



Carl Vinson
Institute of Government
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

PROPEL Program Final Report for the Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge

Submitted by the University of Georgia's
Carl Vinson Institute of Government

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University of Georgia Carl Vinson Institute of Government PROPEL
USDA Rural Development- Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge
PROPEL PLACEMAKING COLLABORATIVE
September 30, 2022- September 30, 2024
FINAL REPORT

With support through the USDA Rural Development’s Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge, the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government (UGA) engaged three rural Georgia communities in placemaking processes through the Planning Rural Opportunities for Prosperity and Economic Leadership (PROPEL) process. Over two years, the communities moved through the six-element model to develop and implement a placemaking strategy organized around their unique assets and goals.

PROPEL Program Background

PROPEL aims to build capacity for economic and community development in communities and community leaders in rural Georgia. In recognition that the challenges and opportunities in rural Georgia area are diverse, complex, and unique to each community, PROPEL focuses on developing data-driven and community-driven placemaking strategy formed by both existing assets and goals of the community. With support and coaching from public service faculty and staff at the University of Georgia Institute of Government, teams of community leaders, including economic development professionals, city, county or municipal officials, educational system leaders, business owners, and others, engage in a two-year, six-element process to create and implement a placemaking strategic action plan informed by community input and grounded in asset-based development principles. During this process, communities participate in regular coordination and planning meetings, workshops, technical assistance programs, and engage with local, state, and federal partners tailored to their goals and community needs.

The RPIC grant funded the second cohort of PROPEL communities. An initial RCDI grant awarded in 2021 helped to launch the first cohort of PROPEL communities. The University of Georgia Research Foundation applied for and received Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge funding in 2022 to support the addition of Baldwin, Ben Hill, and Burke counties in the PROPEL program.



Predicted Benefits and Deliverables

The program's three central objectives were 1) build the capacity of rural community leaders for placemaking and community planning, 2) develop a community placemaking strategy, and 3) assist communities with the implementation of their placemaking plan. There were both short- and long-term predicted benefits for communities who participated in the PROPEL placemaking program, including increased community input and engagement on issues related to placemaking, economic, and community development, increased collaboration between community leaders and various entities, and a clear strategy for placemaking that advances community identity, investment, and development. Long term impacts of this program include a higher capacity for placemaking, community and economic development in communities, and its leaders, including elected and appointed officials. Because the focus of the program is capacity-building, the impact of the PROPEL program extends beyond the grant period by increasing community leaders' sense of capacity and efficacy around placemaking.

Each community engaged with the six-step PROPEL model across the two-year program. Communities engaged with this model through three main modalities: monthly, in-community meetings and workshops facilitated by assigned UGA faculty and staff (community coaches), annual cross-community workshops focused on resource connectivity and technical assistance, and, beginning in summer of 2024, the PROPEL Ramble, an annual cross-community networking and open house event, hosted in and by a PROPEL community team. Through focused effort and consistent engagement, communities are supported as they move through the six-step model.

This model includes analysis of the community's key data, including demographics and population metrics, labor force reports, and community and residential reports. This analysis allows communities to make data-informed decisions when creating their placemaking strategy, and to consider what additional data may be useful to their efforts as they move from planning to implementing work. Community input is another element of the six-step model. Communities consider their past community input efforts and are provided resources to explore best practices. Equipped with this information, communities review their placemaking focus area and make decisions about what community input strategies may best support their projects and fit within their community norms, ability, budget, and timelines. Communities engage in asset-based strategy development when creating their placemaking plans. Public service faculty and staff prompt the community team to reflect and work in teams to physically capture their existing assets, including both public and private local organizations and institutions, physical assets, like natural resources, built environment, and public goods and utilities, and capacity and knowledge (expertise) within the community.

The team also considers existing planning documents or efforts, and the driving and restraining forces that impact the community and progress towards greater placemaking. Informed by data, community input, and assets, the community team produces a placemaking strategy focused on two to five key priority areas. These areas, and the action items within them, are determined exclusively by the community team; all steps and elements of the PROPEL model are community-driven, with the UGA team acting as facilitators and coaches, connecting the community with resources and networks of support, the fourth element of the model.



Implementation of the placemaking strategy occurs throughout the two-year process, though most effort occurs within the latter 12-18 months of the program. Support is provided through the implementation of the strategy through technical assistance, project support through student engagement, connection to resources and funding opportunities, and a continued coaching and facilitation relationship with UGA faculty and staff.

