

DeKalb County Thriving!

DEKALB COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT VISION
FRAMEWORK 2015-2020



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DeKalb County's Economic Development Vision Framework

INTRODUCTION

In October 2015, a process began to create an economic development vision framework and establish county-wide priorities for DeKalb County for the next five years. Five entities with a stake in the economic vitality of the County co-sponsored this process and they include: [DeKalb County Government](#), the [DeKalb County Economic Development Corporation \(DCEDC\)](#), the DeKalb County Community Foundation ([DCCF](#)), Northern Illinois University's ([NIU's](#)) [Center for Governmental Studies \(CGS\)](#), and the [DeKalb County Farm Bureau](#).

Understanding the economic development needs of the County's 14 unique [communities](#) and how each community views its assets, challenges, and priorities is key to developing a meaningful vision. Because the communities are linked economically, it was important to identify demographic trends throughout the County and present those in a meaningful way for those participating in the visioning process.

DEKALB COUNTY DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

DeKalb County, Illinois, is located just 60 miles west of Lake Michigan with a 2015 U.S. Census estimated population of 104,352. The demographic trends shared during a "State of the County" economic development summit held in November 2015 pointed to numerous economic development opportunities for all communities in the county.

Since the recession (between 2010 and 2015), DeKalb County employment has mirrored statewide growth at about 9 percent, somewhat lower than the national growth rate of 12 percent. Employment growth has largely been driven by a number of higher growth industry clusters. These clusters include health care (ambulatory health care services, hospitals), manufacturing (machinery, electrical equipment), agriculture (crop and animal production), and truck transportation. Growth in these clusters has led to high demand for workers in occupations such as truck driving, nursing, speech and occupational therapy, and manufacturing sales. The unemployment rate in the county fell from about 10 percent in 2010 to 5 percent in 2015.

About 34,000 persons work in DeKalb County. Roughly half of these jobs are filled by county residents while the other half commute in from nearby counties. About 27,000 DeKalb County residents commute to jobs outside of the county, primarily traveling to the east. The demographics of the county are somewhat unique. Because of NIU students, the county has a relatively large number of 18-24 year old residents. Also, similar to other areas, there are growing numbers of retirees and near-retirees as the baby boom generation ages.

These characteristics present opportunities for the DeKalb County economy. The large number of out-commuting workers and the student population may represent an untapped labor source for potential employers in the county. Also, research has found that near-retirees, young women, and small farmers are associated with higher levels of entrepreneurship. DeKalb County may be able to tap into these populations to spur business growth.

DEKALB COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT VISIONING PROCESS

The sponsoring partners undertook a six-step process to ensure the visioning process was grounded in community input and offered several opportunities for resident and business participation. The ideas and recommendations from the communities participating in this process were integral to creating a vision that embraces county-wide priorities while honoring the qualities that make each community distinct. These steps included the following:

- 1. Advisory Council.** An advisory council was formed to guide the visioning process and ensure that all stakeholders had an opportunity to participate. A kick-off meeting was held in October 2015 to review the strategic visioning process, outcomes, opportunities for community involvement, and timeline.

DeKalb County Thriving! Advisory Council	
Name	Organization, Title
Paul Borek	DeKalb County Economic Development Corporation, Executive Director
Bob Brown	DeKalb County Board and Economic Development Committee
Gary Hanson	DeKalb County Administrator
Melissa Henriksen	NIU's Center for Governmental Studies, Research Associate
Kevin McArtor	Resource Bank, Commercial Advisor
Greg Millburg	DeKalb County Farm Bureau, Manager
Mark Pietrowski	DeKalb County Board Chair, Associate Director of External Programming, NIU College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Brian Richard	NIU's Center for Governmental Studies, Assistant Director
Diana Robinson	NIU's Center for Governmental Studies, Director
Mary Supple	DeKalb County Economic Development Coordinator
Daniel Templin	DeKalb County Community Foundation, Executive Director
Anita Zurbrugg	DeKalb County Community Foundation, Program Director

- 2. Review of Recent Initiatives.** CGS reviewed existing strategic planning documents for DeKalb communities and other material addressing recent economic development efforts within the County. These documents were used as background for community input forums and interviews.
- 3. Kick-off Summit.** On November 17, 2015, the process of creating a vision for DeKalb County's economic development future was launched with the broader community. A morning and evening interactive 90-minute "summit" was held at the DeKalb County Farm Bureau to share the "State of the County" and gather input from participants on the overall assets of the County. Overall themes generated at the kick-off summit included the following.

