

U.S. Department of Agriculture – Rural Development
FY 2022 Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC)

Final Report

RPIC Cooperator: CHM, LLC dba Atlas Community Studios
Period of Performance: October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2024



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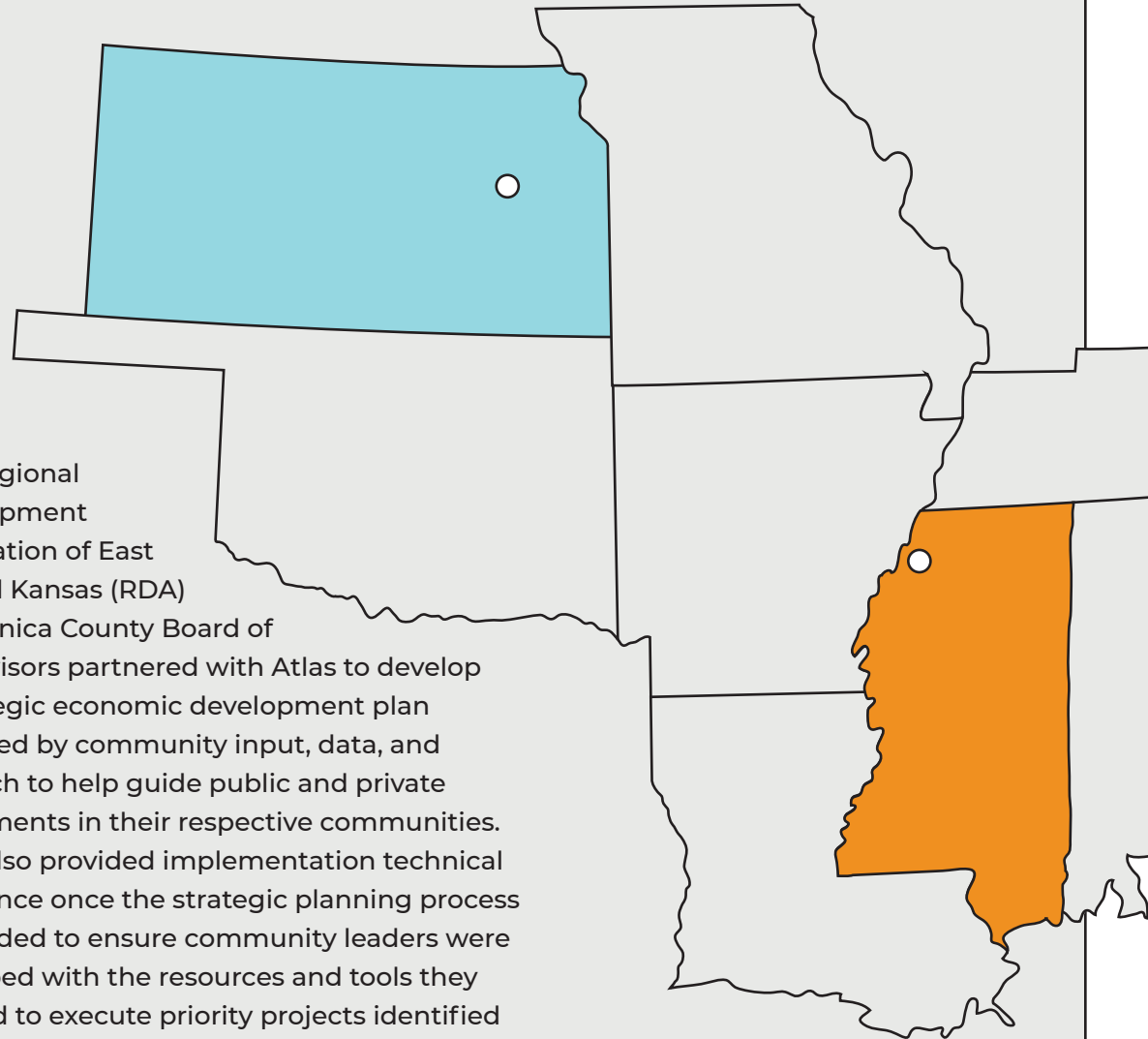
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Introduction

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development (RD) announced the third round of the Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) to provide planning support and technical assistance to foster placemaking and spur economic development in rural communities. USDA RD selected technical assistance providers from across the country to help rural communities create plans to enhance capacity for broadband access, preserve cultural and historic structures, and support the development of transportation, housing, and recreational spaces. CHM, LLC dba Atlas Community Studios (Atlas) was selected as an RPIC Cooperator to provide technical assistance to Emporia, Kansas and Tunica County, Mississippi through the **Rural Placemaking Accelerator (RPA)**.

