Economic Development Organizations in the State of Illinois

Case Studies
Economic Development Corporation of North Central Illinois (EDCNCI)

Quick Facts - LaSalle, Bureau, and Putnam Counties (combined)

- Population: 152,516
- Housing Units: 68,688
- Median Household Income: $50,633 (LaSalle Co.), $50,432 (Bureau Co.), $56,358 (Putnam Co.)
- Median Age: 41.6 (LaSalle Co.), 43.4 (Bureau Co.), 46

An Introduction to EDCNCI

The Economic Development Corporation of North Central Illinois represents the communities within LaSalle, Bureau, and Putnam Counties, a region of 2,200 square miles. Established in the past year, the group was formed as a “spin-off” of the Illinois Valley Area Chamber of Commerce (IVAC). Since 1994—and with a history stretching back to 1911—IVAC has represented the Illinois Valley primarily as a Chamber that supports small businesses and facilitates networking in the region. The newly-founded EDCNCI aims to focus on marketing the region and uniting funds and assets to present the best possible picture of the tri-county area. Debb Ladgenski, founding member and current secretary of the EDCNCI board, answered questions and provided insight for the following case study.

EDCNCI’s Story

Leveraging Assets

The biggest asset for the Illinois Valley is what the region represents as a whole. In the words of Ms. Ladgenski, the tri-county area has “a centralized location to metropolitan markets; a capable workforce; good educational resources; lower costs of living; many fine existing businesses and industries; and leaders willing to work together to make things happen.” Located just 90 minutes from most major cities in Illinois and along Interstate 80, she explains that the area has always felt overlooked, primarily because it did not have enough resources to compete with the larger, surrounding communities. Thus, leveraging assets for EDCNCI meant getting all 21 communities on board and united under the goal of economic development.
Organizational Structure
In addition to EDCNCI’s membership of each of the 21 communities in the region, there are also 25 private investor members. The Board consists of six public and seven private investors, the six public members serving as representatives for those communities with over 25,000 residents. Looking to other successful economic development organizations across the state as a model, the group identified a set of bylaws, created positions, hired a CEO, and developed a vision and strategic plan. One important aspect of the bylaws involved an agreement for confidentiality, which specifically stated that board members could not use information obtained through the organization to try and benefit their individual community. The CEO is the point person for initial inquiries regarding site selections and business creation, and local government officials can get involved only after a matter pertains specifically to their municipality.

Economic Development Programs
EDCNCI is still an emerging organization, so it is still unclear exactly what their programming will look like. Once the group is fully operational, it will focus on identifying and presenting economic clusters and workforce capabilities. The clusters currently present in the region are logistics, agri-business, and sand mining. In terms of workforce capability, EDCNCI will emphasize training programs and the fact that the area is home to a community college and within an hour of several universities. Currently, it is focused on developing its website and building a database of properties.

Vision for the Future
In five years from now, the EDCNCI has specific goals it would like to achieve: retaining existing businesses, increasing the tax base, lowering unemployment, drawing more young people back to the area, and increasing the quality of the types of employment.

Lessons for Success

Don’t Give Up
It was not easy to build support for the formation of EDCNCI, and there were many who said it could not happen. Ms. Ladgenski emphasized the importance of never giving up.

Be Open-Minded
When establishing a regional group, it is crucial to meet and communicate with all communities to hear their perspective. Small communities oftentimes feel like they do not have a voice, but their inclusion is necessary for the success of the organization. Open mindedness will help to recognize and understand the many perspectives involved.

Don’t Try and Do Too Much
EDCNCI has decided to focus primarily on marketing the region. This is a realizable goal, and one that can be accompanied by achievable benchmarks. It is important to not make promises that the organization cannot keep, so sometimes it is better to try and accomplish one thing rather than to half-heartedly try many.
Havana, Illinois

An Introduction to Havana

Havana, Illinois is located in Mason County, situated in West Central Illinois along the Illinois River and in a county of 13,701 residents. As the county seat, Havana has become a leader in economic development efforts as the City’s Economic Development Department has successfully utilized local assets to encourage business growth. The main goal of these efforts has revolved around attracting more visitors and tourists to Havana to experience all that the town has to offer. Its close proximity to Peoria, Springfield, Bloomington, Macomb, and Champaign, has allowed Havana to advertise its central location and access to opportunities outside of its small community. Approximately 38% of Havana’s residents work outside of the city. Its largest industries are education and healthcare (24.7%), retail trade (15.6%), and transportation, warehousing, and utilities (12%).

