and Oak Hill, WV as gateway communities to the New River Gorge National Park

These six small communities, spread across a four-county region represent the major gateway areas to the recently designated New River Gorge National Park in central and southern West Virginia. Each of these communities itself has a year-round population of less than 3,500 people according to census data, but are working together to provide amenities to visitors while also retaining their small-town charm. As a result, many short-term rentals and smaller boutique hotels have been created, along with campgrounds and outdoor recreation outfitters. Opportunities for day use recreation are as plentiful as multi-day rafting trips, making the development ideal for mixed use between residents and visitors.



Galeton Community Meeting



Austin Community Meeting



Coudersport Community Meeting

Tourism Development 2: Support the growth of lodging and legal campground options for visitors to Potter County.

TIMELINE:

Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

PA Department of Community and Economic Development, PA DCNR/Office of Outdoor Recreation, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, local law enforcement, banks and lenders, local business owners, PA General Assembly (if statutory changes are required)

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

PA DCED, PA DCNR, ARC, state and federal funds, USDA Rural Development, The Progress Fund

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 2.1 Promote legal campground investment and modernization, including cabins, RV sites, and designated tent areas with appropriate services and management.
- 2.2 Support small-scale cabin, campground, and short-term rental development along rivers and in scenic areas, with guidelines that protect natural resources.
- 2.3 Increase lodging capacity to meet tourism demand without reducing the supply of safe, affordable housing for residents using collaborative planning, zoning, and incentive strategies to balance visitor needs with community well-being.
- 2.4 Restore and reuse historic lodging assets such as the Hotel Crittenden and other vacant downtown buildings for visitor accommodations and mixed-use development. Leverage capital stacking to complete large-scale renovation projects.

Weak or limited regulatory systems, especially where zoning does not exist, can make it difficult for rural places to manage tourism growth or protect natural areas. Studies of informal camping on national forests show an increase in long-term or unregulated campsites. Law enforcement officers report that these sites often create challenges related to trash, vegetation damage, and basic sanitation, and with the root problem often being limited staff capacity and unclear authority to address issues when they arise (Cervený & Baur, 2020).

Research on camping more broadly shows that when sites are not designated or monitored, visitors tend to create new areas on their own, which lead to soil compaction, vegetation loss, and long-term wear on sensitive landscapes (Marion et al., 2019). National guidance on rural planning notes that limited zoning and land use tools are common in rural areas, which can make it harder to direct growth away from sensitive resources and coordinate enforcement across agencies (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2012). Several residents also expressed frustration that, in practice, enforcement often falls to a limited number of local officials or to private landowners, who are left to manage visitor behavior on their own.



Germania Community Meeting

Tourism Development 3: Improve community visibility through coordinated downtown facade improvements, wayfinding, and gateway signage tied to tourism amenities.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Local business owners, community leadership, Visit Potter-Tioga, North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, PA Downtown Center, Northern Forest Center and the National Coalition for Community Capital (for educational purposes)

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, ARC Gateway Communities, PA DCED Main Street Matters, Municipal Planning Assistance, Local Share Accounts and Multi-Modal Transportation Fund, PA DCNR, PA CBDG funds, PA Wilds Community Engagement Minigrants, PA Lumber Heritage Area minigrants

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 3.1 Improve signage at entrances to communities and ensure consistency throughout the county.
- 3.2 Improve wayfinding and gateway signage along Route 6 and key county roads to direct visitors to downtowns, trailheads, parks, and attractions.
- 3.3 Create consistent, easy-to-read signage directing visitors to major attractions and tourism areas throughout Potter County.
- 3.4 Invest in downtown beautification, facade improvements, and streetscape projects to make main streets more inviting for residents and visitors, utilize the PA Wilds Design Guide to support planning and implementation of these projects.

Downtown development and placemaking are both central to the revitalization of communities. Vibrant downtowns, no matter how small, showcase a community's identity and attract residents and visitors alike. Much can be done before funding is even sought towards downtown development. Raising pride in a community and keeping it neat with regular clean ups and volunteer days is a perfect example of the beginning stages of placemaking activities. Ensuring accessible volunteer engagement is key to successful incremental development (Sieglar, 2025).