Evaluation occurs throughout the process through numerous channels, including monthly coaching reports, assessments conducted with community teams, and program feedback solicitation after major events, including the annual workshop. All elements discussed above are iterative in nature; communities may choose to revisit one or more model elements as their plan develops, based on community needs and goals. In the case of Baldwin, Ben Hill, and Burke counties, the communities were exposed to or engaged in each element of the model at least once, but some elected to return to data analysis or community input as action items were addressed. All communities revised or added to their action plans during the two-year program, and, at time of report production, many were scheduled to participate in another planning process during early 2025.

Overall and Community Specific Outcomes

Each of the three communities supported through RPIC successfully crafted a placemaking strategy through PROPEL from 2022 to 2024. The communities will be recognized for their participation and completion of the program in February 2025 during the annual PROPEL Workshop. Below is a summary of the focus areas of each community.

Baldwin County	Ben Hill County	Burke County
Workforce Development	Entrepreneurship	Tourism and Small Business Development
Economic Development Foundation Building	Downtown & Commercial Corridor Revitalization	Quality of Life and Placemaking
	Community Leadership	

Each of the three communities participated in the 2023 PROPEL Kickoff event on January 25 and 26, 2023. This event oriented the community team to the PROPEL program, UGA public service faculty and staff, and provided technical training on data analysis (Element 1) using community specific labor and demographic data described above. The communities also began preliminary planning around collection and needs for community input (Element 2). Following this event, the UGA team collaborated with each community team to establish a regular, in-community team meeting schedule. Community team meetings began in February and March 2023.





2023 PROPEL Workshop Participants

In year two of the program, the communities participated in numerous cross-community programs. The 2024 PROPEL Workshop, held January 23 and 24, 2024 in Athens, GA allowed communities the opportunity to connect with federal and state funding partners, resources within and outside the University of Georgia, and other PROPEL communities at various stages of their experience. Community teams participated in a funders panel and roundtable to connect with entities that could provide support for implementation of projects in need of capital or additional financial investment. Attendees were encouraged to strategize about how funding bodies could support elements of their placemaking plan now and in the future.



Jonathan Jackson from Baldwin County Delivered a Community Update at the 2024 PROPEL Workshop



All communities had representatives attend a webinar in May 2024 discussing funding opportunities for downtown development and workforce housing hosted by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. In July 2024, Baldwin, Ben Hill and Burke counties had members of their community team attend the inaugural PROPEL Ramble in Baxley, GA, a 2022 PROPEL community. During this event, community leaders were welcomed by USDA Under Secretary for Rural Development, Dr. Basil Gooden, visited various PROPEL project sites in downtown Baxley, toured the region's College and Career Academy and technical college and participated in a networking luncheon with Appling County leaders who served on the community PROPEL team from 2022 to early 2024.



USDA Undersecretary for Rural Development Dr. Basil Gooden Addresses the PROPEL Ramble

Baldwin County

Baldwin County identified workforce development as a key priority area early in their PROPEL experience. Workforce development, including education of youth and young professionals on employment opportunities, workforce needs and alignment, and cross-collaboration with surrounding communities to address training and educational needs across the region's industries.

Baldwin's community team led an extensive public input campaign seeking information regarding workforce perception and needs across businesses, youth, and faith communities. The UGA team assisted with this process by reviewing the input tools and providing resources to hone and strengthen the material. After the campaign, UGA assisted in organizing the feedback received for use in action planning. Through this exercise, the community identified workforce training and development as the most prominent areas of need. The community then collaborated with the City of Milledgeville, Baldwin's County seat, and Baldwin County government officials to identify shared priority areas for use in their action plan.

Following these efforts, Baldwin County hosted a community-wide workforce summit in April 2024, which served as a venue for greater conversations between more than fifty state and local leaders regarding the area’s workforce development needs. Attendees identified community-wide needs like the creation of an online community job board, the revitalization of an employer roundtable forum, and the promotion of services for local employees, like childcare assistance. The community leaders in attendance also recognized a need to document and evaluate existing efforts and plans across governments, businesses, and industries in the area. This event also created an opportunity for the City of Milledgeville and Baldwin County to continue their collaborative efforts to address workforce development and explore additional action items for 2024 and beyond. The community intends to make the workforce summit an annual event, incorporating additional stakeholders as efforts progress. The summit was covered by the local newspaper The Union-Recorder. See the [full story here](#).