The following case study is the product of a conversation with Ron Hills, the Economic Development Coordinator for Havana over the past five years. Although it is a small community, Ron and the City of Havana have had some very important economic development “wins” and stand as a great example for other small towns across the state of Illinois.

Havana’s Story

Leveraging Assets
Havana’s access to a major natural resource, the Illinois River, has informed much of its economic development efforts. Historically, the town had a larger manufacturing presence and there used to be Fortune 500 operations employing hundreds of people. Today, there are some efforts to try and bring back manufacturing opportunities while also encouraging small business creation, retention, and expansion. Most importantly, the focus is on utilizing the river, the city’s central location and highway access, and capturing the uniqueness of Havana. The main goal is bringing people into town, whether that is through its fishing tournament, hot air balloon festival, or the annual Oktoberfest.

Organizational Structure
Because Havana is a small community, the Economic Development Department is staffed only by Ron Hills, who collaborates with the Havana Area Chamber of Commerce and other City staff members. For example, the Havana Park District owns and manages the riverfront, but works directly with Ron to understand potential business and recreational opportunities. The City also works closely with private property owners to encourage business development in areas such as those near the railroad and coal docks. Havana has also worked on economic development efforts with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) and the Illinois Small Business Development Center at Bradley University.

Economic Development Programs
Havana’s main economic development tools are its Revolving Loan Funds (RLFs) and the TIF District. The RLF has been utilized by a popular local store called Havana Outdoors that was able to use loan money to expand its facility, allowing it to now offer tournaments and capture visitors from out of state. The local Tall Timbers Marina has also harnessed this tool and other businesses have received loans to

Quick Facts - Havana, IL

- Population: 3,243
- Housing Units: 1,505
- Median Household Income: $31,834
- Median Age: 45.1
improve their buildings. The downtown is within a TIF district, and the City is working on a public-private agreement that would help upgrade Main Street businesses. Another potential use for TIF money may center around branding the Havana community and advertising it in a way that would attract more people from around the region.

Regional Positioning
Being located in the midst of a populous region and surrounded by larger economies can be both a positive and negative in terms of economic development. Havana understands this and, as a result, has tried to focus on the ways that its community is unique from Peoria, Springfield, and other nearby cities. Part of this is spreading the message of the benefits of small town living—a calmer, more laid back quality of life—and also emphasizing the access to opportunities just outside of Havana’s boundaries. Another focus has been developing niche businesses that serve residents in a more targeted way, and do not try to compete with big-box stores that people can find in any other place. Havana Outdoors is a great example of this, and the City is working on attracting others like this, such as a small-town butcher shop or a fishing store.

Vision for the Future
Havana has made a lot of progress in the last five years. Mr. Hills was instrumental in bringing in the Hawkins Distribution Center, which opened a new 16,000 square foot facility with 2,000 square feet of office space. Recently, the City received a matching grant of $725,000 to help finish construction of the Havana Business Park, which also utilized TIF funds. The City hopes to see an aquaponics industry emerge here, as there is direct access to the Illinois River barge. Havana is working hard to ensure that it is well-positioned for a strong future in which it stands out as sought-after, small-town community for residents and outside visitors alike.

Lessons for Success

Be the Advocate
According to Mr. Hills, when a potential business says they might want to locate in Havana you need to say: “I’m going to be your advocate, tell me what you want me to do to make it happen.” It is important to demonstrate that this is a good opportunity for the business owner, but also crucial to make clear that they will be benefiting the community as well.

Work Backwards
Sometimes it is beneficial to work backwards, meaning that you start the project first and solve the problems later. Waiting until everything is sorted out beforehand might take too long and could result in missed opportunities.