Atlas is a woman and minority-owned firm fueled by creative problem-solvers and capacity-builders committed to advancing the economic prosperity of communities nationwide.

The Regional Development Association of East Central Kansas (RDA) and Tunica County Board of Supervisors partnered with Atlas to develop a strategic economic development plan informed by community input, data, and research to help guide public and private investments in their respective communities. Atlas also provided implementation technical assistance once the strategic planning process concluded to ensure community leaders were equipped with the resources and tools they needed to execute priority projects identified in their plans.



Key Objectives of the Rural Placemaking Accelerator

Develop sustainable, multi-sectoral partnerships with public, private, philanthropic and community organizations to advance local economic development projects and placemaking initiatives, and to incentivize long-term investment to strengthen community resiliency.

Evaluate the local labor market and create strategies to strengthen the workforce development ecosystem to meet the needs of job seekers and existing industry.

Assess local housing markets and create strategies to rehabilitate existing units, incentivize new home development, and leverage a range of financing mechanisms to expand affordable housing through the region.

Analyze broadband accessibility and identify strategies to connect rural residents and businesses to high-speed internet.

Leverage existing assets to develop new or enhanced cultural and recreational amenities to improve quality of life for residents and expand tourism opportunities.

Establish a peer exchange network for partner beneficiaries – Emporia, KS and Tunica County, MS – as a community of practice to facilitate a platform for ideas, problem-solving, best practices, and resources to be shared amongst rural communities/ regions.



Planning Process

Major phases and activities completed during the period of performance are described on the following pages.

Project Kickoff & Peer Exchange Network

Atlas facilitated project team meetings, established a peer exchange network with RPIC beneficiary communities, assisted with building a multi-sectoral steering committee to guide the planning process, conducted preliminary research for each community, and developed a project website for public consumption.

DELIVERABLES

→ Website (rpa2023.com)

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Public Engagement

Atlas collected qualitative input through public visioning meetings, focus groups, interviews, and surveys to synthesize emerging themes in a public input report.

DELIVERABLES

- Emporia Public Input Report
- Tunica County Public Input Report

Community Assessment

Atlas integrated qualitative input with quantitative data indicators to identify key trends, challenges, and strategic opportunity areas. This information was documented in a community assessment report for each beneficiary community.

DELIVERABLES

- Emporia Community Assessment Report
- Tunica County Community Assessment Report

Strategic Plan

Atlas collaboratively developed strategic plans with beneficiary communities, including recommended strategies, partnerships, priority projects/initiatives, best practices and resources, and funding opportunities for four focus areas: Workforce Development, Housing, Broadband, and Arts, Culture & Recreation.

DELIVERABLES

- Emporia Strategic Plan
- Tunica Strategic Plan

Implementation Technical Assistance

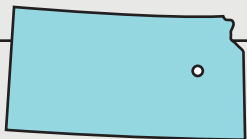
Atlas guided beneficiary communities through strategic plan implementation by prioritizing projects/initiatives, refining timelines, identifying viable funding opportunities, mobilizing project committees/subcommittees, and leveraging programs and resources provided by the Rural Partners Network.

DELIVERABLES

- “Developing a Grants Strategy” Framework

Community Engagement

Below is a summary of public engagement activities that took place during the strategic planning process in Emporia.



Emporia, Kansas

PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE

19 individuals

from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors

The Steering Committee convened quarterly for meetings to help guide the strategic planning process and to ensure the development of the plan was community-centered and in alignment with collective priorities.

Atlas met with the Steering Committee in March 2023 to facilitate a visioning session.

