

US Department of Agriculture Rural Development
RURAL PLACEMAKING INNOVATION CHALLENGE

*Final
Report for
Pennsylvania
Downtown
Center*



Helping *you* make *your* town a better place.

p a d o w n t o w n . o r g

USDA-RD RPIC

Final Report for Pennsylvania Downtown Center

The US Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA-RD) - Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) grant was awarded to the Pennsylvania Downtown Center as one in only five projects awarded nationally in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall of 2020. The purpose of the project is to *provide measurable results in helping rural communities **build robust and sustainable economies** through strategic investments in **infrastructure, partnerships and innovation.***

Key strategies of RPIC include:

- Achieving e-Connectivity for Rural America
- Developing the Rural Economy
- Harnessing Technological Innovation
- Supporting a Rural Workforce
- Improving Quality of Life

RPIC Operates Under the Following Beliefs:

- **Creating livable communities is important** for community developers and practitioners who implement these strategies in rural communities and area **RPIC supports this development practice.**
- It is important that **Placemaking practices include both innovative and adaptive** as well as **established technical processes and solutions.**
- **Partnerships are a key element** to the RPIC, and must be developed with public, private, and philanthropic organizations, **creating new collaborative approaches** thereby learning together and bringing those learned strategies into rural communities.
- **Placemaking contributes to long-term investment** and therefore supports a community's resiliency, social stability and collective identity.
- **Broadband is an essential component** to supporting placemaking initiatives.

Pennsylvania's project is the next phase for most of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh's (FHLBank) 2015 Blueprint Communities: Clarion, New Castle, Reynoldsville, and a regional initiative in Huntingdon County, located in Mount Union, Mapleton & Shirley Township. Realizing that the work of community revitalization is an iterative

process, this project builds off the previous visioning and strategy development to provide an up-to-date evaluation and refresh within the context of the pandemic to develop projects in the community that help to Innovate, Succeed & Sustain.

The intent of the Pennsylvania Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) project is to help communities Innovate, Succeed & Sustain with these outcomes:

- improved community perceptions
- increased organizational capacity
- better informed organizations
- increased volunteerism
- overall increased buy-in to the communities' revitalization effort
- New designations? e.g. Main Street, Elm Street or Nature-Based Placemaking

Three years ago, we had no idea how long the impact of the pandemic would be felt in our communities and in our daily lives. It continues to be difficult to predict and properly anticipate the overall long-term economic, psychological, social, and political effects from the pandemic. What we do know is that communities and the people who make up our communities continue to be responsive, resilient, creative, and diligent in working to make their places better for all. The ideas for some of these projects began before the pandemic and were implemented within the last two years, other projects were instigated by and initiated during the pandemic. We'll share some of the ideas that have come out of the last two years, and how these communities are moving forward.

Clarion

CLARION BLUEPRINT COMMUNITY, INC.

In the Borough of Clarion, **Clarion Blueprint Community, Inc.**, is the community revitalization 501c-3 organization. As part of its USDA Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) Grant, Clarion Blueprint Community, Inc. has made substantial headway in both updating its vision-statement and five-year plan. The updated vision statement is as follows:

"Located in northwest Pennsylvania, historic Clarion Borough provides a safe and clean home for its residents and as a welcoming community for visitors, tourists, and new investors. Clarion Borough is developing numerous 21st-century assets including:

- A vibrant thriving and walkable Main Street;
- Numerous outdoor recreation opportunities;
- A college town environment with its in-time connections to Clarion University of PA;
- Serving as a hub of entrepreneurship and business growth; and
- The benefits of small-town living with many urban amenities."



As an integral part of its efforts to increase the "benefits of small town living," Clarion Blueprint Community Inc. (CBCI), has initiated work on the development of a "multi-generational" community park on 2nd Avenue In Clarion. The phased, multi-year construction of the park began summer of 2022 with site preparation and drainage system work. Blueprint member Theron Miles explained the current construction is "just an infrastructure phase," expected to last for about 45 days. "It's just earth moving, utilities, and stormwater," said Miles in an interview with Explore Clarion.

Actual park construction work began in 2022 and is expected to be completed in 2024. When completed, the park is expected to include:

- A playground
- A sand volleyball court
- An outdoor event venue
- Locker rooms and concession stands
- Basketball courts
- Tennis courts
- An ice rink
- A splash park
- A shuffleboard court

It is hoped that the ice rink may be developed to include tournament style hockey games as a way to increase disposable income within the Borough.

In addition to the new community park, CBCI also undertook:

- An entrepreneurial development audit
- A "shark-tank" type innovation competition
- And the clean-up of a former environmentally challenged auto service property

Clarion

CLARION BLUEPRINT COMMUNITY, INC.

