

Elevate Othello Placemaking Initiative

2022–2024 Final Report for the USDA Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge
Submitted by Rural Development Initiatives



Introduction

Over 2022–2024, a diverse, multi-interest, community collaborative led innovative placemaking efforts in the City of Othello, Washington, with an ultimate goal to improve quality of life indicators in the community. This project —*Elevate Othello*—was made possible through a Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) cooperative agreement with USDA Rural Development. It was led by Rural Development Initiatives (RDI) with support from USDA’s Washington State Office, the City of Othello, Adams County Development Corporation, Innovia Foundation, Avista Foundation, Umpqua Bank, and many community members and partner organizations. This report outlines the project design, describes key impacts, and reflects on project strengths and limitations.

Othello is a diverse and rural agricultural community located in central Washington State. A global leader in potato production, Othello has attracted migrant agricultural workers for decades. Today, the 8,878 total population includes a diverse mix of multi-generational and new Latino immigrants, with 79.7% of residents identifying as Hispanic and 39.2% under the age of 18 (US Census). Upon starting this project, Othello community leaders saw a strong need to develop diverse leaders and entrepreneurs, with a particular focus on uplifting the voices of the Latino and youth populations. It is in this context that community members came together through the *Elevate Othello* placemaking initiative.

RDI, a community and economic development organization with a mission to strengthen rural people, places, and economies in the Pacific Northwest, facilitated this project. For over 30 years, RDI has worked alongside 300+ communities to develop networks of skilled rural leaders, support resilient, equitable rural economies, increase rural access to resources, and encourage civic engagement at all levels of government. RDI designed *Elevate Othello* to guide the community through a sequence of steps that build upon one another.



This sequence is intended to inspire transformational change, resulting in deep impacts throughout the Othello community. Early impacts are showing up in several ways, as described throughout this report; but fundamentally, *Elevate Othello* has inspired greater community engagement, provided a shared vision for the future, and connected the community with funding and other resources to build this future.

“This is by far the best thing that has happened to Othello. We need more of it.”
~ Planning Team Member

Program Impacts

Step 1: Community Visioning

A core team of diverse and committed community members formed a planning team to help RDI coordinate focus groups, a survey, and local events in order to collect public opinion and ideas. This team was integral to engaging a diverse cross-section of stakeholders who represented Latino immigrant and youth priority populations. In total, they solicited input from 364 people, via 272 community survey responses in both English and Spanish (including 222 high school students); five focus groups with topics including food innovation, small business, and career pathways; a listening session specific to teens and young adults; and two public meetings. [Click here](#) to read a Northwest Public Broadcasting piece about teen and young adult involvement.

Impacts: The impact of this visioning process was to greatly increase community engagement and awareness, and reveal community priorities. The resulting *Elevate Othello* visioning report identified the following key themes based on community input as well as specific projects within these themes: Community Engagement and Leadership, Greater Opportunities for Teens and Young Adults, Career Pathways and Workforce Development, Business Environment and Opportunity, and Services to Support Every Community Member. The visioning report can be viewed in full [here](#).

“Community members had been experiencing a decrease in community involvement and few places to volunteer and lend support. Within the last year, there is an increase in people wanting more community-centered events and activities in Othello. Elevate Othello brought momentum to the community to raise up the leaders who were there but didn’t know where to plug in to grow their leadership skills and amplify them.” ~ Planning Team Member



Elevate Othello fostered collaboration and brought additional programming, resources, and funding to the community, and **Jose Garza**, Executive Director of the Othello Food Bank, recognized the value of it early on. “If it wasn’t for *Elevate Othello*, we wouldn’t have had that spark. That had a huge impact. Three years ago, the food bank lacked resources; the town didn’t have capacity or resources. Now there are three to four nonprofits stepping in to fill the need.” Jose saw the positive effect of *Elevate Othello* on the community as a whole and on his own work, with the food bank receiving more funding.