Think Outside the Box
Mr. Hills’ final advice was to make sure you are thinking outside of the box in economic development. Thriving communities are those that are creative and tried to set themselves apart from other places. This could mean finding innovative ways to embrace the small-town aspects of a community.
Jersey County, Illinois

Quick Facts - Jersey County, IL

• Population: 22,751
• Housing Units: 9,952
• Median Household Income: $54,391
• Median Age: 42.1

An Introduction to Jersey County

Jersey County, Illinois is located just north of St. Louis and is part of the St. Louis Metropolitan Statistical Area. Largely a rural bedroom community for St. Louis, the county’s slogan advertises that it is “Near the crowd, but not in it.” U.S. Route 67 cuts through the center of Jerseyville, the largest city and county seat with 8,305 residents. Grafton, the second largest community, is located on the Mississippi river and has become a popular weekend destination known for its restaurants, wineries, and bed and breakfasts. Population across the county has increased 5% from 2000 to 2014. The largest industries are education, health care, and social assistance (30%); manufacturing (13%); and retail trade (12%).

The following information was obtained through an interview with Shari Albrecht, CEO of the Jersey County Business Association. JCBA is in the process of restructuring and redefining its goals, and its story—as well as the county’s unique experiences—offers lessons for any budding economic development organization.

Jersey County’s Story

Leveraging Assets

The western portion of Jersey County is situated along the Illinois River, and its southwestern communities are at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. The rivers have always served as crucial resources for the agriculture-based economy, as all grain produced in Jersey County eventually gets transported along the river. In recent years, Jersey County has been able to leverage the river for other uses, as well.

Today, visitors travel to Jersey County for weekend getaways to frequent the river towns’ restaurants, bars, wineries and shops and to stay in the many guest cottages, bed and breakfasts and the Pere Marquette State Park lodge. The story of how Grafton, IL (a town of just 719 residents) used its riverfront to transform into a major tourist destination illustrates the power of strong leadership and smart leveraging of an important asset.

Much of Grafton’s success is the result of a disaster that was turned into opportunity. In 1993, a huge flood wiped out most of the town. Fortunately, state and federal dollars poured into the community to help rebuild it. This money was crucial to helping get the town back on its feet, but what really made a difference was leadership: Senator Vince DeMuzio had a vision to use this as an opportunity to change the future of Grafton and he worked with local officials to do so.

Residents who lived in the riverfront homes that were destroyed by the flood were relocated to a new subdivision built along the bluffs. This opened up the riverfront, of which some was preserved as greenspace and some developed. Grafton was open for business. Longtime local business owners sought
to expand their existing businesses, and people who were originally from the area moved back to build new businesses from the ground-up. These are now 25-year success stories that show the loyalty many feel for their community. Developers from across the river in Missouri even took notice and invested in a new winery and high-dollar condominiums. All this was a result of leveraging the riverfront and harnessing strong leadership to turn a vision into reality.

Organizational Structure
The Jersey County Business Association (JCBA) is a membership-driven, nonprofit organization. It was established in 2004 as the County’s Chamber of Commerce merged with its Economic Development Corporation. With a two-person staff, JCBA’s priorities are business retention, expansion, and recruitment. JCBA is participating in the state of Illinois’ new CORE model: Creating Opportunities for Retention and Expansion. This initiative intends to provide a unified approach to economic development that will identify and remove barriers to business growth and increase investment across the state.

Economic Development Programs
Three communities in the county have utilized Tax Increment Financing (TIF). Both Grafton and Jerseyville actively use TIF and have seen significant redevelopment dollars as a result of the programs. Brighton, a village of 2,122 residents, has a Business District and a TIF. Jersey County is also in the process of developing its own Enterprise Zone Designations.

Regional Positioning
Jersey County has found a way to capitalize on its close proximity to the Metro-East Region and Chicago. While these larger metropolitan areas might have greater access to financial resources, Jersey County has the advantage of lower housing, workforce, and land costs. JCBA has leveraged this competitive advantage in attracting investment for Project Panther, a 1,400-acre inland port intermodal logistics park being developed in Jerseyville. The town was able to provide actual numbers that prove it is more cost effective for companies to ship products out of Jerseyville and have them delivered by truck to Chicago compared to dealing with the heavily congested intermodal yards in Joliet North.

Vision for the Future
Five years from now, Project Panther will be in its growth stage and Jersey County will be undergoing many changes as a result. The development of this expansive, intermodal logistics park will cause the county to see industrial creation, new housing construction, and retail and service based growth. New roads will need to be built to accommodate the thousands of trucks that will be coming in and out of Project Panther. Most importantly, Jersey County will generate greater tax revenue, which can be reinvested in the community to further JCBA’s long-term economic development goals.