Placemaking builds a community identity through creating spaces where people want to live, work, and play. It relies on natural and cultural assets of a community to attract talent and create businesses that build authentic community identity. Contrary to older models of economic development, placemaking emphasizes that the location does not matter as long as the culture and community are welcoming for new businesses and creative talent (Wyckoff et. al, 2019). During stakeholder interviews, respondents identified vibrant, active downtowns across the county as a 10-year priority. They want to see more events, main street development, and filled storefronts for residents and visitors alike, as well as clear directions on where these amenities and events are.

Tourism Development 4: Expand and enhance trail systems within Potter County and, where feasible, connect them to regional trail networks in neighboring counties.

TIMELINE:

Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Community leadership, Visit Potter-Tioga, North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, PA DCNR Office of Outdoor Recreation, Keystone Trails Association

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, ARC Funding, PA Environmental Council, PA DCED, PA DCNR Greenways funding

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 4.1 Expand designated ATV/UTV trail access with clear mapping, signage, and communication about legal routes and connectors.
- 4.2 Develop mountain biking and multi-use trail systems that connect towns, parks, and scenic sites, including bike paths and safer bike lanes.
- 4.3 Enhance hiking trail networks, maintenance, and signage to improve access to popular outdoor destinations and backcountry areas.
- 4.4 Develop mapped and signed water trails along the Allegheny River headwaters, Sinnemahoning River, and key creeks, including canoe and kayak access points.
- 4.5 Coordinate gravel biking opportunities through replicable models like the Wild Elk Gravel app.
- 4.6 Encourage volunteer organizations and outdoor-focused nonprofits to lead trail, waterway, and mapping system development.

Outdoor recreation, although a nascent economic driver in Potter County, represents a growing sector in the larger PA Wilds region (Ryan, S. and Hettler, P. 2023). The sector has grown more than 5% in the region since 2023. In Potter County, outdoor recreation includes hunting and fishing, hiking, stargazing, flatwater kayaking, cycling, and ATV trails. Businesses related to these activities, such as guiding and outfitting, represent low-investment entry points to entrepreneurship compared to larger manufacturing sectors. Outdoor recreation-based businesses are also typically conservation minded, with preservation of resources a key value of most entrepreneurs in the sector.



Roulette Community Meeting



Local School Workshop

Tourism Development 5: Support and encourage new and existing outfitters, guide services, dark sky photography, rental operations, and other experiential tourism businesses related to paddling, fishing, hiking, biking, and dark sky viewing.

TIMELINE:

Long-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Visit Potter-Tioga, Potter County Chambers of Commerce, North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, PA Route 6 Alliance, PA DCNR, local business owners, outdoor recreation enthusiasts and service organizations, PA Outdoor Business Alliance, PA SBDC Pennwest Clarion

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, ARC Funding, North Central RPDC Revolving and Microloan Funds, The Progress Fund, SEDA-COG SBA 504 Loan

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 5.1 Coordinate business hours, staffing, and service levels among restaurants, shops, and attractions to ensure visitors can reliably find food and activities during their visits .
- 5.2 Foster formal partnerships and associations among experiential businesses, lodging, cultural institutions, and natural attractions to create reciprocal programs and bundled products, such as multi-site passes and bookable weekend adventure packages that link guided experiences across the county.
- 5.3 Develop cross-community itineraries and visitor routes that link Coudersport, Galeton, Austin, Ulysses, and smaller villages into multi-day trip options.
- 5.4 Develop a regional guide and outfitter association to coordinate standards, joint marketing, product or project collaboration, and shared safety and conservation messaging across Potter County and neighboring counties.
- 5.5 Develop a coordinated, rotating schedule of festivals, arts events, and juried markets that move between towns and highlight outdoor recreation themes.
- 5.6 Bundle entrepreneurial support for tourism businesses with technical assistance in finance, insurance, permitting, and digital skills delivered through SBDC Pennwest Clarion and other PA Wilds partners.
- 5.7 Develop tools and training to help aspiring tourism entrepreneurs (e.g., campgrounds, outfitters, vacation rentals) navigate regulations, financing, and marketing.

