

# Columbia County Placemaking Initiative



Final Report  
October 2022 to September 2024



Visit [ourplacecolumbia.com](http://ourplacecolumbia.com) for additional information about the project

# Placemaking Plan

Local municipalities, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and residents collaboratively created a placemaking plan facilitated and compiled by Hailstone Economic. The purpose of the plan was to capture the collective imagination and aspirations of local stakeholders and to structure those ideas into practical projects that will have a noticeable impact on the quality of life throughout the county.

The planning process began with deep listening to understand Columbia County's unique assets, resources, needs, and desires. This included:

- Listening sessions that engaged stakeholders focused on northern municipalities, southern municipalities, downtown Berwick, downtown Bloomsburg, arts and culture, and housing
- Two community cafés open to the entire community
- A partner survey to assess local capacity and professional development needs and priorities
- A community survey to understand local residents' needs and dreams

Everything we learned through this process was organized into a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) that was shared with all participants who provided corrections and additions. Hailstone Economic, in partnership with Commonwealth University-Bloomsburg, also collected, analyzed, and interpreted secondary data to further identify and understand community needs.

The information and ideas gleaned through this process were used to develop a draft placemaking plan. The final placemaking plan focuses on five areas: Coblentz Corner; Broadband Expansion; Council; and Berwick Park Improvements.



# Seed Grants



Two seed grants of \$7,500 were given to local placemaking projects organized by Berwick Arts Association and Berwick Theater and Center for Community Arts in response to a competitive application process. Thank you to Boyle Construction for contributing \$5,000 toward these grants.

**Berwick Arts Association** worked with local artists to visually designate the new Arts District in downtown Berwick. Three artists were selected through an open competition: Anna Maffei, Rita Millard, and Dave Stabley.

**Berwick Theater and Center for Community Arts** is providing an ongoing opportunity for Columbia County residents to share their stories about life in Columbia County a new project called Chatspiration. These stories will be shared on a dedicated website to help people get to know each other, building connection and community.



# Housing Plan and Employer-Sponsored First-Time Homebuyer Toolkit



Central Susquehanna Board of Realtors® and Community Strategies Group took the lead on creating a housing plan for Columbia, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, and Union Counties. The plan was developed through a series of workshops and focus groups that engaged real estate professionals, nonprofit organizations, and municipalities.

The plan has four goals:

Goal 1: Improve local knowledge about housing needs and solutions

Goal 2: Design and deliver innovative programs to address housing needs

Goal 3: Improve local housing infrastructure

Goal 4: Expand local capacity to address housing needs through funding and partnerships

In addition to Central Susquehanna Board of Realtors® and Community Strategies Group, several partners will take the lead on plan implementation including Susquehanna Valley United Way and Eastern PA Coalition for Housing.

Employer-assisted housing programs were started by Fannie Mae in 1991. They include any type of employer-funded assistance to their employees to assist with rental costs and/or purchase a home – typically the employee’s first home. Community Strategies Group and the Columbia Montour Chamber of Commerce will partner to educate local employers about offering an employer-sponsored first-time homebuyer program. An Employer Toolkit was created to educate employers about the benefits of employer-sponsored housing for employers, employees, and communities, options for structuring a program, examples of employer-sponsored housing programs in other areas of Pennsylvania, and information about supports available to help employers start and operate a program.

# Berwick Master Parks Plan

Omnes, a woman-owned landscape architecture firm based in Easton, PA, was selected to create a plan for eight parks managed by Berwick Borough. The plan centers accessibility and the arts to ensure that Berwick's parks are vibrant and inclusive.



## Funder Roundtable Event

On October 19, 2023, a funder roundtable event was held at The HUB in Bloomsburg. The purpose of the event was to connect local municipalities, nonprofit organizations, and businesses with funding opportunities, to build the capacity of local organizations to effectively engage with funders, to help funders better understand the needs of Columbia County, and to pair projects in the new placemaking plan with funding opportunities. Each funder explained the programs they offer. Several projects were pitched and everyone in attendance had the opportunity to ask questions and network.

### Participating Funders



# The Arts and Culture Alliance

In March 2023, a group of artists and arts and culture organizations gathered in Berwick for a community listening session about the arts. From that discussion, a decision was made to pursue forming an arts council for Columbia County and that project emerged into what is now known as The Arts and Culture Alliance.

The Arts and Culture Alliance generates excitement for the economic and cultural impact of the arts and create a vibrant, flourishing arts and culture community by:

- being a champion for the transformative power of the arts and culture;
- connecting, engaging, supporting, and facilitating collaboration among people and organizations who care about arts and culture;
- making art and culture accessible to new audiences; and
- acting as a catalyst for the integration of arts and culture throughout Columbia and Montour counties and beyond.

An Arts and Culture Alliance released an Arts and Economic Development Toolkit at an event on June 20, 2024. The toolkit is located at [letsloveart.org](https://letsloveart.org) and includes:

- Interviews with representatives from GoggleWorks Center for the Arts in Reading, Rivers of Steel in Homestead, Luzerne County Art Advisory Board, and Metris Art Consulting in Easton
- An economic impact analysis of arts and culture in Columbia and Montour counties, released in partnership with Columbia Montour Chamber of Commerce and Columbia-Montour Visitors Bureau
- Links to additional data and resources related to art and economic development



# Professional Development Workshops

Hailstone Economic staff facilitated 23 professional development workshops and classes that were open to all local residents, nonprofit organizations, municipalities, and businesses. The following topics were covered:

- Fundraising 101
- Marketing, Promotion, and Outreach for Nonprofits
- Marketing and Fundraising Planning
- Storytelling for Grant Proposals
- Leveraging Funds and Project Sustainability
- Getting Government Grants
- Pitch Your Project
- Grant Administration Strategies
- Finding Funding and Creative Financing Strategies
- Social Media: Simplified!
- The Business of Running a Small Nonprofit
- Recruiting and Engaging Volunteers
- Sustainable and Equitable Land Use Policies
- Economic Development 101
- Public-Private Partnerships
- Connect and Communicate: Building Bridges through Effective Communication
- Color Your World: A Workshop Based on True Colors Theory
- Effective Collaboration Strategies
- Facilitation Skills: Listening and Learning Together
- Finding and Using Community Data

After the workshops ended, the slide decks were placed in an online learning center so that the entire community could access these resources.