THEMES IDENTIFIED AT THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT KICK-OFF SUMMIT

- ❖ DeKalb County is a great place to live, work, and play because of its people, competitive location, and business climate. However, it lacks a consistent identity and cohesive marketing effort. To attract and retain businesses, residents, students, and tourists in the county, a dynamic and consistent message is needed that all communities can promote.
- ❖ More good-paying job opportunities are needed throughout DeKalb County to encourage younger residents and families to stay in the area.
- ❖ DeKalb County can build on current assets and encourage a “Grow Your Own” environment anchored by three pillars: student retention, strategically important industries such as manufacturing and agriculture, and a collaborative business environment.
- ❖ NIU and higher education are an asset to the County and many community outreach efforts are underway. However, a greater effort should be made to reach smaller communities that have fewer resources but offer opportunities to students and businesses.
- ❖ Thriving, resilient communities are built on innovation and entrepreneurship in all sectors. The County and its partners need to create a built environment that fosters entrepreneurship at all ages and across all industries.

4. Stakeholder Engagement. After holding the kick-off summit in November, the advisory council invited every municipality in DeKalb County to participate in developing the County’s economic development vision and priority areas. Several avenues for participation were offered:

- a. One-on-one interviews.** CGS conducted one-on-one interviews with elected and appointed officials, business leaders, employees, students, and/or residents.
- b. Community forums.** CGS facilitated a number of town hall-type community forums to understand each community’s economic development assets, needs, opportunities, and resources.
- c. County-wide electronic survey.** Anyone who lives, works, or attends school in DeKalb County could complete the online survey which was publicized via local newspapers, the County’s website, and several press releases.

5. Draft Vision and Priority Areas. Based on the review of recent initiatives, community input, and feedback from the advisory council, a draft vision and priority areas document was prepared for distribution and comment.

6. DeKalb County Thriving! Summit. On May 24, 2016, after six months of community data collection, the draft vision and priority areas were shared at a summit held at the Farm Bureau.

VISION FRAMEWORK

Through the various outreach efforts described above, hundreds of ideas about the economic development future of DeKalb County were envisioned. A clear, one-sentence vision emerged from this process:

“People + Place + Partnership Make DeKalb County Thrive!”

Additionally, three primary economic development assets and six priority opportunities to leverage those assets were identified. The three main economic development assets are:

- 1. People** - The County’s greatest asset. They share a solid work ethic and actively support their communities. Employers small and large provide jobs, invest in their workers, and improve the overall quality of life in the County.
- 2. Place** - Many of the County’s assets are tied to its unique communities and strategic location. These include educational resources such as NIU and Kishwaukee College; local and state parks; proximity to Chicago; leading industries in manufacturing, agriculture, logistics and distribution, and health care; and available land for development.
- 3. Partnership** - This visioning process is grounded in the idea of creating alignment and collaboration among the communities. Residents and elected officials alike were reassured to hear that communities throughout the County were experiencing similar challenges that will require partnerships and learning networks to effectively address needed changes.

Six priority opportunities for the County to leverage these assets were identified. They are listed in the table below and explained further in the next section, including specific examples that were provided in the community forums and/or online survey. The initiatives currently underway and existing organizations under each priority are not exhaustive.

Asset	Priorities
People:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Developing local leadership2. Helping connect people to jobs
Place:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">3. Retaining, expanding, and attracting business4. Improving infrastructure
Partnership:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">5. Supporting community economic planning and coordination6. Identifying and pursuing funding opportunities

Priority 1: Developing local leadership.

The success of community development efforts often rests with the leadership of local citizens, volunteers, and business members. An important County role is to foster effective and transparent communication, community engagement, and collaboration across communities.

Initiatives Currently Underway in the County:

- NIU Center for Governmental Studies [Civic Leadership Academy](#) and [Midwest Leadership Institute](#)
- [DeKalb Chamber of Commerce](#) Leadership Academy
- DeKalb Leadership Collaborative
- [Youth Engaged in Philanthropy](#)
- [DeKalb County Non-profit Partnership](#) Board Excellence [Program](#)

Additional Suggestions from Community Participants:

- a. Offer workshops for elected and volunteer community leaders throughout the county.
- b. Create a learning network for exchanging effective practices, celebrating successes, and sharing challenges.
- c. Explore hiring a shared Economic/Community Developer for smaller communities.
- d. Engage NIU's Civic Leadership Academy and other professional development resources to help train local leadership, both volunteer and elected.
- e. Encourage transparency and strengthen communication between County officials, the communities, and residents/businesses.
- f. Work with each community to develop a specific vision for locating future businesses, guidelines for harmonizing their appearance, and promoting adherence to those visions.