Elevate Othello exposed barriers, providing insight on how to overcome obstacles moving forward. Some resources are not accessible for everyone in the community, but other nonprofits see that they can step in to bridge that gap and help the community move forward. For Jose, this experience has been transformative. He was part of the *Elevate Othello* planning team, and his role with the food bank has shifted from direct, hands-on work to being more of a connector and coordinator. Other organizations are now finding ways to help, such as managing events like the food bank’s health fair.

Jose believes *Elevate Othello* planted the seed and the community is reaping the benefits. “Everyone has their own story. I have grown too. The Lighthouse Community Center started just before *Elevate Othello* and now it’s thriving. Sulema and Maria participated in the financial literacy training and went from taking the class, to partnering with a nonprofit, to starting their own nonprofit, MAS. The point was for us to plant the seed and help community members grow.” Through his role on the planning team, Jose attended conferences, and engaged with the Port, the city council, the mayor, and the county economic development department. “There’s funding and so much that Othello can do in terms of community priorities. We have power to make changes; in the future, we’ll see more support and bigger projects.” “We’re not done yet,” concludes Jose. “First we asked, ‘what is possible?’ Now it’s time to take off.”

Step 2: Learning Opportunities

In the second phase of activity, *Elevate Othello* engaged community members in several types of immersive and directed learning opportunities. RDI hosted a series of Peer Learning Journeys and delivered a full suite of leadership and entrepreneurial trainings, including Rural Community Leadership, *Empieza tu Negocio de Cuidado de Niños* (Start Your Childcare Business), *Inteligencia con su Dinero* (Money Smart), and the Mentor Match Teen Entrepreneur Program. These efforts expanded the vision of community members around what is possible in Othello, as well as built their capacity to move their priorities forward.

Peer Learning

Othello community members participated in physical and virtual peer learning “visits” of Northwest communities to experience placemaking success stories hands-on. They visited rural places where small food businesses, youth entrepreneurship, and Latino community involvement are thriving. These included:



- Trip to Oregon to visit Indy Commons, a community space and small business incubator in Independence, OR; CAPACES, a Latino-focused civic engagement, leadership, and small business development nonprofit in Woodburn, OR; and downtown Woodburn, home to nine sister organizations that develop highly collaborative projects that focus on community vitality (in-person);
- Peer Learning sessions with incubator spaces including Talent Maker City, a nonprofit makerspace in Talent, OR, and Bohemia Food Hub, a commercial kitchen and food business incubator that supports food entrepreneurs and start-ups in Cottage Grove, OR (virtual);
- Main Street Approach Presentation and Q&A with K’Lynn Lane of The Ford Family Foundation and previous Executive Director of the Oregon Frontier Chamber of Commerce, and Jonelle McCoy of Washington Main Street (virtual).

Impacts: The opportunity to engage with communities and organizations with similar challenges sparked learning and inspiration among Othello’s core team. Seeing in person the results from various initiatives instilled a sense of capability in the Othello group and equipped them with approaches for success. Participants took away valuable insights to apply to their own efforts as they imagined a community center project in Othello. The biggest lessons learned were the importance of starting small and growing incrementally, and to think ahead to the next possible interest.

“The field trip to Oregon was amazing! I learned so much about commercial kitchens/food incubators as well as one city’s take on a community center. The virtual field trips were also very useful.”

~ Peer Learning Participant

Rural Community Leadership

From October 2023 to April 2024, RDI delivered its Rural Community Leadership Program, which focuses on action and connection and prioritizes activities that honor local visions, elevate pressing issues, and support cooperation towards building more thriving rural communities. The Othello program engaged 18 participants, ranging in age from 16–64 in 18 hours of training over the course of six months. The cohort identified community issues, including lack of community-wide communication and a community event space, and explored ways to make positive change around these focus areas.