Lessons for Success

Strong Leadership
JCBA attributes much of its success to strong local leadership. After the flood that devastated Grafton, it took vision and direction from several people across the county to save the community and make it what it is today. Furthermore, JCBA as an organization now benefits from Shari Albrecht as CEO with her 20 years of experience in the economic development field.

Plan Strategically
Another important component of JCBA’s success was developing a strategic plan that guided the organization’s work. This plan is essential in identifying the county’s goals and direction that it should take to achieve them. While the document itself should be flexible and can evolve, it should serve as a guiding force behind projects.

Have buy-in
Finally, JCBA emphasizes the importance of getting widespread public buy-in before setting out to do any major project. Support for initiatives should come from a variety of stakeholders and participants. Even if people do not completely agree, the public should know what is going and feel included in the process.
Spoon River Partnership for Economic Development

An Introduction to the Spoon River Partnership

The Spoon River Partnership for Economic Development is a nonprofit organization in Fulton County, Illinois that serves the City of Canton and the county as a whole. Located in West Central Illinois, Fulton County is part of the Peoria-Canton Combined Statistical Area and Canton is its largest city. The Illinois River forms the eastern section of the county’s border. Both Canton and the county have seen a minor population decrease (4%) since 2000, but the Spoon River Partnership has opened the doors to many new opportunities.

Missy Towery is the current Director of the Spoon River Partnership. She provided details about their organizational structure and programming efforts, and described some of the unique ways in which they approach economic development.

Spoon River Partnership Story

Leveraging Assets
Spoon River has focused largely on attracting tourists and selling its quality of life. While the county might not have a four-lane highway, the Partnership emphasizes that it can offer access to different assets: great schools, quality homes, and close proximity to the Peoria metropolitan area. Because of Spoon River College, the area also has a qualified and well-trained workforce. As a countywide organization, the Partnership serves Canton—by far the largest city—but also each of the smaller communities. The area also boasts a cost of living that is 16.7% lower than the national average, and lower tax rates than other places around the state.

Organizational Structure
The Spoon River Partnership is funded through public and private sources. On the public side, it receives financial support from the City of Canton, Fulton County, and Spoon River College. Private businesses and some individuals also contribute to the organization. Its staff is comprised of the Director, Ms. Towery, and an office manager who also serves as the tourism manager and marketing coordinator. Spoon River Partnership shares an office with its sister organization, the Canton Area Chamber of Commerce. The Canton Main Street Organization is housed under the umbrella of the Spoon River Partnership. The Board meets monthly and has 13 members. Ms. Towery is responsible for reporting to the Canton City Council once a month and prepares quarterly reports for the Fulton County Board.

Economic Development Programs
The primary activities of the Partnership fall under three main categories: business recruitment, workforce development, and quality of life activities. Business recruitment involves the various incentives that the Canton area offers, like TIF Districts, Low-Interest Loan Funds, and Enterprise Zones. On a day-to-day basis, these efforts typically consist
of communication and negotiation between the Partnership and potential business owners to make sure that the process goes smoothly. In terms of workforce development, the organization offers assistance to companies when they are seeking to expand or needing extra support. Finally, Spoon River Partnership is also involved in efforts such as planning social events, downtown development, and local crowdfunding campaigns.

Regional Positioning
Fulton County is uniquely positioned—approximately one hour southwest of Peoria and one hour east of Macomb. The county is connected to Peoria because there are many residents who work at Caterpillar, and the county is also connected to Macomb because it is included in that city’s Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Plan. Therefore, many projects that the organization wants to undertake involve participation and cooperation with one of these two cities. Overall, Ms. Towery explains that it is advantageous to be so close to these places and to have positive working relationships with those local governments and their local nonprofits.

Vision for the Future
For the future, the Partnership hopes to expand activities it is currently working on. It would like to see the Canton area’s healthcare field grow, building upon the existing healthcare hub in Peoria. It is trying to expand tourism and become a common weekend destination, similar to Galena, Illinois in the northwestern part of the state. Technology is another sector that Spoon River hopes to develop, specifically through the implementation of Fiber throughout the county.

Lessons for Success

Community Connection
The Partnership has learned that economic development is most successful when efforts are led by someone who has community ties. This person knows and understands community needs and intricacies far better than any outsider can, and as a result is more effective.