Rural tourism growth can generate new employment opportunities; however, many positions are seasonal, lower wage, and concentrated in lodging, restaurants, and recreation services, often with limited benefits and advancement opportunities (Reeder & Brown, 2005; English, Marcouiller, & Cordell, 2000).

Research on high amenity rural counties shows a similar pattern, with rising service sector employment alongside wages that often do not keep pace with increases in housing and living costs, which can limit long term economic mobility for workers (Headwaters Economics, 2019) This concern was echoed in Potter County: residents described the difficulty of finding jobs that pay enough to purchase a home and build savings, noting that hospitality, retail, and seasonal recreation positions alone cannot support a family.



Local School Workshop

Tourism Development 5: Support and encourage new and existing outfitters, guide services, dark sky photography, rental operations, and other experiential tourism businesses related to paddling, fishing, hiking, biking, and dark sky viewing.

SUB-STRATEGIES (Continued)

- 5.8 Offer coordinated hospitality training that equips frontline workers with the skills needed to deliver high-quality visitor experiences and to strengthen repeat visitation, alongside business-focused sessions that teach owners the fundamentals of managing and sustaining a successful hospitality operation.
- 5.9 Develop ATV-related visitor services, including fuel access, staging areas, parking, and safety information, in key trail hubs.
- 5.10 Create a nature tourism business incubator without walls that provides training, mentorship, shared services, and revolving loan funds for guide services, outfitters, and small hospitality firms.
- 5.11 Encourage businesses to join the Pennsylvania Wilds Cooperative (WCO), including the county chapter serving Potter County and a regional sector chapter focused on experiential and outdoor recreation businesses.



Austin Community Meeting



Coudersport Community Meeting



Germania Community Meeting

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

In rural communities, particularly those in Appalachia, limited access to highways and four-lane roads constrains traditional economic development models that rely on attracting large-scale manufacturing and similar industries. The geography and insular nature of the communities in Potter County lends itself to prioritizing small business development and support structures, while maintaining opportunities for larger companies if the right fit is found. Rural economies face a distinct set of structural challenges that shape their development trajectories. Sparse population distribution limits the density of employers, consumers, and service providers, making it more difficult to sustain traditional economic models that depend on scale. Workforce development opportunities are often less comprehensive than in metropolitan regions, reducing exposure to training pathways that support upward mobility. These factors combine with persistent transportation barriers that restrict access to jobs, education, and essential services.

Because of these constraints, large corporations and outside firms often struggle to establish sustainable operations in rural settings. Their business models typically rely on larger labor pools, robust infrastructure, and concentrated markets: conditions that rural areas rarely offer. Consequently, effective rural development often requires a shift away from recruitment-focused strategies toward approaches that leverage existing local assets and invest in the capacity of residents themselves. Strengthening community-led entrepreneurship, mobilizing locally rooted knowledge, and building on place-based strengths create development pathways that are more resilient and better aligned with rural contexts.

COMMUNITY-BASED DATA INDICATORS

- Potter County is characterized by small businesses and family-owned hardware stores, restaurants, and service stations.
- Community meetings and stakeholder interviews consistently emphasized the importance of supporting existing and future small businesses.
- Youth sessions frequently identified favorite local businesses and stores as part of the facilitation process.
- The community recognizes the importance of retaining local businesses and supporting new entrepreneurship, while also expressing interest in attracting larger employers to diversify the local economy.
- Tourism is often viewed as a viable secondary sector; however, residents noted that broader community education and coordination would be necessary for it to function as a true industry cluster.