Impacts: The cohort oversaw \$5,000 in community grants, which they awarded to local organizations. The impact is detailed in this [Columbia Basin Herald news article](#), with awards including: Lighthouse Community Center, \$1,000 for after-school activities; The Old Hotel Art Gallery, \$1,000 for operational expenses related to new collaborative efforts; Othello Senior Center, \$1,000 for support of this community gathering space with overhead and operations expenses and to help build community connections through social activities; and Othello Chamber of Commerce, \$2,000 for support of website and event calendar creation. The training increased Othello’s sense of community, identity, and capacity. USDA Rural Development nominated Jose Garza, a participant in the leadership training as well as an *Elevate Othello* planning team member, for a National Rural Innovator award in recognition of his leadership and positive impact in Othello.

“I liked all of the meaningful conversations and the connections that were made. After listening to the stakeholders, many ideas and opportunities opened up.” ~ Rural Community Leadership Program Participant

Financial Literacy Training

Through *Inteligencia con su Dinero* (Money Smart), a Spanish-language financial literacy training led by RDI in partnership with the Othello Food Bank and Othello Education Service District, 24 Spanish-speaking community members gained basic financial skills including learning about credit, creating budgets, and building savings.

Impacts: Interviews early on with immigrant farmworkers highlighted the need for basic capacity building. Feedback from participants was positive and the community expressed interest in more trainings in the future.

“The workshops are very useful in helping us to stay informed about savings and credit, because this is fundamental to get ahead in this country.” ~ Financial Literacy Training Participant

*“I learned how to manage my expenses and start saving, and I learned how to better my credit score.”
~ Financial Literacy Training Participant*

Childcare Business Training

With funding leveraged through RPIC and in partnership with Center for Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Unidos Nueva Alianza, RDI delivered two cohorts of *Empieza tu Negocio de Cuidado de Niños* (Start Your Childcare Business), with 46 participants. The trainings were delivered in Spanish and provided aspiring entrepreneurs with key information for starting and running an in-home childcare business. Each participant received personalized technical assistance following the training to work through business start-up tasks.



Impact: Participants learned to navigate Washington’s early learning system and business licensing requirements and accessed continued support to help them move forward with their childcare business plans. Despite challenges in navigating Washington regulations, a number of program graduates are actively pursuing their childcare licenses and have taken steps towards launching their businesses.

*“I had no idea what was needed [to start a business], and I thought it was more difficult; now I have guidance.”
~ Childcare Business Training Participant*

Youth Entrepreneurship Training

The [Mentor Match Teen Entrepreneur Program](#), a hands-on curriculum with a goal to introduce local teens to entrepreneurship and business as a career path, was initiated as part of *Elevate Othello*, and led by Angela Kudsk of Othello's Lighthouse Community Center and Lighthouse Café, a nonprofit organization in Othello offering outreach programs geared towards youth. Fourteen teenagers met twice monthly over the school year, learning from local business owners and starting their own businesses.



Impacts: Students developed and put into action business plans for a variety of businesses, including baked goods, lawn care, and handmade jewelry. They earned income, and several expressed their intention to continue their business after the program ended. Angela described the program as an opportunity for youth in the community to take risks and gain skills and confidence. The program also strengthened the Lighthouse as an emerging community center in Othello. Mentor Match provided youth a welcoming place to gather by introducing them to the Café, and the Café used this momentum to establish the Community Center branch of the Lighthouse, which offers events and classes for all ages. The Lighthouse Community Center continues to host Mentor Match sessions for aspiring teen entrepreneurs.