Define Policies Early-On
Ms. Towery discussed the importance of developing specific policies and procedures from the beginning. One crucial piece is establishing how and with which entities communication will occur, and another is determining bylaws upon which staff and the Board of Directors agree. All policies should be transparent to the public.

Always Revisit the Vision
Along with developing policies, any economic development organization should outline a clear vision from the start and continually revisit that vision. The vision should not just be a statement, but part of a larger strategic plan that actually guides work. As part of this, all accomplishments—small and large—should be recognized and celebrated.
An Introduction to Montgomery County

Located in the south-central part of the state, Montgomery County, Illinois is approximately one-hour from both Springfield and St. Louis. Interstate 55 runs through the western portion of the county, and the county seat of Hillsboro is approximately 10 miles east of the highway. Hillsboro is the county’s most populous community, with 8,545 residents, followed by Litchfield with 7,004 residents and Nokomis with 2,294 residents.

Montgomery County as a whole has seen a 3% decrease in population since 2000, but its two largest cities have seen population growth over the past decade. The county’s largest industries are education, health care, and social assistance (29.4%), retail trade (10.9%), and manufacturing (10.5%). The Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC) was established in 2004 and has often partnered with University of Illinois Extension.

Amanda Cole, County Extension Director for Christian, Jersey, Macoupin, and Montgomery Counties, has experience working closely with the MCEDC. Ms. Cole provided the information used in this case study and offered her own insights regarding how MCEDC has operated and lessons learned from its story.

Montgomery County’s Story

Leveraging Assets
The greatest identified asset in Montgomery County is essentially strength in numbers: by uniting individuals, businesses, and municipalities across the county under one organization, all economic development efforts are strengthened. Sharing resources and services benefits the entire county in the long-term, because then all communities have representation. The EDC can become a “one-stop shop” where any potential business interests can go to ask about each different community, available tax incentives, and other information and resources. The MCEDC is the keeper of the county’s collective strengths and weaknesses, therefore knowing how to best utilize its strengths to offset its weaknesses.

Organizational Structure
The MCEDC is a 501(c)(3) organization with a volunteer board of directors who serve rotating terms. There are three different types of members: individuals, businesses, and government representatives. Members can have either “governing” or “associate” status, and membership dues are different for all members. For example, local governments pay an amount based on the population residing in each municipality, and businesses dues differ based on the number of employees. The organization has an executive director who focuses largely on small business retention and expansion and recruitment or larger businesses.

Quick Facts - Montgomery County, IL

• Population: 29,348
• Housing Units: 12,758
• Median Household Income: $46,966
• Median Age: 42.2
Economic Development Programs
One major role of the MCEDC is to provide assistance in grant writing. As Ms. Cole explained, the county has been able to secure grant dollars that it would not have otherwise received without the help of Extension and the existence of the economic development organization. The EDC established a Revolving Loan Fund that has now evolved to primarily provide low-interest loans to municipalities in the county to clean up buildings and downtowns. The organization has also functioned as a small business incubator in some circumstances. It once partnered with a local nonprofit to host programs targeted towards low-income residents hoping to start their own businesses. Ms. Cole has also worked with MCEDC to conduct one-on-one counseling with small business owners and help direct them to resources with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

Vision for the Future
Some have questioned the benefits of a countywide economic development organization, but MCEDC believes this is the best way forward for Montgomery County. Ms. Cole describes this strategy as “High Tide Raises All Ships.” When business comes to a place it is rare that all employees live and spend money in that same place. For example, one large employer in Litchfield discovered that one-third of their employees lived in Litchfield, one-third lived around Montgomery County, and one-third lived outside of the county. Failure to support that employer would have negative effects for people across the county. Therefore, MCEDC’s vision for the future is to “raise the tide” across the county and help attract or support business wherever possible.

Lessons for Success
Growing Your Own
Montgomery County learned to face that fact that economic development is no longer simply “smokestack chasing” or trying to attract investment from outside the community. Rather, efforts are more effective when focused on helping existing businesses thrive and grow or helping to support opportunities that come from within the county.

Adapt with Change
Economic development is also typically concerned with Interstate access as the means for connectivity and new investment. MCEDC is rethinking this approach and finding ways in which the Internet can be the new Interstate. It is important to be able to adapt with changing times and find ways to harness potential opportunities.