In CY2023 Q3, Baldwin County also hired a full-time professional to provide continued support for community input and planning efforts. Community leaders are also working to finalize infrastructure that will enable Baldwin County to secure additional economic development success through the Sibley-Smith Mega Site for large-scale manufacturing projects.

In CY2024 Q3, Baldwin County had a notable success resulting from the community workforce summit. The community received a grant from Georgia Power to support the enrollment of eight participants in an Industry Ready Manufacturing Boot Camp in 2025; the community team aims to finalize planning efforts for the boot camp in early 2025.

In Spring 2025, Baldwin County will host a team of UGA undergraduate students to assist with the relaunch of the county’s employer roundtable forum. The student team will collect input from business leaders to better inform the structure and function of the forum. A final project report will be produced and shared with the community team in May 2025.

Ben Hill County

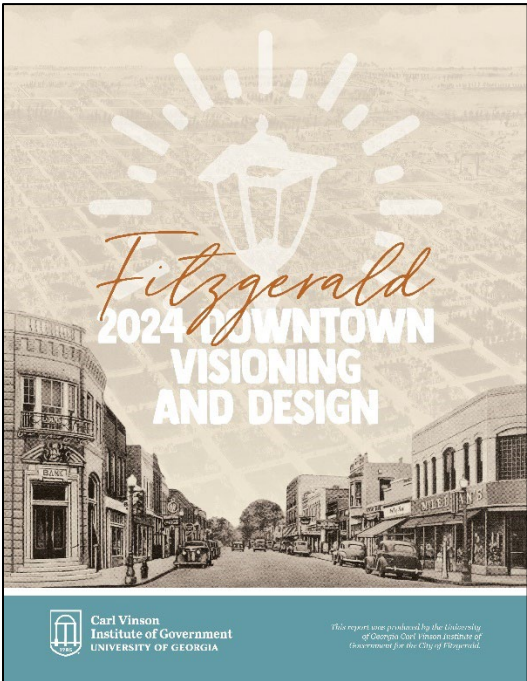
Ben Hill County’s efforts in PROPEL centered on corridor revitalization and entrepreneurship in the community. The community received technical assistance support in CY2023 Q2 to begin their community input efforts. In CY 2023 Q3, through community input gathering, the community team added community leadership as a priority area. To encourage entrepreneurship in agriculture, the community team led efforts to restart the community's farmers market and launch a shared commercial kitchen space in support of food and beverage businesses in the community. Despite complications resulting from Hurricane Helene in CY 2024 Q3, the commercial kitchen space will come online in early 2025. During CY 2023 Q3, Ben Hill County was awarded the Innovations in Community Leadership Initiative grant through UGA’s J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development. This grant provides support for community-based leadership programs, giving energy to an early-identified priority area. The community continues to make strides in leadership development.



The Fitzgerald- Ben Hill Chamber of Commerce has led efforts to support corridor revitalization in the community's central business district. This includes the acquisition of blighted property to support development in the area and participation in UGA's Renaissance Strategic Visioning and Planning Process (RSVP) program in Summer 2024. The RSVP program, which is a partnership between the University of Georgia, Georgia Municipal Association, and Georgia Cities Foundation, provided facade and streetscape renderings to reimagine downtown Fitzgerald, GA. This effort focused on previously engaged privately owned businesses and city/county-managed properties, making the project proposal more tenable for the community as a whole. The final project presentation, initially scheduled for CY 2024 Q3 but rescheduled because of Hurricane Helene, was delivered to community leaders, business owners, and other community members in late 2024. See the [full plan here](#). The community intends to execute elements of the project, including acquiring and placing street trees and commissioning a city logo mural, in early 2025. The PROPEL team will continue to provide support on downtown plan implementation in the years to come.

In CY 2024 Q1, a team of undergraduate students collected input from business owners with buildings or storefronts located within the community's Pine & Main corridor. Through small group conversations and individual interviews, the students created thematic areas regarding the concerns and priorities of the business owners in the area. This information was presented to the community in CY 2024 Q2 and has been used to inform additional revitalization efforts.





EAST PINE 100 BLOCK, EXISTING

The 100 block of East Pine Street running from Main Street to Grant Street includes some fine examples of Fitzgerald's vernacular architectural heritage. The former Third National Bank building, has brought a dignified presence to this corner since 1946. Grand Plant Park across the street was once home to the Empire Hotel. Additional shade trees would be a welcome addition to this popular downtown park.

