

RURAL CHAMPION PLACEMAKING & RECRUITMENT PROJECTS

PLACEMAKING IN LINCOLN COUNTY

Background Information

Revitalizing communities through placemaking is a trend sweeping through rural communities. As communities begin to invest in themselves and build energy around beautification projects, people will see that it is a place where they want to live and be involved.

The project in Lincoln County was inspired by the 2021 Kansas “Power Up & Go” report written by the Kansas Sampler Foundation, “Communities of the Future,” which states that a community of the future is one where new residents are welcomed, existing residents are engaged, and the arts are supported. Several projects were combined with the underlying goal of creating a community of the future.

This goal is accomplished first by improving the economy. Economy is based largely on population and in order to see population growth, there must be incentives and advertisements of the county for new families. Advertising the county is as simple as making sure that the community’s downtown looks inviting and cared for. Additionally, it’s just as important to keep current residents in these towns which comes with providing resources that the residents need and want to see in their communities. In most rural towns similar to Lincoln all struggle with this so it’s beneficial for people to continue to support public resources such as libraries and childcare options.

To assist the economy and grow the population, funds were allocated for employee recruitment, downtown beautification, county libraries and childcare facilities. To ensure that this project and its goals would be accomplished, a Rural Champion was hired to lead the process.

The Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation (LCEDF) sought out the Rural Champion to spearhead several initiatives around the “Communities for the Future” theme. The Rural Champion will not only build capacity but renew collective energy to launch several key initiatives.

A goal for this project was to include Placemaking and Beautification Projects. The LCEDF has had several projects stuck in preliminary planning stages for several years and the Rural Champion will help push these forward to completion.

With the help of several funding sources including a SEED grant from the Kansas Department of

Commerce, there is capacity to include downtown beautification projects in every community in the county. The object of this piece is to spruce up downtown to bring in new movers and have the community put together in preparation as Lincoln County will be one of the host counties for the 2024 Big Kansas Road Trip during the first weekend of May.

The other initiatives being a Remote Work Relocation Grant Program. The LCEDF approved the creation of a program similar to Tulsa Remote or Choose Topeka to offer relocation grants to remote workers who move from out-of-state to Lincoln County. The primary goals of the recruitment portion of the Rural Champion project are to support success in bringing at least 5 new families in Lincoln County and have spread the word that Kansas is the place to live. This project is to address the economic downfall with population decreases. The population in 2020 was 2,939; compared to 2010 it was 3,241. Continual decrease is highly impacted by death of the older population with over 25% of the county being over 65 years old.

The Rural Champion will be the local friendly face to correspond with potential applicants, provide community information, answer questions, and generally be a ‘conciierge’ that helps a mover feel welcome and excited about their move and their future.

The obstacle is the concern of the overall dilapidated appearance in the downtowns and concerns from current residents and potential movers. There have been previous attempts to revitalize the area, but never to the extent of this project. The goal for Lincoln County’s downtown was to complete at least three buildings in each community with over 25 paint projects.

When working on a large project, there are going to be challenges that might be faced and make completing difficult. Below are barriers that might arise, but that does not make completing the project impossible:

Gaps/Barriers Identified: Capacity Barriers

- Involvement – Seek out opinions of community members in order to avoid unsatisfactory from those who live in the community.
- Recruitment – Reaching the ideal crowd to bring to Lincoln was found to be a struggle without the correct resources. Hiring outside

- firms found to be helpful.
- Lack of Volunteers - Make sure to do community meetings, church bulletins, and plan several weeks in advance to get a lot of support.
- Try to delegate - For example, if a local business does a volunteer day, work with them to have them sponsor a specific project. This works well and reduces the amount of work on organizers. You can also do the same thing with other organizations. Ask the book club to work with the owner and coordinate a day, snacks, advertising, and pick the colors.