Business Development 1: Create and implement a coordinated new resident welcome and retention strategy in partnership with municipalities and school districts.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Local Realtors, North Central Penn Board of Realtors, Municipal Governments, School Districts and Chambers of Commerce, Utility Companies, Small Business Owners, Major Employers

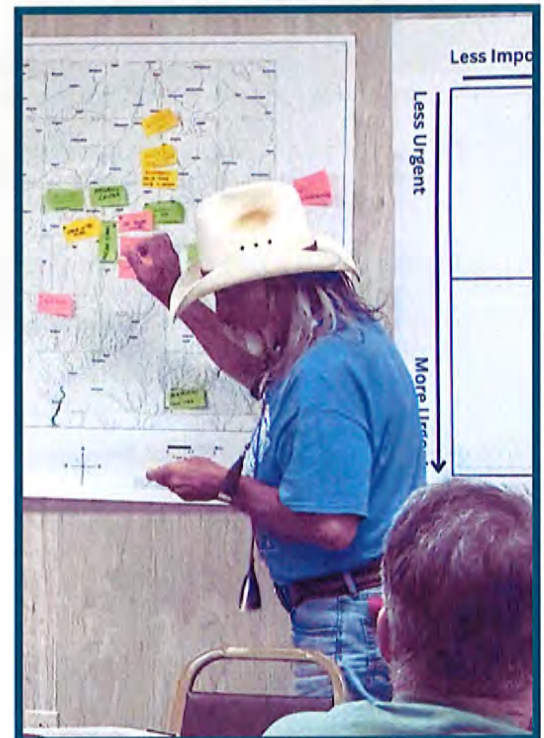
POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, Local Business Sponsorships, Realtor Associations, North Central RPDC, Foundation grants focused on rural vitality

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 1.1 Develop webpage and outreach materials that showcase community amenities and resources for new residents.
- 1.2 Host welcome nights in school districts for new residents to build relationships and learn about their communities.
- 1.3 Create a community "welcoming and outreach" committee in each school district to reach out to new and potential residents.

Newcomers can bring fresh ideas and new energy to a community when they relocate; this is particularly important for rural areas which are facing declining populations (Harders, 2025). By giving clear points of engagement and solving some typical problems for new residents upfront, they are more likely to relocate and stay in an area. In communities such as Potter County, where much of the information is spread through word of mouth or on local social media, the creation of a welcome program with resources for new residents can be key to satisfaction for the first 6-12 months. Improving early integration strengthens workforce retention, school enrollment stability, and long-term economic resilience.



Roulette Community Meeting

Business Development 2: Grow interest in the tourism and outdoor recreation sector as an industry cluster for Potter County, PA.

TIMELINE:

Medium-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, PA Route 6 Alliance, PA DCNR, PA Department of Community and Economic Development, Visit Potter-Tioga, Local and Municipal Governments, Potter County School Systems

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

PA DCED, USDA Rural Development, ARC Gateway Communities Program, State ARC Funds, Ben Franklin Technology Partners of Central & Northwestern PA

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 2.1 Create a business environment that supports natural resource-based and outdoor recreation enterprises, including farmers markets and outdoor recreation business networks.
- 2.2 Establish a targeted business and amenity recruitment list for each designated Gateway Community.
- 2.3 Create a campaign to showcase opportunities in tourism and recreation and importance of protecting sacred spaces in the community.
- 2.4 Develop a small niche manufacturing industry around outdoor recreation needs. Position the ATV trail network as a testing and innovation hub for ATV technologies and related outdoor equipment.

Tourism and outdoor recreation, although a nascent economic driver in Potter County, represents a growing sector in the larger PA Wilds region (Ryan and Hettler, 2023). The sector itself has grown over 5% in the region since 2023. In Potter County, outdoor recreation includes hunting and fishing, hiking, stargazing, flatwater kayaking, cycling, and ATV trails. Businesses related to these activities such as guiding and outfitters represent low investment entry points to entrepreneurship, unlike larger manufacturing possibilities.