In addition to the above-mentioned projects, Clarion Blueprint Community, Inc. has been working with the Pennsylvania Downtown Center to develop façade improvement program guidelines to proceed with a local façade improvement grant program. Clarion Blueprint Community's biggest impact was the creation of an informal partnership between itself and the Clarion County Economic Development Corporation, the Clarion County Housing and Redevelopment Authority, and the Borough of Clarion, all of whom had input into the development of the façade program.

An unexpected outcome of this program was the Clarion County Economic Development Corporation (CCEDC) stepping up to say it would be willing to be the long-term implementing organization for not just a Clarion revitalization effort, including a façade program, but for a larger county-wide effort as well. CCEDC is about to undergo a regional revitalization planning effort throughout multiple core communities in the county, with the Borough of Clarion being the hub. The intended outcome of this planning effort will be to pursue a regional Pennsylvania Main Street designation, the Keystone Communities Regional Main Street program.

Additional intended outcomes around applying for and leveraging public and private investments, such as façade grants or loan financial incentives will make business and property owners more willing to adopt reasonable façade guidance and restrictions, even in relatively conservative communities where strong attitudes around property rights prevail.

Unfortunately, challenges continued during the project and due to the lack of dedicated staff from the Clarion Blueprint Community Inc., as it is an all-volunteer organization. Because of this, the Pennsylvania Downtown Center had to provide more administrative support than originally envisioned. Other challenges continue to exist with a municipal council that is reluctant to advance measures that are not their ideas. Building ownership will continue to be a priority in the community and in the leadership of the governing body. However, the intended outcome was to provide the framework for an intentional façade improvement program and initiative that can be implemented however appropriate it is for the community. Mission accomplished.



New Castle

NEW VISIONS

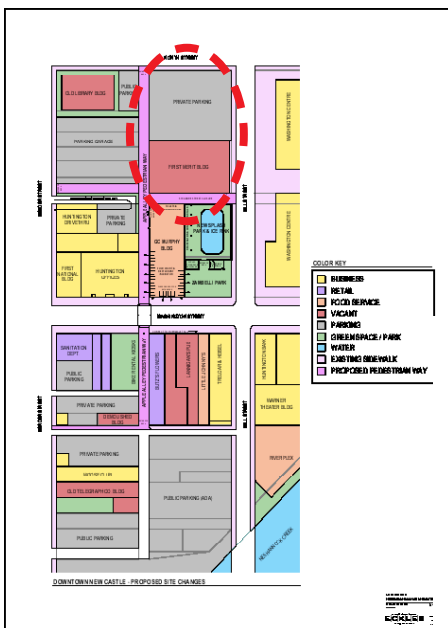
In the City of New Castle, **New Visions** is the community nonprofit that is leading the revitalization effort. They are working as a community connector in close partnership with a variety of other organizations, along with city and county-wide initiatives, and linking other consultants, such as LISC and Recast City. Out of the revised five-year strategy and visioning refresh through the RPIC project, the program saw a need and rebranded themselves as “Hometown New Castle: Home is Here”, with a newly developed social media campaign, hats, t-shirts, other merchandise, and a video series that’s just about ready to launch.

During the five-year strategy and vision refresh process, the community determined that they needed to define a project that they could rally behind, and the idea of the public market/ice rink/park, climbed to the top of the list. These projects are currently in the conceptual design phase, as they are developing a phased three-year plan to implement the individual elements. When completed this project will provide a much-needed entrepreneurial and food hub and an inviting yearlong public gathering space. This project could be transformational as it helps to generate additional economic activity along E. Washington Street, culminating so much of the work that has been done over the last few years. Community leaders, Angie Urban and Kim Kohler-Jones, believe that “the synergy

that has been created is nearing a tipping point of positive influence”.

