

DeKalb County Thriving! Summit

When: May 24, 2016, 8:00 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.

(Join us for a light breakfast at 7:45 a.m.)

Where: DeKalb County Farm Bureau, 1350 W Prairie Dr, Sycamore, IL

AGENDA

- I. Welcome, Mark Pietrowski, DeKalb County Board Chairperson
- II. Overview of Visioning Process, Melissa Henriksen, CGS-NIU Research Associate
- III. Share Draft Vision and Priority Areas Based on Community Input, Melissa Henriksen
- IV. Open Mic- Suggestions and Questions
- V. Updates and Next Steps, Mark Pietrowski, Kevin McArtor, and Anita Zurbrugg, Program, DeKalb County Community Foundation



Draft Summary

DeKalb County Economic Development Vision: DeKalb County Thriving!

Hundreds of ideas about an economic development vision for DeKalb County were offered through the initial summit, community forums, and on-line survey. These ideas have been summarized into a vision and framework that may be used by the County as it develops its strategic plan.

Draft Vision:

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

This framework is built on consensus around supporting and marketing three primary economic development assets and six priority opportunities to leverage those assets. Three main economic development assets were identified:

1. **People** - are the County’s greatest asset. They share a solid work ethic and actively support their communities. In particular, 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 Northern Illinois University 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.

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 or the online survey.

Asset	Priorities
People:	1. Developing local leadership 2. Helping connect people to jobs
Place	3. Retaining, expanding, and attracting business 4. Improving infrastructure
Partnership:	5. Supporting community economic planning and coordination 6. Identifying and pursuing funding opportunities

Priority 1: Developing local leadership.

Effective leadership is vitally important to small towns and rural communities. The success of community development efforts often rests with the leadership of local citizens, volunteers, and organized business members. DeKalb County communities need effective and transparent communication, community engagement, and collaboration across communities to thrive.

Suggestions from the Community

- a. Offer workshops for elected and volunteer community leaders throughout the county.
- b. Create a learning network that includes best practices, celebrates successes, and shares challenges.
- c. Explore hiring a shared Economic/Community Developer for smaller communities.
- d. Engage NIU’s Civic Leadership Academy or 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 plan for locating future businesses and guidelines for harmonizing their appearance, and promote adherence to those plans.



- g. Build/improve bike lanes and pedestrianized zones between Sycamore and DeKalb, and around higher-density areas.

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 every community. Many DeKalb County residents have a solid work ethic on which to build and only need technical skill training or career planning assistance to help find gainful employment. An employment-ready workforce is also a top consideration for attracting new business and helping existing businesses expand in the County.

Suggestions from the Community:

- a. Develop soft skills training and outreach programs to help unemployed and under-employed workers.
- b. Create accessible business incubators with training that can be “taken on the road” to all communities.
- c. Help align the training needs of employers with the education being provided in the region.
- d. Encourage exploration of manufacturing careers that offer a livable wage and opportunities for advancement.
- e. Internships, mentorships, or other part-time positions for teens and adults who need to learn life skills. Possibly creating a County-side program for student-run businesses.
- f. There are a lot of entrepreneurial opportunities in technology, local foods production and processing, and in the arts that the County can support.

Priority 3: Retaining, expanding, and attracting business.

Existing businesses in any community shape the local business climate, provide jobs, and improve the community’s overall quality of life. County-wide support from the DeKalb County Economic Development Corporation has been effective for its industrial-focused responsibilities. Many smaller communities expressed interest in a County-wide program focused on helping smaller, local businesses stay and grow and attracting new businesses suited to their areas. This could include sharing leads, enhancing infrastructure (Priority 4), and marketing.

Suggestions from the Community:

- a. Identify and address barriers to business growth and economic diversification in all communities.
- b. Create a County-wide “Small Business of the Year” award to express appreciation to community businesses for their contribution to the local, regional, and state economies.
- c. Streamline and update policy and application processes to ensure new and expanding businesses have a clear path for moving forward without excessive or antiquated regulations.
- d. Facilitate business access to local, state, and federal programs to improve their competitiveness.
- e. Develop a comprehensive County-wide marketing campaign that highlights tourism assets (e.g. wine, whiskey, and beer tour) as well as natural amenities, and industry based such as agri-tourism.
- f. Create or enhance mentor programs for new businesses.
- g. Develop a succession program for retiring business owners to help communities connect entrepreneurs to viable business options.
- h. Help smaller communities determine if businesses such as grocery stores, pharmacies, and other retail outlets are viable and create a plan for recruitment. This may include addressing façade issues, building rehabilitation, or zoning needs.
- i. Publicize how business can benefit from the County’s Enterprise Zone designation and other incentives.
- j. Offer innovation grants for senior run-businesses.

Priority 4: Improving infrastructure

As with 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. 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.



Suggestions from the Community:

- a. Help communities plan for growth including how to pursue new sources of financial support for infrastructure replacement or expansion, e.g. new water tower or sewer system.
- b. Provide management, marketing, and other areas of training consistent with the needs of small businesses.
- c. Facilitate access to high-speed Internet possibly providing County-wide Internet.
- d. Establish a pool of matching funds for structural rehabilitation 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 a façade matching grant program.
- h. Improve public transportation system throughout the County. Explore bringing the Metra rail back to DeKalb.
- i. Establish a small business loan program.

Priority 5: Supporting community economic planning and coordination

Efforts to identify, preserve, and enhance the distinct character of each community in DeKalb County must be undertaken in concert with the County-wide economic development plan. Many communities want to continue their individual strategic planning initiatives after the County has completed its planning efforts 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 plans fresh and accountable. The DeKalb County Community Foundation will be making funding available for planning and implementation activities in the fall of 2016.

Suggestions from the Community:

- a. Conduct or support strategic planning workshops for each community in the County.
- b. Create an online tool box for communities, include strategic planning aids.
- c. Provide funding for strategic planning efforts, periodic updates, and alignment with County planning.
- d. Identify a liaison at the County level 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 (i.e. Shabbona wants to create weekend packages around Lake Activities and could partner with DeKalb hotels for guests. More tourism may create a demand for a hotel in Shabbona).
- g. Partner with communities to identify and innovatively 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 the communities such as zoning, taxes, transportation, etc. This could be a place where studies, press releases, and opinion pieces are shared, hot topics, questions, blogs, etc.

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 create a way to 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.

Suggestions from the Community:

- a. Retain a grant-writer to help identify and help write grants that could be shared by all DeKalb County communities.
- b. Explore a crowd-funding model in which the communities raised money for an economic development project and the County could match the funding up to a certain amount.
- c. Identify resources to enhance quality of life throughout the County in a range of areas: expanding bike paths, improving sidewalks, supporting senior community planning, and increasing Farmer's Markets/local foods.