Outdoor recreation-based businesses are also typically conservation minded, with preservation of resources a key value of most entrepreneurs in the sector. Because tourism and outdoor recreation are more seen as "what we do" instead of "investment potential" by the residents of Potter County, community and student education related to entrepreneurship opportunities specific to Potter County could help engage local residents in business development around this industry.



Ulysses Community Meeting

Business Development 3: Ensure that commercial properties and sites are viable and available for occupancy by businesses of all types

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

Local businesses, North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission, PA Department of Community and Economic Development, Realtors, Potter County Planning, GIS, and Community Development Department, Utility Companies

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, Appalachian Regional Commission, Federal Economic Development Authority, PA DCED, EPA Brownfields, Mid-Atlantic TAB, North Central RPDC/Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority

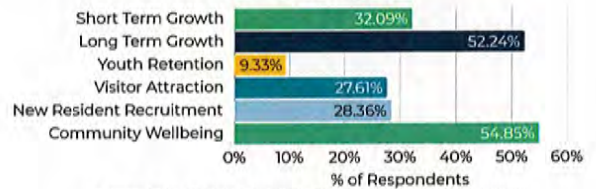
SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 3.1 Develop a site selection tool for commercially available real estate in the region.
- 3.2 Create vacant building inventory for each community and assign a status (usable, needs major renovation, dilapidated and requires removal).
- 3.3 Ensure that vacant, usable commercial properties are included in the site selection tool and inventory.
- 3.4 Develop "best suited for" profiles that identify the types of businesses or industries appropriate for specific commercial properties.
- 3.5 Work with brownfields partners and redevelopment agencies to remove dilapidated structures.
- 3.6 Prepare priority industrial and commercial sites by conducting environmental reviews, utility upgrades, broadband expansion, and site due diligence to increase competitiveness.
- 3.7 Align site planning with workforce availability to ensure industrial and commercial development aligns with workforce pipelines, apprenticeships, and certification programs.

Studies on rural economic development emphasize the importance of having prepared, infrastructure-ready sites for business attraction. Literature highlights that "shovel-ready" certification—documenting utility capacity, environmental clearances, and site due diligence—reduces uncertainty for potential businesses (Cunningham, 2017). For Potter County, where the inventory of industrial and commercial sites is limited, the evidence supports focusing resources on preparing a small number of high-potential locations rather than spreading investment across many sites.

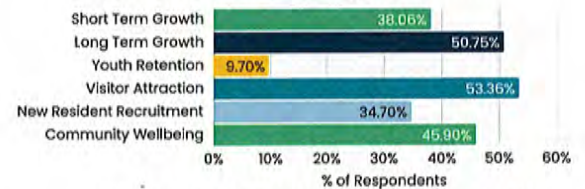
Community survey results reinforce the importance of brownfield redevelopment and facade improvements as drivers of economic growth and community wellbeing.

Potter County's Brownfield Redevelopment: Perceived Impact



Source: Potter County Community Survey (2025), n = 268 respondents.

Potter County's Facade Improvement: Perceived Impact



Source: Potter County Community Survey (2025), n = 268 respondents.

Together, the research and community data justify a targeted site readiness strategy that prioritizes a limited number of high-potential commercial locations.

Business Development 4: Implement a coordinated strategy to attract and support remote workers.

TIMELINE:

Short-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, Corporations with Remote Work Opportunities, Make my Move Program, Local Businesses

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

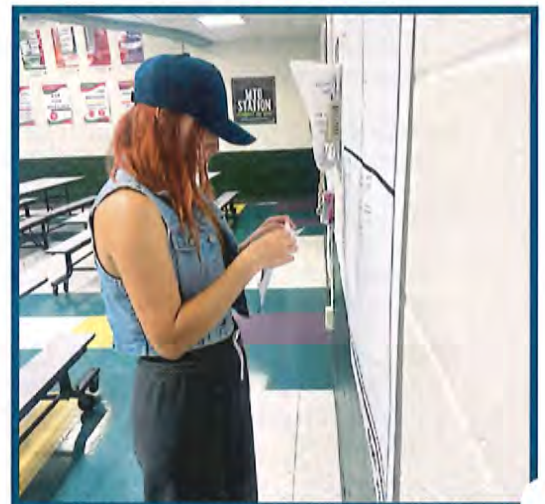
Make My Move, USDA Rural Development, Appalachian Regional Commission

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 4.1 Identify and promote third spaces (coffee shops, coworking spaces, etc.) for remote workers online and in print materials.
- 4.2 Facilitate networking opportunities specifically for remote workers in the region at area local businesses.
- 4.3 Develop incentive programs for remote workers that could include monetary incentives, gift certificates, workshop/studio space opportunities, or other in-kind incentives.