FOCUS GROUPS JUNE 2023

3 facilitated discussions

emphasis on topics such as housing, workforce development, and arts, culture and tourism

INTERVIEWS MARCH 2023 JULY 2023

Atlas conducted interviews with:

- Workforce development practitioners
- Arts, culture, and recreation stakeholders
- Native Spanish speakers

PUBLIC VISIONINGS MARCH 2023

65+ attendees

Overall, approximately **35** individuals participated in the focus groups and interviews.

ONLINE SURVEY RELEASED MARCH 2023

289 responses

English survey

7 responses

Spanish survey

Community Engagement (cont.)

Below is a summary of public engagement activities that took place during the strategic planning process in Tunica County.



Tunica County, Mississippi

PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE

19 individuals

from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors

The Steering Committee convened quarterly for meetings to help guide the strategic planning process and to ensure the development of the plan was community-centered and in alignment with collective priorities.

Atlas met with the Steering Committee in March 2023 to facilitate a visioning session.

PUBLIC VISIONINGS MARCH 2023

50+ attendees

including high school students

ONLINE SURVEY RELEASED MARCH 2023

182 responses

FOCUS GROUPS JULY 2023

3 facilitated discussions

emphasis on topics such as housing, workforce development, and arts, culture and tourism

Overall, approximately **15** individuals participated in the focus groups.

INTERVIEWS SEPT 2023 OCT 2023

Atlas conducted interviews with:

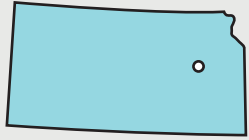
- County officials and staff
- Workforce development practitioners
- Arts and culture stakeholders

Key Trends & Challenges

The following key trends and challenges emerged from the quantitative research and public engagement conducted for each beneficiary's Community Assessment report.

HOUSING

Inventory - lack of availability 20-25 yrs
Age of Housing Avg Age - 1964 / not updated
Land Locked - Rivers / Flood Zones
Large Property Merged / let properties back
↳ Code enforcement
Centraries / Builders - long wait list - struggle w / labor
Supply chain
Affordability - [Starter Home \$120-200]



Emporia, Kansas

Workforce Development

- For various reasons—housing shortage, lack of childcare, lower paying jobs, etc.—Emporia is struggling to attract and retain a skilled workforce.
- Emporia and Lyon County are realizing a number of people enrolling in an institution of higher education but not completing their certificate or degree program.
- Latinos represent a substantial segment of the workforce but are not fully immersed in the local community and economy, likely leading to a loss of industry productivity, labor force participation, and entrepreneurial development.

Housing

- Lyon County continues to face an aging housing stock, a high number of vacancies, and lack of new builds.
- Housing affordability continues to be a challenge for both homeowners and renters.

Broadband

- A large portion of Lyon County appears to have broadband accessibility, but pockets remain where accessibility and reliability could be improved.

Arts, Culture & Recreation

- Outdoor recreation is a huge draw to Emporia for both residents and visitors with unique amenities and successful events drawing huge crowds to the community.
- Emporia is home to a wide variety of visual and performing arts as well as cultural assets.
- As Emporia continues to realize tourism-related success, community leaders could potentially face tension between residents and visitors if new cultural and recreational development focuses more on tourists than residents.



Tunica County, Mississippi

Workforce Development

- Tunica County residents are enrolling in college but are not finishing their degree programs, resulting in a non-credentialed workforce that could face barriers to meeting the qualifications for employment within industries offering family sustaining wages.
- Tunica County has several public and private organizations supporting talent pipeline development, but the area overall does not have an established workforce development ecosystem of interconnected partners and resources.
- With Tunica County's economy heavily concentrated in the gaming and hospitality industries, workforce retention and attraction can become especially difficult, especially for individuals seeking employment in a region offering more diversified career pathways.

Housing

- Tunica County has a relatively young housing stock, and has continued to build new housing despite rising costs to build.
- Despite a majority of the population being renters, significant levels of vacancy exist among rental units, potentially indicating an oversupply of units and lack of demand, affordability challenges, or poor housing conditions.
- Renters earn significantly less income and are twice as likely to spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs than homeowners in Tunica County, making them severely disadvantaged.

