community development
innovation

Preliminary findings on progress, successful strategies and persistent challenges facing West Virginia's community development field.

CHAMBER & VISITOR CENTER

Over the last ten years, West Virginia communities of all sizes have been engaging in innovative and proactive economic and community development work.

Through determination and perseverance, towns across the state are reporting visible improvements in their communities[1] and residents are feeling optimistic about their town's future.[2] This progress has been occurring despite downward trends in state economic activity as West Virginia has struggled to rebound from the 2008 financial crisis (McCullough, 2019).

Communities across the state are experiencing positive progress: Residents are actively engaged in working toward positive changes and outcomes, unexpected collaborations and partnerships have become the norm, new businesses are popping up, downtowns are coming back to life, and other signs of momentum are available in abundance.

The WV Community Development Hub (The Hub) has been an active supporter of this kind of local activity, working directly with more than 45 individual communities across the state over the last decade, and working closely with hundreds of community and economic development partners and resource providers. Through our work, we are seeing a system of people and services in West Virginia that is vibrant, engaged, and committed to bringing about innovative approaches to rural community development rarely seen anywhere else.

Yet, despite the level of community development activity that has been undertaken over the last decade, data trends documenting economic growth, prosperity and quality of life have not tracked with local progress, engagement and optimism. Why is this?

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1 For instance, ten buildings have been redeveloped in downtown Fairmont within the last decade. Fifteen new businesses have located in downtown Buckhannon over the last three years, and city leaders cite 41 community improvement projects undertaken by community volunteers over the last decade. Eleven businesses have formed in Richwood in the last three years, with five more set to open this year. (Create Buckhannon, 2019; Petry, 2019; Raffo, 2019; Upshur County Development Authority, 2019)

2 A survey of 131 community leaders across 22 towns found that 94% of respondents felt that their community had visibly improved over the past ten years. More detailed information on this survey is discussed later in the report. (Downstream Strategies, 2019; WV Community Development Hub, 2019)

A Challenge We Can Tackle Together

The Hub, in collaboration with a newly forming statewide WV Community Development Network, is putting forward a key question:

Why is there a disconnect between existing data about prosperity and decline in West Virginia and the on-the-ground progress and impact that we have seen coming out of towns engaging in community development activities over the past ten years?

By working collaboratively to document and share research-backed information about our collective impact, West Virginia's community development field has the potential to shift the stereotype of a state in perpetual decline, establish West Virginians as national leaders in community development, and better position communities to attract new and greater resources for their work.

Beginning with releasing this report for your consideration, we will be facilitating a collaborative process to:

- Understand the collective impact of the West Virginia community development field over the last ten years,

- Propose metrics that could be used to begin to measure demonstrated impacts, and

- Uplift community development strategies that lead to success and innovation for rural towns, particularly in communities that are under severe economic distress.

This preliminary report proposes relevant metrics, identifies persistent challenges that create a disconnect between positive local activity and commonly cited research about West Virginia, and outlines a set of strategies that are central to successful, locally-led rural community development.[3]

A full-length report will be released in late 2020.

We are releasing this preliminary report with a request for feedback from you, the reader, to help us better tackle this challenge in the coming year. You can help us to: identify the metrics we should track as a field, refine those critical strategies that make our state an innovative leader in rural community development, and uplift the stories of progress, success and leadership bubbling up across the state.

Visit wvhub.org/shareyourvoice to give us your thoughts and get involved.

150+

More than 150 West Virginians shared their feedback on our state's unique approach to community development.

Jump to page 7 to see their best practices.

WHAT do you think about the impact of community development in West Virginia over the past decade? Share your thoughts at **wvhub.org/shareyourvoice**.

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3 To read more about our process and methodology, visit wvhub.org/shareyourvoice.

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Tracking Rural Community Progress

Community development is the process of community members coming together to take collective action. Community development initiatives focus on topics ranging from individual leadership development and capacity building to commercial real estate and small business development. Participants at a February 2019 Community Development Think Tank in Bridgeport, WV recognized 14 different sectors within the state's community development field, including civic engagement, the built environment, arts and creative placemaking, and entrepreneurship and business development, among others.

Systems to track impacts across the field are inconsistent and disconnected. Tracking primarily occurs by individual entities, is structured based on program outcomes, and typically fails to measure long-term impacts in individual communities (WV Community Development Hub, 2019b). The lack of data collection across different community development sectors leaves the field without a counter-narrative to the story that statewide data tells: a story primarily of decline and disinvestment.[4]

HOW are we defining "communities" in this report? Community development? Read about our approach at **wvhub.org/shareyourvoice**.