"[After Mentor Match] some students came back to visit once a week at the Lighthouse. The word mentor is truly what this is—a great way to help build dreams and goals and have connection with a supportive, caring adult." ~ Mentor Match Entrepreneur Program Facilitator



Angela Kudsk doesn't see herself as a leader. Her efforts are driven by her desire to see change in her community, and she attributes her rise to leadership to *Elevate Othello* and RDI's support. The *Elevate Othello* initiative gave people opportunities and tools to carry out priorities and get things done, and Angela saw positive impacts of the initiative on her personally, on her organization, and on the community in general. Born and raised in Othello, Angela recalls a time when the community was tightknit, with people knowing each other and plenty of opportunities to contribute to the community. She moved away for a while and returned 15 years ago to a changed community. It was harder to connect and find opportunities for involvement. However, within the last year, Angela has witnessed a desire for more community-centered activities and events in Othello. "RDI had a huge part in that. *Elevate Othello* brought momentum to the community to raise up the leaders who were there but didn't know where to plug in to grow their leadership skills and amplify them." The Senior Center, the Old Hotel (a community arts hub), and the public library are all examples of organizations that are starting to rise to the top again and become community resources.

Formerly a teacher, Angela transitioned to her role as director of the Lighthouse Community Center through her involvement in *Elevate Othello*. She was first introduced to *Elevate Othello* when she attended a meeting about it with her students. This ultimately led to Angela becoming program director for the Lighthouse. For Angela, the timing felt perfect. This new role was the realization of her hopes and dreams for her community—a dream that she was able to present to City Council. Angela envisions the Lighthouse as a community partner, and she is advancing this goal by connecting with other organizations and local leaders as they work together to address resource gaps and foster collaboration.

Her focus remains on supporting youth, particularly through programs like the Mentor Match Teen Entrepreneur Program and a partnership with the juvenile department for an afterschool program for at-risk girls. Angela sees her role as one that helps people find their place, and meeting people where they're at to help them take the next best step, and she believes that *Elevate Othello* provided opportunities and guidance to keep Othello moving forward.

Step 3: Connecting Communities with Resources

Community Seed Grants

RDI implemented a Community Seed Grant program to help community members make tangible progress on identified priorities, with funding committed from USDA Rural Development, the Innovia Foundation, and the Avista Corporation. Othello core team members, along with representatives from the City of Othello, oversaw the awarding of seed grants to the following projects, ensuring alignment with *Elevate Othello* goals and vision.



- **Cinco De Mayo 2024** (\$16,500): [Othello's first ever Cinco de Mayo celebration](#) included a parade along Main Street, a car show, live music and performances from local Latino groups including the elementary school dance group, a raffle with local items, and 37 vendors.
- **Othello Senior Center Bingo Night** (\$7,800): Funds were used to support a Bingo program for seniors, addressing the need for more senior activities highlighted in the Visioning Report and encouraging and enhancing community engagement and well-being.
- **Community Garden** (\$1,200): Community members built six raised gardens at a local housing project, impacting 25 senior residents who actively participated in the garden. Funds helped buy supplies and fund educational workshops around gardening and growing your own food.
- **Lighthouse Community Education Program** (\$16,000): The Lighthouse Community Center coordinated new low cost and free community classes, launched a website with a class calendar and designed a print catalog and mailers that were distributed citywide.

Impacts: These grants generated widespread and deep impact throughout Othello, inspiring community members to outline projects and providing funding to carry them out. Cinco de Mayo organizers built a strong relationship with Othello Parks and Recreation, and the second celebration is slated to take place in 2025. Older populations were engaged through Senior Center Bingo Nights and the community garden project, building community and space for this population to thrive. These grants succeeded in supporting initiatives that address the priority needs expressed in the visioning plan around bringing the community together.

"We were pleasantly surprised by how much the community embraced the garden, showing great enthusiasm and involvement in maintaining and enjoying the space." ~ Seed Grant Recipient

"I have seen a heightened interest in bringing our community together to develop personal learning and growth. At a recent tabling, I collected three pages worth of parents who are interested in attending our classes and gave us their contact information to be notified to sign up. I have also seen partnerships develop between larger entities in Othello." ~ Seed Grant Recipient



A grassroots group of community members joined together to form a local Hispanic Committee and take the lead on coordinating the Cinco de Mayo celebration. This in turn spurred the creation of a new organization to provide additional services for the community. This organization, MAS, was founded by a mother and her two daughters; the organization has received technical assistance funding and is applying to be a 501c3 nonprofit.