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Broadband

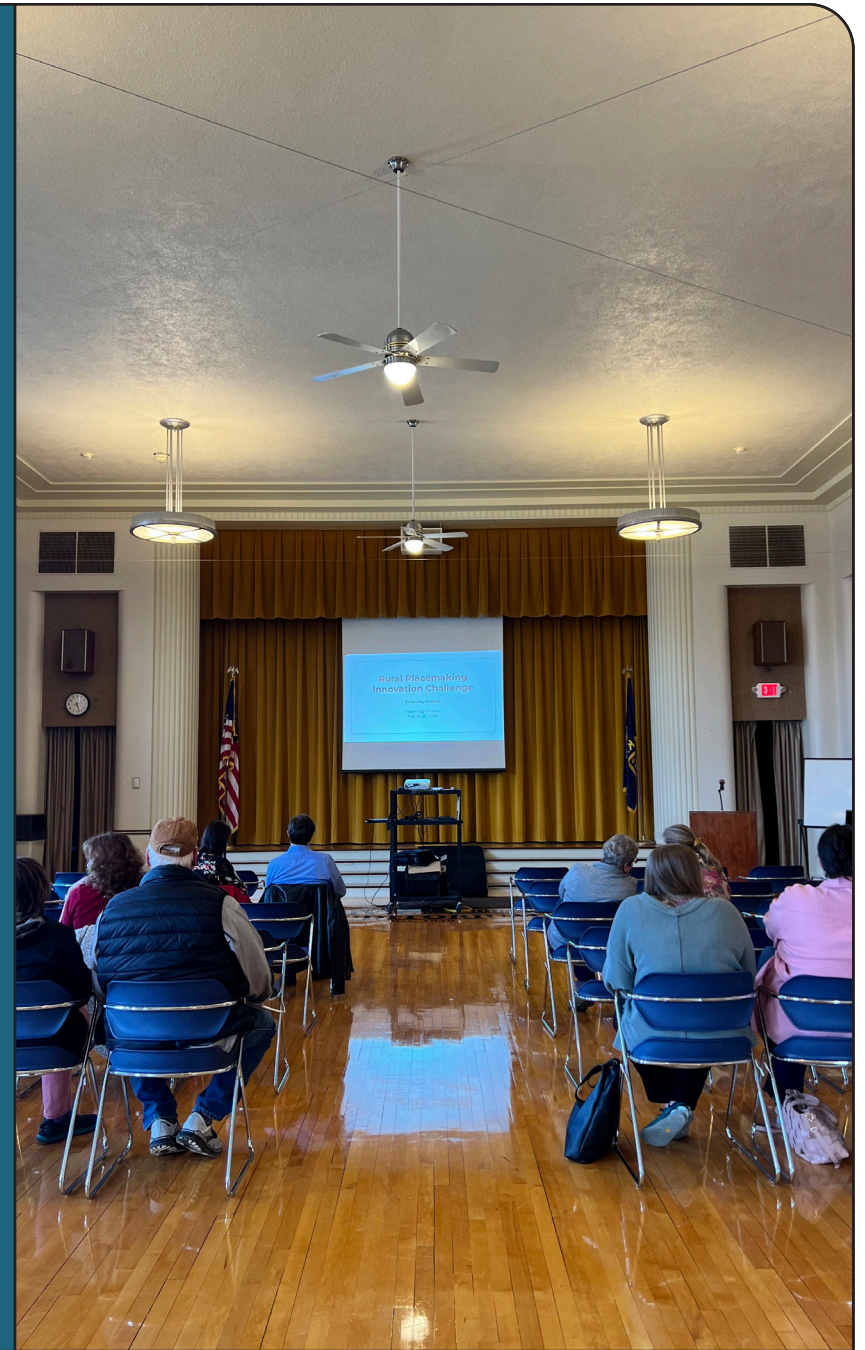
- Although Mississippi is low-ranking in terms of internet coverage, speed, and availability, recent efforts at the state-level are aimed at addressing these connectivity barriers.
- Access to broadband services often correlates with household income in Tunica County.
- Data demonstrates that there is some correlation between internet access and level of income, suggesting that financial resources could be a prevalent barrier to access.
- Tunica County and the Town of Tunica seem to have solid enrollment rates for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), but have limited internet service providers who accept ACP subsidies while also offering reasonable download speeds. + Fixed wireless coverage is sporadic and unreliable, further widening the access gap to obtain internet services through a wireless device.

