



A Five-Point Call to Action: A Path Forward for Rural Recovery

In June 2020, John Wood Community College (JWCC) in Quincy, Illinois published a report entitled, [*“Building a Resilient Economy in the Lower Illinois River Valley – Considerations for Farm Profitability, the Workforce, and Rural Recovery.”*](#) Made possible by a grant secured by the Illinois Green Economy Network (IGEN) and authored by THG Advisors (THG), the report provides a regional assessment of conditions and opportunities, includes input of regional stakeholders, and recommends key next steps. The recommendations are summarized in this Call to Action.

Overview

The report is a rapid needs and opportunities assessment of current conditions in the Lower Illinois River Valley (LIRV). There were two major components to the study. First, literature research provided a snapshot of the baseline condition in the LIRV in terms of economic status, technological capability and opportunities, workforce readiness and federal, state and regional policies. Concurrently, one-on-one interviews were conducted with practitioners in the region, adding a grounded, realistic perspective. The recommendations that resulted call for defined metrics and demonstrable performance, both of which are crucial in building investor and citizen confidence.

White House Task Force Parallels



In April 2017, the White House issued Executive Order 13790, Promoting Agriculture and Rural Prosperity in America, and established the Federal Interagency Task Force on Agricultural and Rural Prosperity. Six months later, the Task Force released a set of 100 recommendations.

The Task Force declared that realizing prosperity in rural America would require action on multiple fronts, including promoting economic development, advancing innovation and technology, ensuring a well-trained and productive workforce, and improving the quality of life in rural communities. The Task Force concluded that achieving increased productivity would require access to capital, improvements in infrastructure, and an adequately trained workforce. Finally, attracting and retaining a skilled and motivated workforce was determined to depend on regional and local quality of life attributes.

The recommendations of the Task Force were ultimately nested across five action areas:

1. Achieving E-Connectivity for Rural America
2. Improving Rural Quality of Life
3. Supporting the Rural Workforce
4. Harnessing Technological Innovation
5. Developing the Rural Economy

The recommendations contained in the report issued by JWCC and IGEN finds alignment with these five focus areas.

Next Steps – Call to Action

Call to Action #1: E-Connectivity for the Lower Illinois River Valley

In today's economy, e-connectivity is essential. E-connectivity is more than connecting households, schools, and healthcare centers through high-speed Internet; it is a tool that enables increased productivity for farms, factories, small businesses, and financial institutions. It is fundamental for economic development, innovation for enterprise, advancements in technology, workforce readiness, and an improved quality of life.

LIRV Activation Project Ideas:

- Establish a Regional Broadband Council to assess existing conditions and engage stakeholders in advancing a coordinated cooperative effort to make e-connectivity a regional strength.
- Develop and advance an accelerated broadband deployment strategy.
- Develop and implement a regional school-based telehealth pilot program.
- Pursue purchase of telehealth support equipment.
- Assess and develop Career and Technical Education (CTE) courseware to meet the workforce needs of a new digital economy.

Call to Action #2: Improving Our Rural Quality of Life

Rural quality of life is a measure of human well-being that can be identified through economic and social indicators. Modern utilities, affordable housing, dependable child care, adequate health care, efficient transportation, and reliable employment are economic indicators that must be integrated with social benchmarks, including access to medical services, public safety, education, and community resilience.

LIRV Activation Project Ideas:

- Stimulate reinvestment in regional town centers.
- Effect greater rural and population hub cooperation with the three largest regional population centers: Quincy, Jacksonville, and Alton, Illinois.
- Support efforts to transform regional health and wellness.
- Build a framework to capitalize on the region's outdoor recreation, nature-based tourism, and active-living economy.
- Create programs and events to celebrate local foods and heritage-based festivals to bolster local and regional food systems and markets with a "Grown in the Valley" brand identity.



- Develop platforms to convey and market compelling relocation strategies, targeting displaced workers, young families, retirees, and other talented individuals with information about the region, such as a ‘relocation guide’ to recruit new residents to the region and the state.

Call to Action #3: Supporting a Rural Workforce

Rebuilding Illinois’ rural population and reestablishing growing, prosperous communities requires a skilled and ready workforce. For rural areas within the LIRV to thrive and prosper, human capital is a top priority.

LIRV Activation Project Ideas:

- Partner with local businesses/organizations to identify gaps and emerging needs. Work with high schools and community colleges to provide expanded CTE opportunities, build awareness of rural career opportunities, identify and augment training to meet emerging needs, and grow apprenticeship opportunities.
- Work with area community college administrators and consortiums, state and county workforce development councils, and workforce practitioners to conceptualize a Community Assessment Rapid Engagement (CARE) platform and pilot efforts to quickly react to small workforce training needs and placement opportunities.
- Develop a small business acumen training toolkit and assistance platform as part of a regional rural entrepreneurship initiative.
- Grow the LIRV’s digital capacity with a skilled and ready workforce. Work with manufacturing partners and community colleges to develop automation and robotics training and certification program.

Call to Action #4: Harnessing Technological Innovation

The impact of technology has been remarkable in terms of production, safety, efficiency, and cost containment. The modern farm is mechanized in every aspect, from combines to grain handling, to in-field real time sensing devices. Most producers are self-selecting for technological advantages, and therefore require individualized education regarding the myriad of choices at their disposal. A key to accelerated deployment of these techniques is the development of effective demonstration programs.

LIRV Activation Project Ideas:

- Foster collaboration between the private sector and community colleges to increase awareness and interest in the digital economy and emerging technologies.
- Develop a Farm Worker/Operator Digital Proficiency Training Program and create a platform to assist small and mid-sized farm operators to troubleshoot digital issues and build their digital proficiency.
- Develop additional peer-to-peer producer networking opportunities, demonstration projects, farm tours, and instructional workshops to accelerate adoption of emerging technologies and best practices.

Call to Action #5: Developing Our Rural Economy

The existence of stronger rural businesses and agricultural economies empowers the nation. Therefore, expanding funding options to increase the productivity of farmers will lead to enhanced viability and competitiveness of rural America, boosting “Made in America” goods, nationally and globally.

LIRV Activation Project Ideas:

- Seek and secure leveraged public and private investment in regionally significant transportation modernization projects and longstanding backlogs of deferred maintenance.
- Support the creation and development of a Regional Rural Economic Development Hub and Clearinghouse. See [North Carolina Rural Center](#) as an example.
- Promote the emerging ecosystem services market.

Call for Transformational Leadership and a Bold New Vision

When considering the activation project ideas offered within each of the Call to Action areas, one looms as an organizing theme above the rest: the conceptualization of a Lower Illinois River Valley Rural Innovation and Career Center. This Center could provide a platform to address each of the activation projects described across all five focus areas.

The Center could be the single “big idea” inspirational and scalable enough to energize interest and advance regionalism. This place-based innovation and incubation hub could create a pathway to regional capacity-building and problem-solving, resiliency, greater long-term economic stability, and regional livability. A nucleus for agricultural innovation is part of this concept, but not all of it. A complementary function of this Center would be to consider “all things rural” and advance a regional approach to revitalization.

Today’s challenges in rural communities require transformative leadership and regional platforms to leverage a larger shared and common effort. Regional rural efforts elsewhere in the nation are finding traction and attracting long-term impact investors.

The aspiration of this reporting is to contribute actionably to the timely discussion regarding how we take next steps to revitalize and build the prosperity of the Lower Illinois River Valley, giving our region the opportunity to make its own contribution to restoring rural America.

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