“If it weren’t for Elevate Othello we never would have taken the chance to hold a Cinco de Mayo event, and it wouldn’t have led to three of us starting our own nonprofit to help families navigate specialized services in our area.” ~ Elevate Othello Participants, Maria and Sulema

Regards to Rural Conference

In April 2024, nine Othello community members, including members of the planning team and participants from RDI’s Rural Community Leadership Program and entrepreneurship trainings—one with limited skills in English—attended RDI’s Regards to Rural conference in Kennewick, WA. With sessions conducted in Spanish and translation services available, they spent three days learning and networking with other rural community members and organizations, including USDA Rural Development representatives from Washington DC and the Pacific Northwest.



Impacts: This activity broadened the group’s outlook, giving Othello’s local leaders a chance to engage with innovative approaches happening in other rural communities. Those who had never had the opportunity in the past to meet with peers and funders found themselves networking and representing their community’s efforts. They were able to share the work of Elevate Othello and their dreams for the future.

Grant Writing Training

Eight Othello community members, including members of the planning team, participated in RDI’s spring 2024 Ready, Set, Grant!—a virtual training to provide practical guidance regarding nonprofit grants and funding, including grant writing basics and researching funding opportunities. The final session of this training took place at RDI’s Regards to Rural conference and included a funder panel. Participants received one-on-one mentoring from Kelley Nonprofit Consulting, RDI’s partner for this program.

Impacts: Nonprofit leaders outlined grant narratives and developed relationships with federal and foundation funders. As a result of the training, they have developed grant strategies and successfully applied for and received new funding to support their organizations, including two \$10,000 grants from Empire Health Foundation awarded to the Lighthouse Community Center and MAS in August 2024.

“These collaborations have been instrumental in enhancing our collective impact and expanding the resources available to those we serve.” ~ Planning Team Member

*“I have seen a remarkable difference in the opportunities that have been provided for our community towards the goals. It has also provided ways for people in our community to partner and collaborate with each other.”
~ Planning Team Member and Program Participant*

*“This brought awareness of who is part of the change champions for Othello.”
~ Rural Community Leadership Program Participant*



Othello mother-daughter team, **Maria and Sulema Martinez**, have seen a significant impact on their community in the last couple of years. They initially heard about *Elevate Othello* when Maria responded to a community survey and was subsequently invited to the community ice cream social and information session about the initiative. Maria was aware of a lack of services for the Hispanic population in her community, so she decided to attend the event to learn about *Elevate Othello*, and she encouraged Sulema to go along. This was the catalyst for the two of them to get connected and find more ways to support their community.

In the beginning of the *Elevate Othello* process, the community identified a lack of Hispanic cultural events. Most events took place outside of Othello and people wanted to bring that culture back to Othello. Thus, the idea for a Cinco de Mayo event was born. Before they knew it, Maria and Sulema were helping to organize the first ever Cinco de Mayo event in Othello through the Hispanic Committee in partnership with the Othello Rotary Club. Sulema began advocating for and providing support to vendors and small business owners who were interested in being involved with the event. “Elevate Othello not only provided the opportunity to create this community event, but it also opened doors for people that had business ideas, and helped them walk through the door and get the help they needed to get started. It helped them to not be afraid. They thought, ‘This is my opportunity; I can start my business, I can try here, because it’s something new that Maria and Sulema are trying, so let’s try it too.’ They were able to try it together with us,” reflected Maria.

This experience helped Sulema acquire skills, attain a job, and get connected to the community. This in turn resulted in Sulema and Maria opening their own nonprofit, MAS, to provide additional services for their community. Looking back, Sulema reflects that, “When I went to the ice cream social, I wasn’t working and I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing. The ice cream social kicked everything off for me.” Sulema joined the Othello Rotary Club and is now the secretary. She made connections with the city and the county and has had encouragement and support from her mother and from others involved in *Elevate Othello*, including Jose Garza and Othello Mayor Shawn Logan. This is giving her more confidence to realize that she can continue doing good things for her community. “I’ve always had a heart to help people, so to be able to keep doing that, it’s fulfilling. If it wasn’t for my mom pushing me to go to the ice cream social, and if it wasn’t for RDI coming to Othello and offering that event, I don’t even know where I would be today.”