TABLE 22

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CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

This circa 1920s image shows the building at 121 Pine Street as home to Johnson Hardware Company. This image shows architectural elements including storefront transom windows and cast iron columns that have been removed over the decades.

PROPERTY OWNER FAMILY HARPER PROVIDED THIS IMAGE OF CHIMANINE CALLIN HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA AND REQUESTED AN IN-LIEU COLOR palette for 121 Pine Street. The property owner requested storefront elements including warm wood and a contrasting color on the building's distinctive masonry detailing.

PHOTO 24

2024 11 16 12:19:00 303635645 21523 16 48 4 102165

Example pages from the Downtown Fitzgerald redevelopment plan

Burke County

Burke County conducted a planning session in July 2023 and established a focus around tourism and business development and quality of life and placemaking. Burke County had conducted community input prior to starting the PROPEL program due to their affiliation with UGA's Archway Partnership and used their experience and previous development focuses to inform the Burke County PROPEL plan. Q2 and Q3 of CY 2023 centered around tourism assets and the promotion of the community through such assets.

The community began implementation of their PROPEL plan during CY 2024 Q1; projects to support tourism and small business included the expansion of the community's farmers market, documentation of the community's tourism assets, and promotion of community events. UGA aided the community by researching and collecting best practices for farmer's markets, leading to a successful expansion of services in both vendor count and operating season, beginning in CY 2024 Q2. In CY2024 Q1, an undergraduate student team produced a collection of tourism case studies, capturing the strategy of similar-sized communities in the region. The team also developed ever-green digital content, search engine optimization research, and an integration strategy to promote tourism across various assets in the community.

The community is continuing efforts connected to their quality of life and placemaking priority area. The community identified various projects in this area, including conducting preliminary research to relocate the community's history museum and building a public restroom to service patrons visiting downtown businesses. The community team participated in a fact-finding visit to a neighboring county's museum to learn more about their expansion, governance processes and operational challenges. The community aims to engage UGA faculty and students to continue research to better inform their decision-making regarding the museum. The community is working with engineering students and faculty at UGA to revitalize a blighted property previously acquired by the city to create a downtown public restroom. A report was produced in CY2024 Q2 and delivered to the community for their use.

In CY 2024 Q4, the community collaborated with a UGA student to promote small businesses in downtown Waynesboro through the development of a downtown digital map. In Spring 2025, a team of UGA undergraduate students will begin work to explore residential development efforts within small cities in Georgia to aid Burke County in addressing housing needs within Waynesboro city limits.

Challenges & Unexpected Aspects of Project

Participation in PROPEL revealed both system and community-specific challenges and unexpected opportunities for each community. Personnel challenges in Baldwin and Burke counties slowed initial community input efforts during Q1 and 2 of CY2023. During this period, Burke County experienced a leadership transition; while this created an initial logistical challenge, the transition created an opportunity for the incorporation



of new leaders to the community team. As a result, a new point of contact was identified, which created new energy for the team.

Lack of resources, including lack of paid staff to support economic and community development, continue to persist in rural communities, including those participating in PROPEL. However, despite Burke County lacking a paid economic development professional until Q1 of CY2024, the community produced a high-quality, executable plan aligned with the goals and needs of the community. While additional full-time staffing may remain a challenge, increased capacity amongst existing entities, professionals, and volunteers in the communities is evident, as well as the engagement of new or additional community leaders. These examples reflect both the opportunity and challenge that exists in rural communities: while strong, community-driven leaders exist and are dedicated to these efforts, limited full-time professional staff place limitations on the scope, timely implementation, and feasibility of placemaking efforts. Time is the most limited resource facing many rural community leaders; many PROPEL communities face extended lead times while establishing and onboarding their team. Baldwin, Ben Hill, and Burke counties all experienced some form of delay in their planning or implementation process resulting from availability issues amongst their team. The opportunity to learn from these communities has spurred programmatic changes, including an extended pre-program engagement period where community points of contact begin identifying PROPEL team members three to six months prior to program launch, and increased communication about program expectations through program agreements and pre-program meetings.

Baldwin County's focus on workforce development presented the community with an opportunity to collaborate across city and county government and with key industry partners in the community and region. This partnership yielded results like a well-attended workforce summit and the creation and funding of the Industry Ready Manufacturing Boot Camp. While reaching a consensus across government entities was challenging, the collaboration and synergy resulted in numerous short- and long-term projects in the interest of the city and county alike. Through the program, it has become clear that communities engaging in PROPEL and other capacity building programs need to scaffold their efforts to include short- and long-term projects both for the longevity of the planning process, but also to build momentum and encourage those engaging in the work to continue forward with their effort. Short term, discrete, or low-complexity projects increase the confidence of the community team and can be used as building blocks for larger, longer-term projects in the program and beyond.

