

Pierce and Madison County Nebraska

USDA Rural Placemaking Innovative Challenge Grant 2020-2022

Creating public-private partnerships, capturing talent and funding from existing rural champions, agencies, and partners to deliver assistance with lasting impact is the focus of Pierce County Economic Development (PCED) and Plainview Economic Development (PED) Executive Director, Susan Norris. With the help of collaborative partners cities located in Pierce County have experienced success in revitalizing their communities.

A smart growth strategy was developed by Plainview Economic Development (PED) in 2017 to help address its declining business and housing environment and to develop strategies for growth and prosperity. In the previous ten years little housing or business activity had occurred in the community, storefronts were empty, housing was deteriorating, and there was a noticeable divide between the residents and city administration.

PED focused on bridging the divide between the city and its residents and encouraged the city to adopt an entrepreneurial approach to economic and community development. New collaborative partnerships were formed with the University of Nebraska, the Center for Rural Affairs, Pierce County Economic Development, USDA Rural Business Development (USDA-RD), Northeast Nebraska Economic Development District (NENDD), Lower Elkhorn Natural Resources District (LENRD), the Nebraska Department of Economic Development (NDED), and more.

To accomplish their goals PED connected with UNL Rural Prosperity staff to implement the Entrepreneurial Community Activation Process (ECAP) planning process. ECAP provided a framework of education, research, and engagement to guide the community through surveys and discussions that provided the Plainview community opportunity to gain a better understanding of resident perspectives and aspirations. An important part of the ECAP process is its strong invitation to residents to help shape the future of Plainview- both is social capital as well as its built environment.

To determine community goals residents, alumni and all 9-12th graders were asked to complete a comprehensive survey and embark on a six- month visioning/planning process. Community members explored community strengths, values, and characteristics of a successful entrepreneurial community. By the end of the process the citizens of Plainview had developed goals and action plans based on their highest priorities- all centered around developing an entrepreneurial culture for Plainview.

Bringing the community together to establish a common vision was paramount to the success of Plainview. As a result of their holistic ECAP experience, Plainview supported and rallied around ambitious and challenging goals for growth that included a well-coordinated economic development strategy, housing, a future vision for the community, leadership and the enhancement of community amenities for resident retention and attraction.

By leveraging community assets with outside resources, both technical and financial, multiple projects have been initiated, completed, or are on-going in efforts to sustain growth. Today, the community has increased its population, built new homes, welcomed 26 new business owners, created 90 new jobs,

embarked on a downtown revitalization project, upgraded the majority of community amenities, and reflects a culture of change.

In 2020, PCED was one of five organizations nationwide to receive funds from the USDA RD Pilot Program- Rural Innovation Placemaking Challenge Grant (RPIC). PCED and its collaborative partners were interested in replicating the smart growth strategy developed for Plainview, NE in nine additional communities across the region. The grant would help those communities identify and plan goals- such as resident retention, smart economic growth, housing, placemaking, and broad band activities- more quickly while retaining their individual and distinctive rural character.

PCED partnered with Pierce and Madison Counties, Five Rule Planning, USDA RD and the University of Nebraska to deploy the ECAP process and utilize the community engagement to create comprehensive and tailored strategic plans for each community.

The communities of Plainview, Osmond, Pierce, and Hadar in Pierce County and Tilden, Battlecreek, Madison, Meadow Grove, and Newman Grove in Madison County were targeted for this program.

Each community went through the ECAP planning process with the University of Nebraska to identify their priority goals. Communities then partnered with PCED, USDA RD, NENEDD, Five Rule, and UNL to ensure the goals and priorities outlined during the process were achieved. Deliverables for the RPIC project include new comprehensive planning documents, goal prioritization and action steps, and a strategic planning document tailored to fit the conditions, goals, and priorities of each community, leading to a strengthened competitive position.

In recognition of these efforts, in 2021 the University of Nebraska Rural Prosperity Educators and Plainview/Pierce County Economic Development were recognized by the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) for their work with ECAP in the community of Plainview. The group received the National Award for Excellence in Community Development. They also received the Regional Award for Excellence in Community Development.

The City of Plainview was also recognized by Nebraska Governor Pete Rickett and presented the Governor's Showcase Community Award for community and economic development in April 2022.

RESULTS for Pierce County--

City of Plainview- Population 1,384- Economic Development Projects

- Received two USDA Rural Business Development Grants to create \$505,000 in local revolving loan funds. To date nearly \$300,000 has been expended for new business.
- City of Plainview received a \$43,000 CDBG grant for downtown planning activities
- City of Plainview was awarded \$435,000 CDBG downtown revitalization grant for building façade and revitalization activities.
- City of Plainview recognized as a rural Smart City for providing 1G to all homes and businesses within 8 miles of the community

Housing Projects-

- Plainview economic development board purchased land for \$25,000 and created a subdivision north of Plainview. Lots in the subdivision sell for \$1,000 each with a minimum purchase of three lots. Only lots for two houses remain.
- The city was awarded a \$500,000 NAHTF workforce housing grant to construct four townhomes.