Maria sees that Sulema is following in her footsteps to help others. “Sulema has a heart for it. It’s been an honor to see my daughter grow and make good connections.” Maria is proud of her daughter and believes this work is creating an ongoing legacy for her family and for future generations to continue making an impact on their community. “We want to help people grow just like we’re growing.” Maria has seen that people in the community don’t know how to get connected. As Maria recalls, “Before Elevate Othello, we didn’t know where to go, we started with the community ice cream social. We received resources and information to help other people. That’s what we want to do. We’re not only helpers, but we want to share the information with other people. Helping everyone makes our community better.”

Conclusion

Our theory of change, reflected in the steps of this project, was confirmed through the impacts in Othello. The sequence of identifying community priorities, building capacity, and then facilitating access to resources is having the intended effect of moving the community into transformative change around their highest priorities.

Some of the greatest challenges:

- There were setbacks to community seed grants, due to the length of time needed for match funders to provide funds, which in turn affected community project timelines. RDI staff intervened by seeking alternative funding sources and working with funders on alternate plans for distributing funds.
- During *Empieza tu Negocio de Cuidado de Niños*, RDI staff did not anticipate the marked variation to childcare business regulations between states, nor the amount of time and effort required to prepare business documentation to meet Washington State standards. We were surprised at the barriers in Washington (compared to Oregon and Idaho) to start an in-home childcare business.
- Engaging newer immigrants including Mam and Mixteco speakers was challenging. We needed to build trust, address language barriers, and find partners for this work, which takes significant time. We were able to conduct a modest amount of engagement in partnership with a local company that employs farmworkers, and a local organization was hired to conduct successful outreach for the childcare business trainings.

What we would have done differently:

- We would have refined our communications around the community meetings to clarify expectations and increase participation;
- We would have sped up the process of hiring a dedicated program manager to jump into relationship-building and visioning a little more quickly;
- We would have been more proactive communicating with funders who had committed match funds.

What worked well:

- **Forming and supporting a core community planning team:** RDI found that Othello community members and the Planning Team maintained their commitment to this project, and the energy that had built throughout the community encouraged them to persist.
- **Learning opportunities:** We observed the greatest energy in the moments where community and Planning Team members connected to peers, funders, and future partners with information and ideas that they could apply back to their hometown.
- **Multiple ways to plug in:** Giving people multiple ways to engage meant that many people were able to participate in the type and amount of activities that suited them.
- **Seed grants:** These grants gave community members an opportunity to implement their ideas and built excitement in the community.
- **Building up community leaders:** A diverse group of community leaders heard what community members want, and then creatively guided pathways to see projects come to fruition. The program created a structure for those leaders to emerge and thrive.

Based on the results of this opportunity to layer many programs sequentially within one community, we aspire to use this approach again. That said, to access this scale of funding is rare and challenging. We appreciate USDA's support to enable this work happen in Othello. Community change takes time, ongoing attention, and a steady flow of resources. While this program jump-started a number of initiatives and has provided a platform for leaders to emerge, the long-term impact and capacity to keep the work moving forward are works in progress. We hope to continue to support the community of Othello, and we look forward to seeing the ripple effect in the community over the long term.

"Looking at where we started compared to where we're at, everyone that was part of Elevate Othello has a success story. Each individual has grown so much." ~ Planning Team Member

*"Elevate Othello helped us make connections; we wouldn't have known where to start otherwise."
~ Othello City Staff Member*

This report was written by RDI staff members Alison Cassin, Bonnie Day, Amy Hause, and Marci Miller.