While individual communities have documented quantitative measures of growth and revitalization,[5] these measurements are not consistently tracked, particularly in communities that lack staffing resources to track community development activities. One exception to this lack impact tracking is the Main Street West Virginia program, which requires its 15 communities to provide quarterly data on impacts relating to its program areas and consolidates that data into an annual report on statewide community and economic development impacts in these communities (West Virginia CAD, 2019).

4 Since 2010, West Virginia's total population of 1.8 million has declined by over 47,000 residents, which has coincided with a loss in approximately 28,000 jobs. Nationally, the Mountain State ranks among the worst for poverty, drug addiction, chronic illness, workforce participation, and educational attainment. (PolicyMap, 2019; United Health Foundation, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018)

5 For example, Huntington's obesity rate has dropped 13% in the last decade through major community health and wellness initiatives, even as the state trends have continued to worsen (Cunningham and Black, 2019). Wheeling's downtown vacancy rate has dropped from 32% to 15% in the last five years through a community revitalization effort, which has led to nearly $50 million in total investment downtown (Main Street America, 2019).

Suggested Metrics to Show Collective Community Development Impact

Identifying metrics to measure impacts across a field as broad as community development requires first identifying some broad goals which the field as a whole is seeking to advance.

In February 2019, 75 community members and community development practitioners worked together to define long-term outcomes of community development efforts in the state. Their responses were synthesized into the following statements. (WV Community Development Hub, 2019b)

Through sustained local leadership and investment into community development throughout West Virginia, we can expect to see:

1. Thriving local communities with diverse economies and populations as well as strong place-based assets (i.e. improved infrastructure, small businesses, beautification, etc.);

2. Shifts in community dynamics such as the presence of a large base of actively engaged residents who share a positive outlook about their town; and

3. Improved quality of life for residents (i.e. access to education, recreational opportunities, and services). (WV Community Development Hub, 2019b)

What approach can we take to track progress?

While there is no perfect individual indicator for community development, an effective strategy to track the collective impacts of the field is to measure community progress by comparing long-term, third-party data indicators with short-term, community-specific indicators that show on-the-ground community change (see the table on the left for examples).

These short-term indicators, when consistently tracked across multiple communities by a central entity, could be the key to quantifying community development impact in rural, low-resourced communities. Indicators could be identified and tracked in accordance with the Community Capitals Framework, a nationally recognized approach to analyzing and acting on community

Potential long-term and short-term indicators

Capital	Suggested indicator	Long term	Short term
Financial	Increased household incomes	x	
Human	Increased population; Increased population under 40	x	
Financial	Increased tax revenue	x	
Financial	Increased property values	x	
Built	Increased safe and affordable housing	x	
Built	Buildings constructed/ rehabilitated	x	x
Built	Improved broadband access	x	x
Financial	Businesses created/expanded	x	x
Financial	New jobs created locally	x	x
Financial; Natural	Increased tourism and recreation	x	x
Financial	Increased resources and investment in local projects	x	x
Political	Increased voter turnout	x	x
Social; Natural; Cultural; Human	Improved quality of life	x	x
Social; Human	Increased civic engagement		x
Social; Natural; Cultural; Built; Financial	Increased number of completed community improvement projects		x
Human; Social	Increased community optimism		x

assets with the goal of building sustainable communities that offer economic security, a healthy ecosystem, and social inclusion for all residents. The seven community capitals are natural, built, social, cultural, human, financial and political. (Flora and Flora, 2008)

In addition to quantitative data, qualitative data development can help to round out the story of the progress of the field and success within individual communities.

Over the past year, The Hub held focus groups with 63 community members in five individual communities, and surveyed over 150 community leaders and community development practitioners across 17 additional communities to gather qualitative data about community progress over the last ten years. These focus groups and survey results identified a sense of optimism and hope within the community development field that was seen as a unique and under-explored aspect of the field that is not captured by quantitative data (Downstream Strategies, 2019; WV Community Development Hub, 2019). In the coming year, we will further this research through a broader survey of community development stakeholders across the state to build a deeper understanding of qualitative perceptions of community development progress and impacts.

is there anything missing from the outcomes and metrics for community development efforts in West Virginia? Share your thoughts at **wvhub.org/shareyourvoice**.