Steps to Success

The key to a successful project is the widespread of involvement and support. Building a committee or workgroup will be a vital part of the success of the project. Utilizing social media, websites, table tents, local flyers and community meetings can really spread the word and find more assistance for the project at hand. The most common involvement will come from groups such as Economic Development, County Commissioners, City Council members, Recreational Departments and the Pride committee. Many resources had been identified but gaining more involvement will ultimately determine the success of the project.

Through the initial process of identifying projects, it was decided that informing and involving the community was critical and the best way to do so is by holding meetings to vote on the plans for Lincoln. By providing a platform for community members allows for new ideas and ensuring the best approach for the people living and movers in Lincoln County. Having meetings gave them the opportunity to share things past experiences similar to the work of the project such as budget and timeline restraints, how projects were determined while also providing the opportunity for them to play a role and have buy-in. When providing these platforms and opportunities, it's recommended to keep discussion on the identified projects to limit negativism that can occur if opened to general comments. While having the community present, it's just as important to include business owners in order to have their consent before the projects are presented to prevent burning bridges with local businesses.

The best success for community meetings was specifically reaching out to people asking them to spread the word to make sure everyone had the opportunity to attend and have their voices heard. There success in making sure there was plenty of time to plan for these meeting to ensure it would be effective and run as smoothly as possible. By planning weeks in advance, creating a large sign to place near the building and using social media

platforms to share details were just few ways to inform the public of the meetings.

It's important to emphasize how much everyone needs to be given a job. In Lincoln County, there were several older members of the community that wanted to work but might not have had the means to do so. Many wanted to donate but did not have the funds. Some had prior obligations that conflicted with the volunteer hours but that is when it's important to get creative and find jobs for everyone that wanted to assist in the project. Older volunteers might not be able to perform much physical work, but they could bring snacks to those who are working. Those who have prior obligations could share on their social media platforms to reach more people. Those who want to assist financially but might not be able could potentially ask to pick up the supplies and delivery them to different sites. It's important to be creative in this space.

Solutions

- Get the community to fall in love with the project. Explained how rare it is to receive such funds and how important it is to come together as a community to revitalize the town.
- Once anything was done, post pictures of before and after, and of the volunteers working and smiling. This really helped to build support in other cities and get them excited for their "turn".
- Make sure to work when there is more street/foot traffic for others in the community to see the work going into the project. This could encourage other to volunteer and result a quicker turnaround.
- Have community input on mural design and make sure to listen and respond to each suggestion. Start from scratch on a chalkboard; have people call out things they feel would be important to be in the mural and suggest designs, colors, location etc. The community connected with the historical things added to the mural and half the population of the town showed up to help paint it.

This group was awarded a SEED grant that funded all paint projects we wished to complete. It was helpful to utilize volunteers for labor to bring down costs. This allowed for there to be six murals and over 20 buildings worked on throughout the community.

The goal was to show pride in the county and build morale amongst residents. With so many volunteers and projects completed, many other businesses and even homes have been updated

in the downtown. The goal has been achieved. Currently there is still working going on with Google maps to try to get local photos updated, but tremendous progress has been made in the community.

Resources Identified

The Rural Champion Project Implementation Grant funding is being used to support The Placemaking Grant Program. Open to any municipality, non-profit or business in Lincoln County, is intended to provide an extra boost to volunteer efforts that will continue revitalizing Lincoln County through “placemaking” projects that will either 1) create new amenities for residents, or 2) enhance local attractions for the coming Big Kansas Road Trip (BKRT) in May 2-5, 2024.

Placemaking projects are those that create or improve public spaces or recreation areas where people enjoy gathering such as downtowns, parks, or neighborhoods. These projects demonstrate pride and a commitment towards making our communities better for future generations. Examples of placemaking projects include murals and public art, walking paths and bike trails, benches and flowerpots, and streetscape improvements and holiday lights among many other ideas.

Projects associated with enhancing local attractions for the BKRT are those that provide a better experience for visitors exploring the region. Examples include installing signage and information kiosks or improving parking or sidewalk access to entrances.