Priority 2: Helping connect people to jobs.

Ensuring that residents of DeKalb County have the skills and knowledge to access good jobs that pay a living wage is fundamental to the health and vitality of all our communities. Many DeKalb County residents have a solid work ethic on which to build and only need technical skill training or career visioning assistance to find gainful employment. An employment-ready workforce is also a top consideration for attracting new business and helping existing businesses expand in the County.

Initiatives Currently Underway in the County:

- DeKalb County Community Foundation [CommunityWorks](#) Grants
- [DeKalb Ogle Workforce Consortium](#)
- [NIU Career Fairs](#)
- Kishwaukee College [Job Fairs](#)
- [Illinois Work-Net Center](#)

Additional Suggestions from Community Participants:

- a. Develop soft skills training and outreach programs to help unemployed and under-employed workers.

- b. Expand apprenticeship training opportunities.
- c. Create business incubators with training focused on entrepreneurship and innovation that can be “taken on the road” to all communities and/or have locations in several communities.
- d. Assess the diverse training needs, challenges, and opportunities in the County and encourage alignment between the skill needs of employers and the education and training offered in the region.
- e. Create a County-wide high school mentoring program with small business and industry. Encourage internships, mentorships, or other part-time positions for teens and adults who need to learn life skills.
- f. Explore creating a County-wide program for student-run businesses.
- g. Encourage manufacturing careers that offer good wages and opportunities for advancement.
- h. Support entrepreneurial opportunities in technology, local foods production and processing, and in the arts.
- i. Help communities and NIU, Kishwaukee College, and other training/education organizations connect to create a robust County-wide network. These entities are knowledgeable about entrepreneurship, innovation, business and marketing, and other areas of benefit to communities and businesses of all sizes.

Priority 3: Retaining, expanding, and attracting business and industry

Commercial and industrial enterprises shape the local business climate, provide jobs, and improve the community’s overall quality of life. There is effective County-wide support from the [DCEDC](#) for important industries in the region. However, many smaller communities expressed interest in a County-wide program focused on attracting, retaining, and growing new small businesses suited to their areas. This could include sharing leads, improving infrastructure (Priority 4), focusing on entrepreneurship and innovation, and marketing.

Initiatives Underway in the County:

- DCEDC
- Municipal Chambers of Commerce
- Municipal Business Associations
- [DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau](#)
- [DeKalb County Business Incubator](#)
- [DeKalb County Enterprise Zone](#)

Additional Suggestions from Community Participants:

- a. Identify and address barriers to business growth and economic diversification in all communities. Create training modules that address business planning, financial planning, expansion, succession, marketing, and others useful topics.
- b. Create a County-wide “Small Business of the Year” award to celebrate community businesses that contribute to the local, regional, and state economies.
- c. Create or enhance a County-wide asset inventory that is updated annually. It could include community anchor institutions, businesses, natural resources, etc.

- d. Streamline and update policy and permit application processes to ensure new and expanding businesses have a clear path for moving forward.
- e. Facilitate business access to local, state, and federal programs to improve their competitiveness.
- f. Develop or enhance a comprehensive County-wide tourism campaign that highlights attractions such as natural amenities and agri-tourism (e.g., wine, whiskey, and beer tours).
- g. Create or enhance mentor programs for new businesses.
- h. Develop a succession program for retiring business owners to help communities connect entrepreneurs to viable business options.
- i. Help smaller communities determine if businesses such as grocery stores, pharmacies, and other retail are viable and create a plan to recruit needed services. This may include addressing façade issues, building rehabilitation, or zoning needs.
- j. Publicize how businesses can benefit from the County's Enterprise Zone designation and other incentives.
- k. Offer innovation grants for senior-run businesses.

Priority 4: Improving infrastructure

Like mature communities across the nation, many municipalities in DeKalb County struggle with aging infrastructure. Of particular concern are many vacant or dilapidated buildings that, with financial assistance, could be renovated or demolished to make way for new development and lack of readily accessible public transportation options. Further, as the economic recovery continues, many communities lack the infrastructure needed to support growth opportunities resulting from the Chicago economy's continued westward development.

