Mercer County: Better Together
Community Based Planning for Economic Development

Project Overview
Mercer County: Better Together (MCBT) is a research-based, community-driven planning process centered around the ultimate goal of establishing a countywide economic development organization. The process employs the Community Heart & Soul planning framework, which emphasizes inclusivity and storytelling as the basis for shaping solutions.

The purpose of MCBT is to: work collaboratively as individuals, businesses, organizations, and communities; to assess resources and identify priorities; and to implement plans to build healthy individuals and communities, vibrant social generations of Mercer County.

October - December 2015
Local leaders partner with U of I Extension and Mercer Foundation for Health to discuss the potential for a countywide planning process. After reviewing 8 different community planning models, leaders select the Orton Family Foundation Community Heart & Soul ® Planning Process.

January - April 2016
Formation of Steering Committee and proposal submitted for summer information forum series. Foundation funds forums at $18,000.

May - July 2016
Four informational forums held throughout the county to inform residents about the Foundation, the community planning process, and to solicit some initial feedback.

August - October 2016
Results from informational forums are used to secure a $120,000 grant from Looser Flake to fund an 18-month long planning process, Mercer County: Better Together (MCBT).

November 2016 - July 2017
MCBT hosts public forums in each of the 11 population centers across the county. Residents help to facilitate meetings in which participants identify what their community wants for the future.

July - September 2017
Committees of resident volunteers analyze data collected from the forums to identify initial goals, strategies, and recommendations for the future MCBT nonprofit organization.

Future
Mercer County: Better Together is established as a sustainable and representative countywide economic development organization. Initiatives are informed by research and a resident-led vision.

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Recommendations
By the end of the planning process, MCBT will establish a 501(c)(3) nonprofit economic development organization. The following are recommendations developed after observing community forums and conducting case study research in similar countywide organizations across the state.

- Establish a representative and inclusive leadership structure.
- “Grow your own,”
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- Use a strategic plan and vision to guide initiatives in a cohesive and deliberate direction.
- Think countywide, embracing each community’s assets and weaknesses.
- Set realizable goals and create accountability measures.
- Recognize and celebrate all accomplishments.