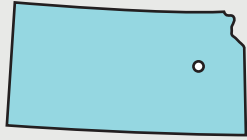
Arts, Entertainment & Recreation

- Tunica County revolves around a tourist-driven economy, which can have both positive and negative impacts on local residents and businesses.
- Tunica County's location on the Mississippi River and other natural assets are a major draw for tourists, second to local gaming institutions.
- Tunica County residents feel there are not enough "things to do", and are especially interested in more family-friendly options and youth activities.

Priority Projects

Informed by the findings in the Community Assessment reports, Atlas presented potential project concepts to each Steering Committee for their consideration. During a Strategy Workshop, each Steering Committee collectively decided that the following project concepts should be prioritized based on their likely viability, potential partners, available resources and overall community buy-in.





Emporia, Kansas

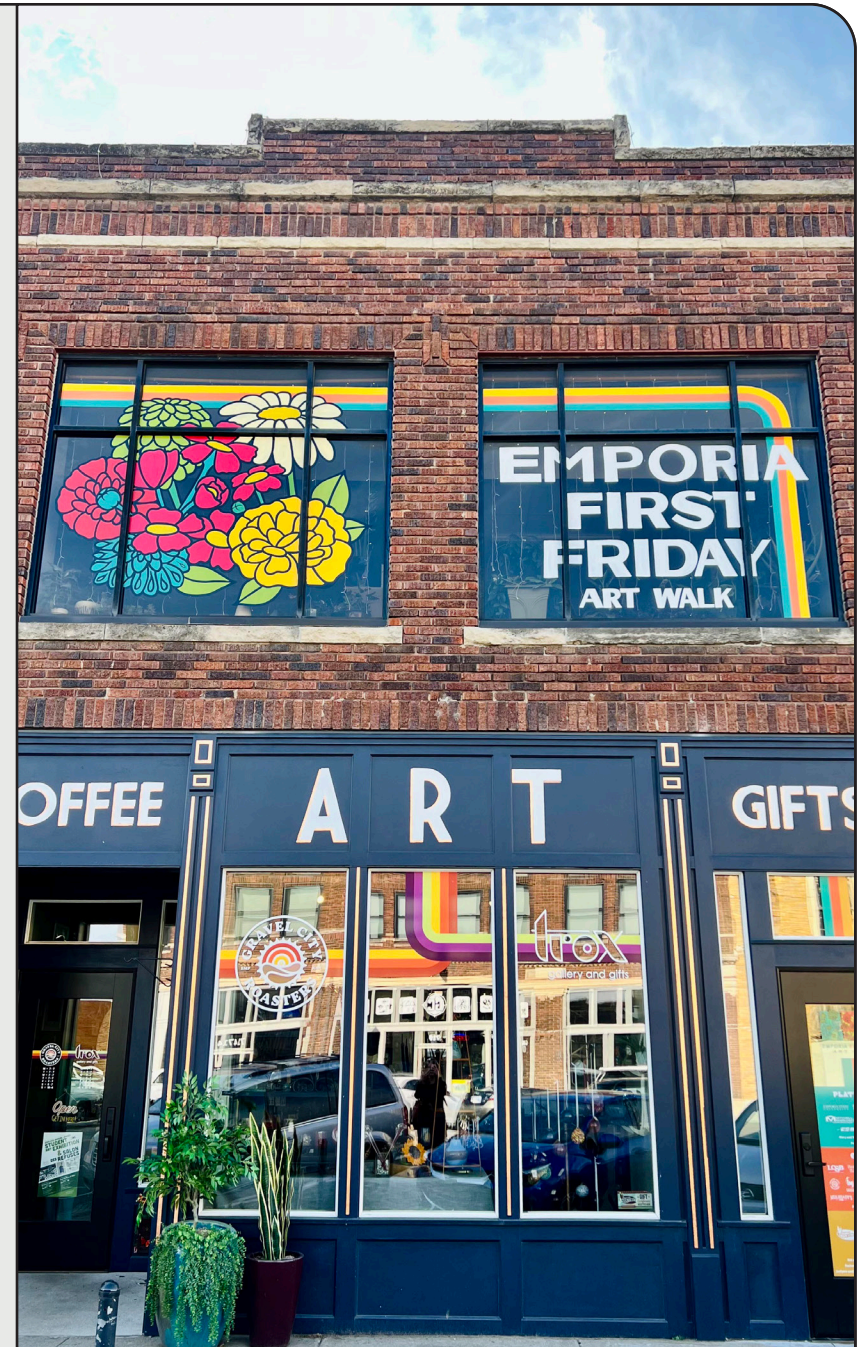
Workforce Development

- Hire a Spanish-speaking community engagement specialist to liaise with special population groups in Emporia and connect them to programs and resources.
- Offer all printed and online materials related to workforce development/education and small businesses/entrepreneurship in both English and Spanish .
- Develop a registered apprenticeship program to support several regional employers in need of developing workforce talent pipelines for in-demand careers.
- Develop a pre-apprenticeship program to engage young people early and build awareness of jobs offered by regional employers.

Housing

- Launch a cohort-style program to recruit and train local residents interested in becoming residential developers.
- Develop a pattern book of appropriate single and multi-family housing units specific for infill lots to encourage uniform development.
- Explore creative approaches to residential development, such as modular or tiny homes, to meet the needs of under-housed or unhoused populations.

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Broadband

- Identify a liaison to collaborate with local, regional, and state partners on broadband efforts
- Conduct a targeted community-wide Speed Test Initiative to further determine Emporia's existing gaps and needs for broadband accessibility and reliability.
- Develop a marketing campaign to increase awareness of the Affordable Connectivity Program and encourage eligible households to enroll.

Arts, Culture & Recreation