Remote work offers rural communities a pathway to attract new residents and stabilize local economies. Research from the Upjohn Institute (2023) and the Purdue Center for Regional Development (2023) find that remote work can help reverse rural population loss when paired with strong broadband, housing, and quality-of-life amenities. Within the PA Wilds region, programs such as Wilds Are Working provide a model for attracting remote workers by offering stipends, community immersion experiences, and structured engagement with local employers and amenities.

Although Potter County did not serve as a host site for this initiative, the program illustrates a viable framework for inviting remote workers to the area and leveraging the county's natural assets and small-town appeal. With reliable broadband already in place, Potter County is well positioned to implement targeted remote worker attraction strategies, such as remote-work residencies, co-working hubs, or relocation incentives, alongside housing supports that can help expand its future workforce.



Shinglehouse Community Meeting

Business Development 5: Support and expand entrepreneurship across Potter County by reducing barriers to entry, increasing access to capital and technical assistance, strengthening main street and village business ecosystems, and ensuring that potential entrepreneurs have clear information about viable business opportunities.

TIMELINE:

Long-Term

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, PA Department of Community and Economic Development, PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission, Clarion SBDC, local chambers of commerce, Visit Potter-Tioga, local businesses, Covation Center Masterclass, Potter County Education Council, Ben Franklin Technology Partners of Central & Northern PA, PennTAP, The Progress Fund, SMART-PA, Penn State Entrepreneur Assistance Legal and IP Clinics

POTENTIAL FUNDING PARTNERS:

USDA Rural Development, PA DCED, PA DCNR, North Central RPDC, ARC POWER Program, ARC State Programs

SUB-STRATEGIES:

- 5.1 Engage a qualified consultant to conduct feasibility studies identifying business types that are economically viable in each borough or village center. These studies should analyze market demand, gaps in essential services, tourism potential, and demographic needs. All findings must be made publicly available to ensure transparency and to help prospective entrepreneurs make informed decisions.
- 5.2 Complete a full asset map of current and potential industry clusters serving each community in Potter County.
- 5.3 Launch a 'Buy Local' campaign highlighting why small business development matters.
- 5.4 Create an entrepreneurship toolkit for Potter County specifically, including marketing resources for businesses.
- 5.5 Support intergenerational transfer of small businesses: provide technical assistance, financing tools, and succession planning to keep small businesses operating and retain local jobs.
- 5.6 Create small business development mentorship program.
- 5.7 Explore pop-up or temporary spaces for small businesses to explore storefront models.
- 5.8 Develop a Chamber of Commerce structure that serves the entire county.

A stronger entrepreneurial environment will diversify the local economy, improve youth retention, and fill essential service gaps across boroughs and townships. By growing a system of entrepreneurs and building support around them, beginning small business owners can find a peer network and engage with one another for more success in rural communities. This method of development creates a system of interdependence and diminishes competition in rural communities, both of which combat low-resourced behaviors which are detrimental to sustainable development (Stam, 2021).

Components of entrepreneurship ecosystem development include: enabling policies and leadership, availability of financing, a conducive and enabling culture for small business development and growth, a ready workforce, and access to technical assistance support for first-time business owners (Aref, 2009).



Galeton Community Meeting

Business Development 5: Support and expand entrepreneurship across Potter County by reducing barriers to entry, increasing access to capital and technical assistance, strengthening main street and village business ecosystems, and ensuring that potential entrepreneurs have clear information about viable business opportunities.