- The SEED grant funded all of the paint, and supplies. Rural Champion grant funded the man hours to organize it. Both were obtained from Kansas Department of Commerce through and matched by the Economic Development Foundation.
- Some individual communities added to the projects by allocating funds to further projects in their communities. For example: the city of Barnard used a portion of the funds to paint a building, but then added their own to have a signage added.
- Local hardware shops were the greatest partners in the project. These shops would supply everything and often worked after hours or came in when closed on special occasions to fulfill very demanding orders.
- The partnerships with local leaders were key to success. Such partnerships helped identify needs, rally people, and connected all networks of people. Be sure to ask as many questions as possible. For example: “Do you know any local artists that may be able to help us come up with a design?”

RECRUITMENT IN LINCOLN COUNTY

Background Information

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The primary goals of the recruitment portion of the Rural Champion project is to support success in bringing at least five new families to Lincoln County, and have these families spread the word that Kansas is the place to live.

Steps to Success

There have been several marketing efforts put forward to help bring in new residents and incentivize young people to stay. Many of these efforts were done by the Chamber office and Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation.

When struggling to find resources to reach the target group to move to Lincoln, LCEDF partnered with and hired a MakeMyMove recruitment firm. The goal with the recruitment team is to connect communities to employees who can work from anywhere. There was a two-year contract put into place to ensure that by the end of the project there would be five new families move to Lincoln.

A website has also been developed modeled after the one on MakeMyMove. Rather than work-from-home employees, the targeted audience is people who can fill key roles in the community, such as but not limited, to medical personnel, teachers, law enforcement, and contractors.

Investing in good advertising could be another option, but that would require another person on the team, and some might not have additional resources for that. Hiring a company has proven to be successful so far and would recommend outsourcing the advertising if that’s needed and there are means to do so.

To start out the project, creating a list of incentives that would be offered to new movers and reach locals to provide such items was a top priority. When asking for such requests, it’s beneficial to provide a full list of incentives and ask for suggestions for ideas to expand the list.

It was found to be more impactful to talk about the amazing communities that come from Lincoln to shift the direction to things to love about the town as if the project has already been successful and is completed.

The number of incentives at hand could potentially be a lot to ask of one person or organization. To avoid causing burdens on the community, make

the list as a selection of options instead of requiring every single incentive to make it less overwhelming.

Solutions

The main obstacle for this project in the beginning was budget. Getting support of the board can be a challenge. It was important to present statistics that helped them see the positive impact on the community and bring a guest to the meeting who can testify of the solutions where possible.

For those residents that had moved to the county in the last five years were fortunate enough to be included with the incentives as the local business owner was willing to extend their offer for that timeline.

Resources Identified

Our MakeMyMove initiative was funded in part by the LCEDF's general funds as match to a \$20,000 grant from the Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center, Inc. (NWKEICI). The NWKEICI saw this as a unique idea to support as a pilot project and potential case study for supporting other MMM initiatives.

The biggest non-financial resource is the list of incentives provided by local members of the community which is listed below. This is important to the plan for the project and in conversations with potential new residents to show the support from the community.

Incentives Lincoln County offers:

- 100% [ROZ Income Tax Waiver](#) (if eligible)
- \$500 High-speed Internet Service Credit
- \$4,500 Cash
- \$5,000 Cash Incentive for hired spouse or partner at qualifying job
- 1-year membership at [Post Rock Fitness](#)
- Lincoln Avenue's [Tea Time with Marilyn](#), the Mother of Lincoln County Tourism
- Dozen Farm-Fresh Eggs Every Month for a Year
- Welcome Potluck and Basket
- Choose Your Own Outdoor Adventure: Mountain Biking, Bird Watching, Boating or Hunting Areas Tour
- Ebike guided city tour
- Custom name sign painted on historical local rock
- Welcome Basket sponsored by local bank including local products and freebees
- Optional: [Free Lot to Build a House On](#)

Partnerships with local leaders was also key to success. It helped identify needs, rally people, and connected a network of people.