# Technical Assistance

The organizations, municipalities, and businesses. The type of assistance provided included:

- Strategic planning
- Market study to identify uses for a new community facility
- Identifying funding opportunities
- Social media planning
- Marketing and outreach materials
- Teambuilding
- Research and data analysis
- Writing
- Entering into a Memorandum of Understanding
- Grants.gov registration

Hailstone Economic also provided insight and assistance, and/or facilitated connections and communication, for the following programs:

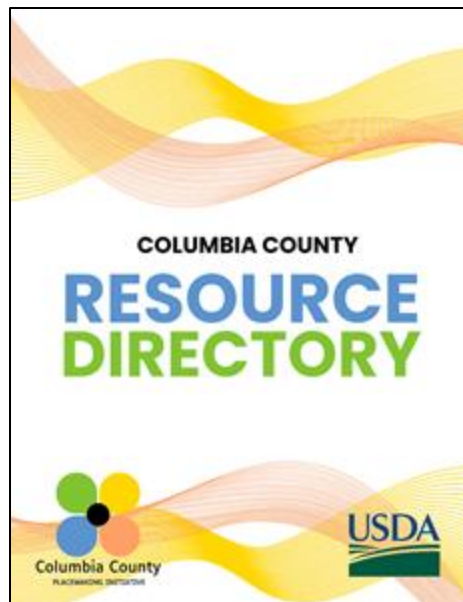
- U.S. Department of Agriculture – Strategic Economic and Community Development, Community Facilities, and Rural Business Development Grants
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development – Economic Development Initiatives
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – Brownfields Program
- Appalachian Regional Commission - Area Development Grants
- National Endowment for the Arts - Challenge America
- PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources – Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund
- PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency - COVID-SFR Local Law Enforcement Support
- PA Office of the Budget - Redevelopment Capital Assistance Program
- PA Humanities Council – Wingspan
- PA Council on the Arts – Creative Communities Initiative
- PA Department of Community and Economic Development - Neighborhood Assistance Program, HOME-ARP, and COVID-19 ARPA PA Multi-Purpose Community Facilities
- FHLBank Pittsburgh – Blueprint Communities®



# Community Connections

Through various meetings and events, local organizations connected with funders, new board members, and new partners. The Hailstone Economic team hosted Your Questions: Answered! at The HUB at Mulberry Mill on May 22, 2024. At this event, representatives from municipalities, nonprofits, and businesses had access to three members of the Hailstone Economic team with expertise in public policy, zoning and land use, community and economic development, community and regional planning, housing, program development, grant application and administration, fundraising, and marketing and outreach. Over lunch, the group discussed several topics including: how to write an effective grant application; supporting community-building initiatives; zoning for multi-use facilities operate; identifying sponsors; navigating government resources; bringing donors together; engaging local healthcare institutions.

Hailstone Economic created a Columbia County Resource Guide to share up-to-date information about local programs, services, and organizations with the community. The guide was published in August 2024.



# Reflections

## **What have been the most challenging or unexpected aspects of this project?**

It took a while for the many partners to buy into the project. We found that bringing partners together for networking and professional development during the implementation phase helped to build trust by connecting them with each other and providing our team with more visibility in the community. Community members took a survey at the end of the process to share what they experienced from being part of the project. 67% met new people in their community and 60% developed or expanded their knowledge.

We encountered significant resistance from a few members of the community to this project. We had to balance competing interests with creating equitable opportunities for participation.

USDA staff had limited involvement with this project. While they attended many community meetings, we did not work collaboratively to identify and address community needs or to engage partners. It would also have been helpful for there to be structured communication and resource sharing among current and past cooperators. It was surprising that USDA invested significant resources into Columbia County without these complementary elements in place. We appreciate the value that was contributed by the housing program staff.

**What advice would you give to other organizations planning a similar project? You should include strengths and limitations of the program. If an innovative approach was used successfully, you should describe the approach in detail so that other organizations might consider replication in their areas.**

The project started to gain a lot of momentum in the seventh quarter. We identified key partners, such as the United Way, Chamber of Commerce, and local community foundation, to support projects and carry them forward past the two-year RPIC project. We appreciate the opportunity to provide seed grants to community-led projects, the multi-jurisdictional and multi-sectoral approach to the planning process, and the opportunity for projects in the plan to qualify for priority points with USDA RD programs under section 6401 of the Farm Bill (SECD).

Facilitated communication among cooperators and more robust communication with USDA RD Innovation Center staff would have strengthened the project tremendously.

This project provided stakeholders with multiple opportunities to get involved and share their ideas including surveys, world cafés, listening sessions, roundtable discussions, and networking and professional development events. We worked behind the scenes to connect organizations with each other and to funding and other capacity building opportunities.

**If you had the opportunity, what would you have done differently?**

If we could go back in time, we would have identified community champions for various project earlier in the process and working collaboratively with them through an information written agreement to begin joint implementation of projects in the plan. This would facilitate a more seamless transition to the community.