SUB-STRATEGIES (Continued)

- 5.9 Create an entrepreneurship support program for youth and young adults who are interested in creating their own businesses in the area.
- 5.10 Develop an incentive program for main street property owners who agree to offer reduced rent to startups during their first years of operation. This reduces a major barrier to entry and encourages renewed activity in downtown districts.
- 5.11 Establish a small-grants or micro-capital program to support early-stage entrepreneurs with start-up costs such as equipment, inventory, storefront improvements, licensing, or insurance. Prioritize businesses that fill identified service gaps or align with the strategic goals of the economic development plan.
- 5.12 Launch a mini grant and low-interest loan program for tourism-oriented micro enterprises to invest in equipment, facility fit-out, energy efficiency, and digital marketing.
- 5.13 Encourage new restaurants, microbreweries, coffee shops, and social spaces, especially in downtowns, with incentives, small grants, or low-interest loans.
- 5.14 Encourage businesses to join the Pennsylvania Wilds Cooperative (WCO), which will include a county chapter in Potter County and a regional sector-chapter focused on experiential/outdoor recreation businesses.



Local School Workshop



Local School Workshop

CASE STUDY

City of Hazard, Perry County, KY

Hazard, Kentucky is a small city located in Perry County, in the eastern Kentucky coalfields. Like much of Appalachia, the mono-economy version of development and its subsequent collapse caused outmigration and many of the associated hurdles with population loss. A group of Hazard residents began meeting regularly, without a budget or formal organizational structure, to host events and launch projects that would generate excitement about Hazard's renaissance. This ad-hoc group of individuals and their energy led the city and county leadership to invest in a downtown development coordinator position to help guide these activities. Although the movement was still grassroots and citizen led, the addition of a staff member helped to organize and make things more efficient.

The creation of a civic leadership development program as a paid internship for young people has led to significant grassroots development and the passing of the baton to the next generation. This has directly led to young residents returning to Hazard after graduation. Hazard is the only city within the central Appalachian footprint to gain population between 2010 and 2020, after many decades of population decline.

The intentional and careful documentation of downtown and county development activities, as well as the support created for entrepreneurs through this process, has led to many businesses opening and several being recruited to the county. Even during the flooding experienced in the last five years, Hazard has continued to support and grow its small business support network, and, as a result, create more businesses. A business after hours event for remote workers, local business owners, and other community members, realtor workshops for potential new homeowners, and the creation of several community-based businesses based solely on needs of the residents has led to resident satisfaction increasing.

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Coudersport Alliance Church
Coudersport Borough
Coudersport School District
Denton Go
Galeton School District
Genesee Park
Maureen Cracknell Homemade
Mountain Valley Realty
North Central Regional Planning and Development Commission
Northeastern Potter Economic Development Association
Northern Potter School District
Oswayo Valley School District
PA Lumber Heritage Museum
Penn State Cooperative Extension Services
PoCoPa Creatives
Potter County Board of Commissioners
Potter County Conservation District
Potter County Creative Council
Potter County Department of Planning, GIS, and Community Development
Potter County Educational Council
Potter County Emergency Management
Potter County Housing Authority
Potter County Human Services
Potter County Planning Commission
Potter County Redevelopment Authority
Roulette Fire Hall
Trout Unlimited
UMPC Cole
Visit Potter-Tioga

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IN WITNESS WHEREOF, this Revitalize Potter County Strategies for Economic Growth and Community Development Plan is hereby enacted at a regular meeting of the Board of Commissioners of Potter County, Pennsylvania, held on the 14th day of May, 2026."

5-14-26
Date

5/14/26
Date

5/14/2026
Date

ATTEST:

5-14-2026
Date

Nancy J. Grupp
Nancy J. Grupp, Chair

Paul W. Heimel
Paul W. Heimel, Commissioner

Robert W. Rossman
Robert W. Rossman, Commissioner

Jessie M. Giebel
Jessica M. Giebel, Chief Clerk