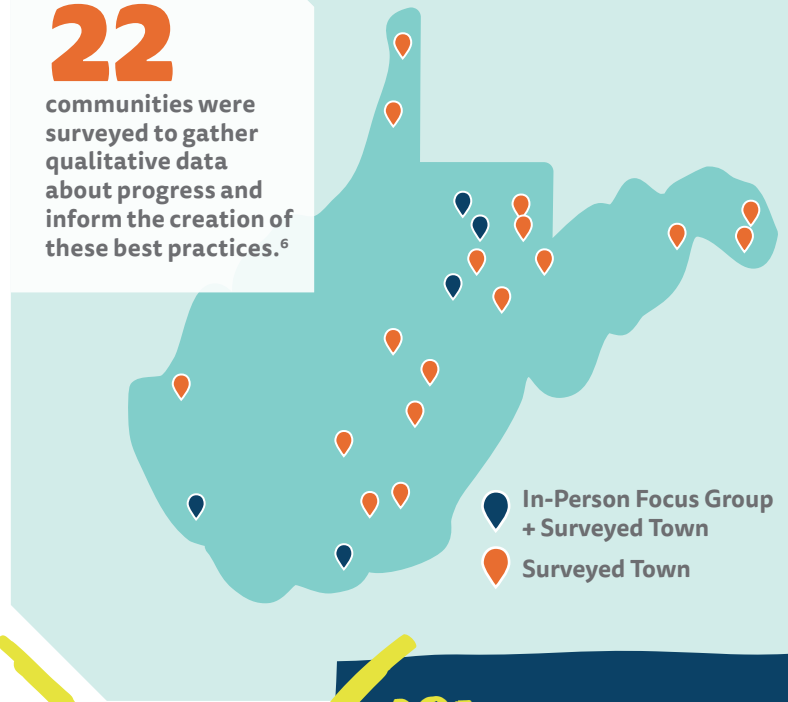# Best Practices for Rural Community Development

Despite the lack of demonstrable data tracking community development impacts, there are success stories of innovative, strategic approaches to rural community development in West Virginia that have been documented by individual communities. These communities also have powerful lessons to share about strategies for rural, low-resourced, locally-driven community development that can be implemented in similar communities throughout West Virginia and the rest of the nation.

22 communities were surveyed to gather qualitative data about progress and inform the creation of these best practices.[6]

- In-Person Focus Group + Surveyed Town
- Surveyed Town

ARE these best practices true to your community's experience? Share your story at **wvhub.org/ shareyourvoice.**

The best practices exemplified in these communities include:

1. **Maintaining and growing volunteerism & civic engagement.** A broad base of volunteers and individuals committed to making positive local change stands behind every successful community. Positive momentum in communities tracks with overall volunteerism and engagement. Conversely, as volunteer engagement declines, overall community progress slows as well. Achieving long-term success hinges on a community's ability to keep volunteers engaged over the long haul.

2. **Developing diverse local leadership.** Successful work requires a mix of committed local leaders, including: 1) individual leaders who inspire others to get involved and take action in their community; 2) organizational leaders at local businesses and nonprofits who lend capacity; and 3) civic leaders who are committed to driving positive change through policy and governance. Relatively few of the 12 case study communities have all three tiers of leadership; yet every case study town has individual leaders who form the foundation from which the higher levels take root.

3. **Building a common vision and executing a plan.** Uniting behind a common vision is a critical element of achieving and maintaining progress. Not every project or undertaking in a community will succeed, but the communities that stay positive and solution-oriented, commit to sustained progress toward the goals laid out in their plan, and celebrate the small victories along the way are the ones poised for long-term success.

4. **Centering inclusivity, collaboration and communication.** Turning points happen when local leaders intentionally decide to work together and try something new. Having regular - and consistent - community meetings and conversation, being welcoming and transparent, talking across traditional community silos, and intentionally reaching everyone in the community are key strategies to build momentum, promote collective ownership and foster buy-in for community efforts.

5. **Utilizing a system of support.** Communities making progress take advantage of and benefit from a wide range of educational opportunities, training programs, and additional resources from providers to build local capacity.

6. **Leveraging financial opportunities.** Strategically leveraging available funding sources to support work is a key component of success in under-resourced communities. This includes identifying large and small-scale public and private investment opportunities and funding partners to drive projects forward.