Initiatives Underway in the County:

- [DeKalb County Greenways and Trails Program](#)
- [DeKalb Sycamore Area Transit Study](#)
- [Voluntary Action Center](#)
- [Huskie Bus Line](#)
- Community-wide façade programs for beautification

Additional Suggestions from Community Participants:

- a. Help communities plan for growth including how to pursue new funding sources for infrastructure replacement or expansion, e.g., new water tower or sewer system.
- b. Offer training in management, marketing and other business areas to small business owners.
- c. Facilitate access to high-speed Internet.
- d. Establish a pool of matching funds for renovation or demolition programs.
- e. Create a fully connected and effective County-wide pedestrian and bicycle transit area.
- f. Consistently enforce building and zoning codes throughout the County and communicate why decisions are made (e.g., agriculture zoning and boundary agreements) and the financial and non-financial impacts.
- g. Create county-wide façade matching grant program or help communities create their own.

- h. Improve public transportation system throughout the County.
- i. Establish a small business loan program including micro-business lending.

Priority 5: Supporting community economic visioning and coordination

Efforts to identify, preserve, and enhance the distinct character of each community in DeKalb County must occur in concert with the County-wide economic development vision. Many communities want to continue their own strategic visioning initiatives after the County has completed its visioning work and look to the County for a framework and guidance. While funding and time are an issue for communities, requiring an update every one or two years will keep their visions fresh and accountable. The DeKalb County Community Foundation will be making funding available for planning and implementation activities in the fall of 2016.

Initiative currently underway in the County:

- DeKalb County Community Foundation Community [Economic Development Grant Program](#)

Additional Suggestions from Community Participants:

- a. Conduct or support strategic planning workshops for each community in the County.
- b. Create an online toolkit for communities, including strategic planning aids.
- c. Provide funding for strategic planning efforts, periodic updates, and alignment with County visioning.
- d. Identify a County liaison to help coordinate strategic planning efforts and identify metrics for success that the County can use for promotional purposes.
- e. Create a dashboard for the County where all communities can update plans and progress.
- f. Help communities enhance their economic development opportunities by collaborating with each other for tourism related activities. For example, one community could create weekend packages around lake activities and partner with another community to provide hotel rooms.
- g. Partner with communities to identify and creatively address blighted or dilapidated areas that cannot be rehabilitated or repurposed without collaboration. This could include empty storefronts, restaurants, warehousing, and others.
- h. Create or enhance the County's online presence for topics that affect all communities such as zoning, taxes, transportation, etc. This could be a place where studies, press releases, opinion pieces, hot topics, questions, and blogs are shared.

Priority 6: Identifying and pursuing funding opportunities

Many communities are challenged to identify funding to support their community and economic development goals. County-wide funding enabled through grants, crowdfunding, and community and innovation funds would allow for more impact, prevent duplicative or competing efforts, and help engage other partners in the work. Supporting community-identified goals will help maintain unique niches while contributing to the economic vitality of the entire County.

Initiative Currently Underway in the County:

- DeKalb County Community Foundation Community Economic Development Grant Program

Additional Suggestions from Community Participants:

- a. Retain a grant writer to help identify and help prepare proposals that could be shared by all DeKalb County communities.
- b. Explore a crowd-funding model in which communities raise money for an economic development project and the County could match the funding.
- c. Identify resources to enhance quality of life throughout the County: expanding bike paths, improving sidewalks, supporting senior community visioning, and increasing Farmers' Markets and local foods Initiatives Underway and Existing Organizations.

NEXT STEPS

Two additional steps will be undertaken to complete the visioning process and help DeKalb County communities align their planning with this framework. The first step is to reach out to the leadership of other important County partners who, for a variety of reasons, did not have an opportunity to directly contribute their ideas. After their input has been gathered, this document will be revised and finalized. The partners will be engaged in the next phase of planning and implementation.

A final step is to make resources available to communities that wish to conduct their own local planning efforts and build on this County economic development vision. The DeKalb County Community Foundation has developed a DeKalb County Community Economic Development Grant Program that will make up to \$20,000 available to communities and the County to organize and take action toward their own economic development opportunities. This initiative will be announced on September 1, 2016.