Community Projects-

- Chilvers Park was upgraded with a \$165,000 new playground. Grants received for this project include \$30,000 from the Peter Kiewitt Foundation, \$22,500 from the LENRD, \$4,500 from the Cooper Foundation, \$30,000 from the community, the remainder was funded by the City
- Band Shell Park- the city installed new sand volleyball courts, trees, and upgraded picnic and bathroom shelters with the assistance of a \$22,500 grant from the LENRD
- Chilvers Park tennis court was turned into a multi- use court facility featuring a full-size tennis court, full size basketball court, two pickleball courts, and half basketball courts, and two four square courts. Funding was provided by the Plainview Brunswick Community Fund (PBCF, local fundraising efforts, and the LENRD.
- The City of Plainview in conjunction with the PBCF purchased ten acres of land north of the community for \$81,000. The land will be developed for housing and a new 35,000 square foot community center.

City of Pierce- population 1,780 Economic Development Projects

- The City of Pierce was awarded \$50,000 for downtown planning activities
- The City of Pierce received a \$385,000 CDBG grant for downtown street and infrastructure improvements
- The City of Pierce received a \$435,000 CDBG grant for building façade and downtown revitalization activities.

Housing Projects:

- The City of Pierce utilizing ARPA funding and partnering with non- profit organization PPF developed a new 20 lot subdivision west of town
- The City of Pierce was awarded a \$595,000 NAHTF workforce housing grant to construct six new duplexes west of town.
- The city is actively pursuing a \$500,000 NAHTF grant for the construction of a new apartment complex near the downtown area.

Community Projects:

- The city received a \$20,000 LENRD grant to improve the trail system in their main park, Gilman
- The city kicked off a \$300,000 campaign to improve Chilvers Park with new basketball and pickleball courts and a splash pad.

The City of Osmond- Population 800 – Economic Development Projects

- The city partnered with PCED and the Osmond Home Team to fund a \$30,000 downtown revitalization plan. The plan is a necessary component of the city’s future CDBG application for downtown revitalization funds
- The city has embarked on an ambitious plan to pave 30% of its roads for current and future development

Housing

- Private builders in the city have created 20 new apartment units for residents aged 55 and over.
- Four new townhomes constructed by private builders for workforce housing

Community Development

- Construction of \$1.1 million-dollar outdoor pool/aqua center in their main park
- Construction of community activity center at the high school

The Village of Hadar – population 292- Economic Development Projects

- The community is constructing an economic development plan for its downtown corridor and HWY 81 access to address its future needs.

Housing-

- The community is working on a 100-lot subdivision south of town

Community Projects-

- The Village added new RV Camping pads to its city park
- The Village upgraded its existing baseball and softball fields with new scoreboards and lighting.

The above communities in Pierce County have been focused on the goals and priorities identified by their respective communities during ECAP. As reflected by the projects they have already completed they have achieved much in two short years.

The communities in Madison County have completed their comprehensive planning process with Five Rule and are just beginning their ECAP process with UNL Rural Prosperity.

PCED, PED, UNL Rural Prosperity, Five Rule Planning, Pierce County and Madison County would like to thank the USDA RPIC committee for selecting our ambitious project for this opportunity. We believe we have developed an organic smart growth strategy for our region that will pay dividends for many years to come.

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

CHALLENGING: the most challenging aspect of this project was being able to provide each local government the attention that was necessary to ensure that the plans being completed would be implemented once the project ended. Coordinating communication across numerous agencies was also challenging. Eleven local governments and four agencies were involved in the project as well as FIVE RULE, a private vendor, the University of Nebraska at Kearney Center for Entrepreneurship and Rural Development, the University of Nebraska Community Vitality initiative and Pierce County Economic Development. The number of agencies involved was also combined with geographical barriers and COVID meeting protocols in place that required most of our project management meetings to happen online.

UNEXPECTED: another issue that impacted our schedule that we did not expect was the extra local communication that would be required to include residents in the community engagement portion of this project. Our project team was aware of the effectiveness and positive, lasting impact that the ECAP experience provided to communities. Communities that would have the opportunity to experience ECAP as part of this RPIC grant were not fully aware of this resource being offered to them. In the past, communities sought out ECAP; in this project, ECAP was an important resource being offered. The amount of time and extra communication needed to create local buy in for the ECAP was not something our team anticipated.

- What advice would you give to other organizations planning a similar project? If you had the opportunity, what would you have done differently?

This is absolutely a great way to create a comprehensive plan for a community. I would caution any project leader intending to complete this on a regional level should consider extending the project timeline to accommodate working with multiple communities.

The ECAP process developed and offered by UNL CV is a thorough and inclusive process and produced rich content that was applicable to identifying the infrastructure and land use needs and goals that are commonly identified within a comprehensive plan. The ECAP also sorted out those programs, projects, or policies that must be taken up the local government as well as identifying what must be addressed by a local, non-governmental organization. A comprehensive plan is two components: 1) community sentiment 2) land and infrastructure assets and deficiencies. ECAP provided #1 while FIVE RULE provided #2. In communities where buy-in was established, this method was effective and efficient and (most importantly) affordable for the client communities. Any community that has goals for growing but has not participated in land use or strategic planning for several years should be able to utilize this two-part process.

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