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6 The 22 communities are Alderson, Buckhannon, Capon Bridge, Charles Town, Elkins, Fairmont, Fayetteville, Grafton, Hinton, Huntington, Kingwood, Philippi, Princeton, Richwood, Rowlesburg, Shepherdstown, Sutton, Thomas, Webster Springs, Weirton, Wheeling, and Williamson. Documentation of the process for selecting communities and gathering information is available at wvhub.org/methodology.

See the Best Practices in Action: BUCKHANNON, WV

The small town of Buckhannon has seen remarkable community and economic development progress over the past ten years.[7] Downtown main street is lined with numerous restaurants, a specialty coffee and craft beer shop, a cooperative art gallery, retail shops, and a myriad of other businesses. Being the county seat, home to a college, and within proximity to oil and gas industry development have all helped Buckhannon remain resilient despite the state's larger economic decline. In addition, community leaders began to organize more than ten years ago to take a more proactive role in their town to promote local development and ensure that progress reflected the long-term vision they had for Buckhannon (WV Community Development Hub, 2019a).

[7] Fifteen businesses have located in downtown Buckhannon in the last three years, and at least 41 community improvement projects have been completed by Create Buckhannon volunteers over the last decade. Local investment has tracked along with this redevelopment activity. For example, Citizens Bank, one of about seven banks located in town, is investing $2.6 million into the area. (Create Buckhannon, 2019; Knicely, 2018; Upshur County Development Authority, 2019).

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Create Buckhannon volunteers have completed 41 community improvement projects over the last decade.

The six best practices for rural community development have each served as a key element to guide and support the work of local leaders, ranging from volunteer community members to business owners to elected officials and everyone in between.

1. **Maintaining and growing volunteerism & civic engagement:** Community volunteers are a driving force spearheading and implementing community improvement projects, coordinated by the 10+ year old Create Buckhannon volunteer group.

2. **Developing diverse local leadership:** Committed individuals, local businesses and organizations, the city council, and the mayor share a common vision and are all actively involved in community development activities.

3. **Building a common vision and executing a plan:** A comprehensive planning process sparked Buckhannon's initial community development resurgence roughly a decade ago. Activities continue to be undertaken in accordance with this plan.

4. **Centering inclusivity, collaboration and communication:** Create Buckhannon holds consistent community meetings every week with an open door policy and provides a welcoming platform for broad-based community involvement.

5. **Utilizing a system of support:** Buckhannon community and city leaders have been aggressive in utilizing technical assistance resources, including The Hub's HubCAP program and multiple federal funding resources spearheaded by the county economic development authority.

6. **Leveraging financial opportunities:** Collaborations with public partners such as their county economic development authority and regional planning and development council, and private partners such as investors, developers and banks have led to funds for major projects.

Recommendations for Moving Forward

While there is a sense of heightened optimism among local leaders across the state about the potential for community development progress and impact, there is still significant work needed to advance the field and to build strong communities that can improve, revitalize and grow locally regardless of the state and national economic trends that they may face.

Documenting progress is one way that we can work collaboratively as a field to better support and catalyze community development in West Virginia.

Documenting progress is one way that we can work collaboratively as a field to better support and catalyze community development in West Virginia. We have identified three key strategies to better measure our work collectively with the aim of supporting and promoting the successes happening within individual communities, improving the community development field overall, and positioning West Virginia as a national innovator in the field of rural community development.

These strategies include:

1. **Create a comprehensive set of short and long-term metrics** that can be reasonably gathered from individual communities on an annual basis. Set these metrics within a framework that clearly delineates their relevance to community development strategies, such as the Community Capitals Framework (WealthWorks, 2019).

2. **Coordinate community development practitioners** to work collaboratively to set standard definitions for key community development practices (such as capacity building, creative placemaking, downtown redevelopment, etc.) and to build best practices for tracking programmatic activities.

3. **Develop and resource a statewide research and data collection system** that coordinates this effort and provides the backbone support for gathering and tracking on an annual basis.

WHAT other recommendations do you have for how we can collaboratively build a system that tracks rural community development in West Virginia? Visit **wvhub.org/shareyourvoice** to share your ideas and help us build a stronger system.

Join the Effort

The WV Community Development Hub is committed to understanding how we can best support, grow and catalyze community development in West Virginia in collaboration with you. This includes working with individual communities, sharing best practices across communities, and driving forward innovation throughout the entire field that will advance all communities. We see the need to document and celebrate community development impacts in rural communities as a key innovation opportunity facing us in the coming decade. We are eager to learn from you about how we can best do this work.

Please share your ideas at wvhub.org/shareyourvoice.

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Photography

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