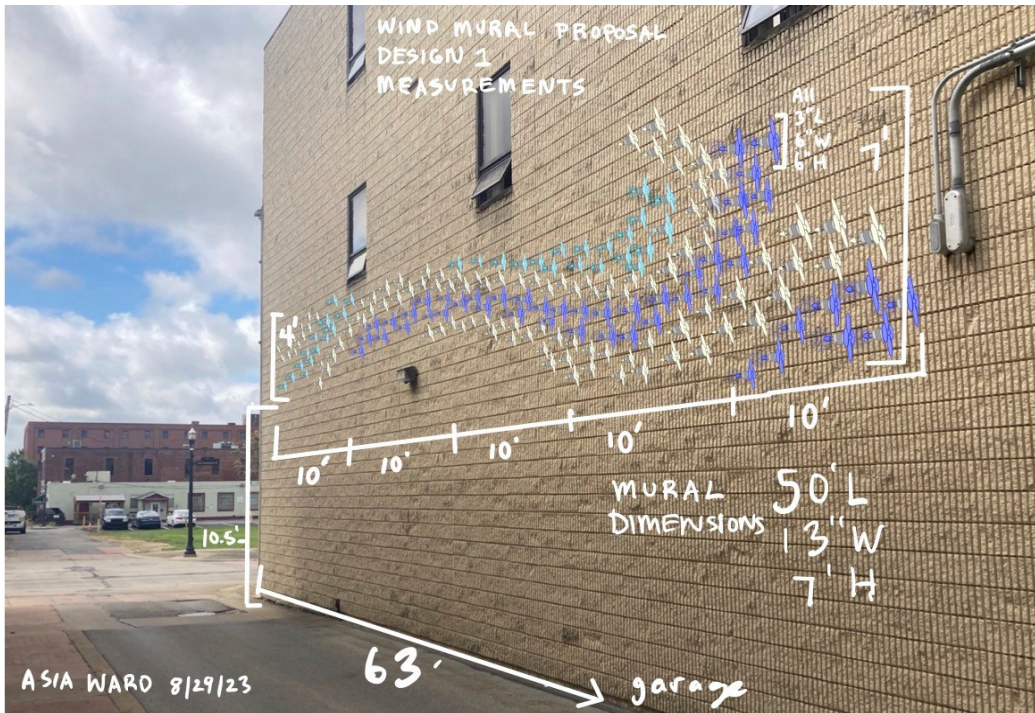
Since the beginning of the project, one of the greatest challenges over the years has been building cooperation between multiple players to work on a project collaboratively. The Apple Alley project represents a collaboration between the New Castle Blueprint Communities Council, New Visions for Lawrence County (the fiscal agent), the New Castle Community Development Corporation, the City of New Castle, and the Lawrence County Conservation District. The project included ‘greening’ the alley with impervious pavers, plantings, and public art to create an attractive user-friendly corridor from the municipal parking garage to the main street (E. Washington) that could house pop-up activities during public events such as the annual parade. The community is most proud of that collaboration but also in identifying a public art project that is forward thinking and also sustainable or ‘green’. It is a dimensional wall mural created from hundreds of small wind turbines that light up varying intensities of red or green depending on the speed of the wind. The mural in and of itself is an attraction to the downtown business district and surrounding community.

An unexpected outcome of the project was collaborating with their newest partner, Asia Ward, a recently relocated artist and science educator from Minnesota. She had just completed a fellowship at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and had purchased property in Ellwood City (a neighboring municipality to New Castle) to develop a science-based artist residency program. Upon learning that she has significant experience in embedding wind and solar energy into public art pieces, she was invited to solicit several proposals. The wind-powered mural was chosen by the partners as the best complement to other elements of the project.



New Castle

NEW VISIONS



The growing synergy between partners encouraged the CDC to secure a \$250,000.00 grant from American PA Water to build upon the development of Apple Alley with a green space for public performance and gathering on the opposite corner of Apple Alley and E. Washington Street. The initial design includes a stage, flexible seating, a water feature, and public art. An adjacent property owner on E. Washington St. (Steve Vitale) committed to investing more than \$100,000 to prepare the wall of his property facing this area for public art and a lighting display. This work is currently underway.

A Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) grant was submitted to rehabilitate the Rite Aid building adjacent to the project area in Apple Alley as a public market that would take advantage of this area for activities and seating. No response to date on the status. Thus, one of the most unexpected outcomes was the synergy that was created during this project.

Unfortunately, the Executive Director of New Visions for Lawrence County and Acting Director of the New Castle CDC announced her resignation in September. She has yet to be replaced. However, there are now conversations taking place with Forward Lawrence, an alliance between the Chamber and County Economic Development, to umbrella

their efforts. Additionally, the most recent municipal election will see a rotation of three city council seats and possibly a new city administrator. The new council members and the appointment of a new administrator will not occur until January 2024.

The most challenging piece post-COVID is the dramatic increase of costs with the project budget increasing from roughly \$36,000 with a city match of \$20,000 to \$65,000 with a city match of \$20,000. The Lawrence County Conservation District reapplied for funding and was subsequently awarded \$60,000. However, state budget approvals held execution of that contract up for more than a year, and the grant agreement was not executed until October of 2023. To meet their grant deadline, they phased out the project and invested the RPIC funds into the creation of the public art – a wind-powered mural. The second challenge was getting the number of turbines needed in a timely fashion, followed by identifying a company skilled enough to install them (they ended up securing a sign company). While not difficult, things such as reviewing installation with the out-of-state property owners took more time than one would have thought, followed by contacting the building tenant to discuss any inconvenience that might be caused by installation.