- Conduct a feasibility study to assess the potential economic impact of a new community sports complex and recreation center.
- Create an artist-in-residence program and community art studio to support local and regional artists, and attract new talent, ideas and programming to the community.
- Establish Emporia as an arts & culture hub by strengthening the existing creative ecosystem and expanding marketing efforts.





Tunica County, Mississippi

Workforce Development

- Expand opportunities for residents to participate in GED preparation courses and testing or other short-term credentialing programs to assist them with meeting job qualifications.
- Develop an on-the-job training program or Registered Apprenticeship program for an industry in the Tunica County region that is willing and able to pay family-sustaining wages.
- Partner with AccelerateMS to advance “Region 1’s” workforce ecosystem – comprising employers, higher education, other training providers, K-12, wraparound service providers and local government – to coalesce around workforce development programs and resources to be offered and shared regionally throughout the Mississippi Delta.

Housing

- Develop a vacant housing inventory, noting the number, location, and types of vacant properties.
- Organize community-led initiatives where volunteers help with basic home repairs and improvements, especially for those who are unable to manage due to physical or financial constraints.
- Collaborate with private developers, non-profits, and financial institutions to create comprehensive homeownership programs.

Broadband

- Develop a local task force to assist state-designated BEAM “teams” by increasing awareness of and enrolling eligible households in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP).
- Conduct an audit of cell service-related challenges to improve mobile broadband solutions.
- Create community Wi-Fi zones in public spaces like parks, libraries, and community centers to offer no-cost high-speed internet access.

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Arts, Entertainment & Recreation

- Explore the development of more family-friendly amenities
- Work with local businesses and building owners to sign up for a mural installation, leveraging the talents of Mississippi artists and local students
- Establish a local artists coalition to begin to build an ecosystem of creatives in Tunica County—and potentially the broader Mississippi Delta—and connect to growth opportunities, such as the Mississippi Arts Commission's Artist Roster.