In late September of 2024, Hurricane Helene impacted areas in South Georgia and Georgia's Central Savannah River Area (CSRA). Both Ben Hill County and Burke County experienced significant challenges resulting from the storm, including structural damage, utility damage, and disrupted government operations in the days and weeks following. Efforts of community leaders aptly turned towards storm recovery, resulting in priority shifts and implementation timeline impacts. While communities may have experienced lags in progress towards previously identified placemaking goals during this period, the strength of each community and its capacity for addressing complex challenges was evident. UGA will continue to collaborate with impacted communities to identify ways to support long-term recovery and resiliency efforts. This continued



support model extends beyond communities impacted by Hurricane Helene; as PROPEL continues to work alongside rural Georgia communities, the need for organized, sustained engagement with legacy, or completer communities, exists. The UGA team continues to develop low- and no-cost engagement opportunities for legacy communities to connect with PROPEL after completion of the program, like webinars and regional networking opportunities. Legacy communities are also invited to participate in the annual PROPEL Workshop in Athens, GA to retain and build additional connectivity with UGA, external resources, and other PROPEL communities.

Strengths, Limitations, and Advice for Others

PROPEL exists in a unique context operationally and theoretically; the program aims to bring an innovative approach to rural placemaking through combining theoretical elements of studies like organizational coaching, strategic planning, asset-based community development, community leadership, and process consulting, operationalized and empowered through the resources, expertise, and commitment of the oldest land-grant higher education institution in the U.S.

The process is further operationalized by community-driven work in community-identified priority areas and is reliant on the expertise and leadership of community members. The greatest strengths of PROPEL exist within 1) the recognition of the community team's contextual knowledge, expertise, and social and cultural within their community, 2) the connectivity between the University, communities, and partners like USDA RD and 3) the hopeful invitation of the program that brings stakeholders together to focus on issues and opportunities that are important to members of their own community. PROPEL invites other organizations and universities to engage in similar work while recognizing the following considerations:

1. Consider time as the most limited resource impacting each effort.

As previously noted, many community team members are volunteers who serve in other roles across the community. With this, it is important to establish and maintain a consistent meeting schedule, maximize meeting times, and present additional events and deadlines as soon as possible. This is also essential when communities begin planning and implementation efforts; it can be valuable to ask questions regarding proposed action items and projects to avoid scope slip or the creation of a non-achievable action plan.

2. Work is defined by and completed by the community.

In the PROPEL model, work is community-identified and driven. While resources may be available to support an element of a project, it is not within the function or mission of the program to act on behalf of a community or force a community to act. While a priority area may not seem significant or accurate to an external party, so long as the area is not outside of the expertise or scope of the program, it is up to the community to determine what demands time and resources.



3. Outline program expectations and expectations of each party early in the process.

Clearly communicated and mutually agreed upon expectations are central to all relationships; while PROPEL and similar programs may be ambiguous in nature, it is essential to explain what the program is and is not at program onset.

Communities should understand their role and commitment, the role of other entities involved with the program, including funders, additional staff, and other organizations or individuals, and the stated goals and processes of the program.

What would we do differently?

Since its inception in 2022, the PROPEL program has seen growth and development in nearly every aspect of its function. Each community is unique and allows the team to see our processes through a new lens. The communities supported through RPIC provided key points of reflection, outlined below:

- 1) Connectivity between communities is valuable and desired by leaders.
This cohort of communities participated in two years of cross-community programs, like the PROPEL Workshop and Ramble and gave positive feedback regarding the opportunities for peer learning and networking with communities within Georgia facing similar structural and resource-related challenges. This feedback has been utilized by the program to continue and expand such offerings to future cohorts.
- 2) Universal program content will promote success and further capacity-development in communities.

The centralized development of PROPEL content ensures that every community engaging in the program receives the same training and education regarding the program as their peer communities. As the program continues to bring communities together to connect and collaborate, it is important that they have similar experiences and understanding to have a productive and grounded conversation. This understanding has led to the development of templates, tools, and guidelines for both community leaders and UGA public service faculty and staff, with additional materials in development through 2026.