Immediate Outcomes

- Completed **Public Input Summaries, Community Assessment Reports, and Strategic Plans** for Emporia and Tunica County
 - [Emporia Public Input Summaries](#)
 - [Emporia Community Assessment Report](#)
 - [Emporia Strategic Plan](#)
 - [Tunica County Input Summaries](#)
 - [Tunica County Community Assessment Report](#)
 - [Tunica County Strategic Plan](#)
- Tunica County was selected to be a part of the Tri-County North Delta Community Network under the **U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Partners Network**.
- Collaborated with Tunica County to **submit a Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) grant application** to the U.S. Department of Labor
 - Tunica County was **awarded ~\$1.1 million** in September 2024 – the first workforce development grant they have ever received.
- Tunica County was selected to be a part of the **Thriving Communities Program** under the U.S. Department of Transportation.
- Collaborated with the Emporia Spanish Speakers nonprofit to advance a short-term priority project by **securing philanthropic funding** to hire a Spanish-speaking community engagement specialist to liaise with special population groups
 - Utilized the **\$5,000 "RPIC Seed Grant"** to create a Community Resource Handbook translated in English and Spanish, which advanced the following priority project: Offer all printed and online materials related to Workforce Development/Education and Small Business/Entrepreneurship in both Spanish and English.

Atlas collaborated with Tunica County to submit a Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) grant application to the U.S. Department of Labor. They were awarded **~\$1.1 million** in September 2024—the first workforce development grant they have ever received.

Lessons Learned

Challenges or Unanticipated Aspects

- Engagement with rural communities can sometimes be inconsistent, which can delay the strategic planning process.
- Most, if not all, rural communities (including Emporia and Tunica County) struggle with capacity-related issues, such as being understaffed and underresourced.
- There is a significant Spanish-speaking population in Emporia, and it was challenging to reach these individuals during the community engagement process.
 - Atlas hired a translator for one of the community sessions, but no Spanish-speaking residents attended.
- As is often the case, there are competing interests in communities on an organizational level and across people of various backgrounds.
 - This can make it difficult to hone in on collective priorities, but this is a great opportunity for Cooperators to play the neutral third party and help bring various groups together around one vision and community-driven goals.

Advice for Future Cooperators

Strengths

- Both communities were committed to the process and are actively implementing their strategic plans.
- The strategic plans outlined short-, medium-, and long-term priorities to provide immediate implementation opportunities for each community.
 - This led to several wins within months of the strategic plans being completed.
- Overall, RPIC provided flexibility to Cooperators to engage with the beneficiary communities to determine how to proceed with the strategic planning and technical assistance process.

Limitations

- It takes time to build trust and community buy-in during a strategic planning process.
 - RPIC could benefit from being a three-year program where public engagement and community assessment is the primary focus during much of the first year, then the first half of the second year is dedicated to strategic planning, and the rest of the time is devoted to hands-on technical assistance to support implementation.

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- Ideally, Cooperators can spend more time on-the-ground in communities, but Atlas was limited by budget constraints.
- Capacity and resources differed substantially in the two beneficiary communities, and Cooperators in similar situations should consider customized approaches to meet their unique needs.

Advice


- Customize community engagement approaches to meet people where they are.
 - This will help Cooperators reach more diverse and underrepresented populations.
- High-level goals and objectives being the bulk of a strategic plan are less meaningful without practical guidance for how communities can implement their plans.
- Strategic plans should be living documents so Cooperators should advise communities on how to review and revise their plans on a semi-annual or annual basis.
- Cooperators should encourage communities to document and celebrate their successes.
 - Storytelling plays a huge role in soliciting funding for community projects and is a skill every community should refine.

What We'd Do Differently Next Time

- The amount of time Cooperators need during the community engagement phase should not be underestimated – it's so important to make sure everyone in a community feels heard.
 - Provide various forums for feedback including in-person and virtual public visioning meetings, focus groups, interviews, surveys, and informal conversations during site visits, etc.
 - In hindsight, we would have spent more time and resources on community engagement phase.
- We would have communicated with each community and Steering Committee more frequently.
 - Consistent project updates are appreciated and we have discovered that it helps to send out written updates to the community and Steering Committee every two weeks (weekly updates become overwhelming and monthly updates get ignored by most).
 - We also would have provided more frequent updates on the project website for the public to view at any time.

Atlas Community Studios

To learn more about Atlas, visit our website at atlastudios.com or email us at hello@atlastudios.com.

   @atlastudios