New Castle

NEW VISIONS

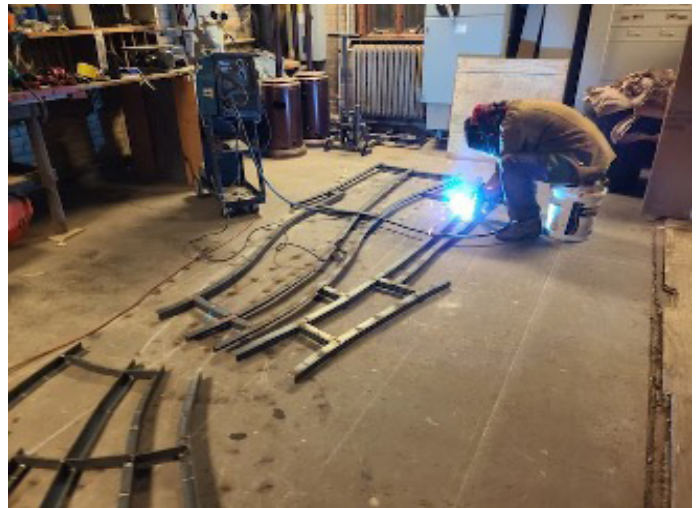
The first piece of advice from New Castle – when you are working with multiple partners, it is always going to take more time than you think. Particularly if you value those relationships and want to sustain them. Courtesies were extended that slowed progress but built trust in the partnership.

Second, interim funding (for ex. Low-interest loans) would have been helpful to proceed with the work while waiting for grant funds to be released. It is frustrating to wait. However, using that time to educate the partners about the pluses of an activated alley and green space proved fruitful in getting everyone on the same page and excited about how it fits into the bigger strategy. It encouraged the Hoyt Center for the Arts to develop lesson plans tied to the wind mural that is free to area educators to use the alley as an outdoor classroom for STEM/STEAM learning. And it is a unique feature to be promoted by the tourism office, Visit Lawrence County which will draw attention downtown.

The last bit of advice is to be flexible in the ability to adapt and to make the most of one's current circumstances is considered a strength. Because the project had to be phased its impact is limited and may not be realized for another year.

As far as insights into the overall project, the community leaders think one of the program partners should have sought interim funding to move the project along rather than waiting for the Conservation District's funding to become available. No one expected it to be held up this long. Of course, the fear was that the funding would not come through despite the written commitment by the

state. The potential of using the space as an outdoor classroom for STEM programming was a new insight that may not have been developed had they not had to pivot in their planning process. The promotion of the site as an attraction has also opened up the possibility of merchandising the mural with unique keepsakes like wind turbine pins and other merchandise. This project ties in nicely with the rebranding of both the internal perception of community pride and identity and the external image of those outside the community of the city of New Castle and the central business district.



This project is an example of how one consecutive idea and implementing project after another can begin to have a positive and ripple effect throughout the community.

This project is an example of how one consecutive idea and implementing project after another can begin to have a positive and ripple effect throughout the community. Ultimately, this project is part of the larger vision for the New Castle central business district and has led to the decision to pursue an application to be a state designated Keystone Communities Main Street program with the PA Department of Community and Economic Development. PDC will be assisting them with this process.



Reynoldsville

REYNOLDSVILLE COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION



In the Borough of Reynoldsville, their community revitalization organization is the **Reynoldsville Community Association (RCA)**. Reynoldsville's focus has been on enhancing the quality of life for residents of the community and providing new opportunities for the businesses of the community. Recreational opportunities include both passive and active facilities, providing options for residents of all ages. Projects that intended to be focused on in this last year are the canoe launch, providing signage and promotional and marketing services, in addition to other recreational facilities in the community. Creating a sense of community pride is at the center of their work, as there have been memorials that have been installed to honor local veterans and current local military serving our nation. The community recently completed a downtown memorial park in partnership with the American Legion and RCA.

Merchant Markets was the brainchild of a local business owner, Kathy Striegel, who decided

businesses needed a way to cross-promote and support one another. Early in 2021, the first Merchant Market was held to bring customers of one business into another business by providing special activities and extended hours and have continued since then.

The Reynoldsville community has been focusing on basic, yet important public infrastructure to the downtown, such as connecting the local assets into the downtown and providing basic gateway signage to the community for travelers entering and leaving the town. The signage is simple, yet it offers a sense of pride and reinforces the subtle welcoming spirit of the town. The feedback from the community has been an unexpected plus. Many citizens remarked on how nice the sign looked, and how they felt it had a positive effect on raising community pride. It is a tangible outcome of one of RCA's projects, raising awareness of the organization and what it works towards.

Reynoldsville

REYNOLDSVILLE COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

Some unexpected outcomes of these projects have been to invite local businesses to sponsor the signage in the future and use this as an opportunity to expand the interest and support of the revitalization project to new private partners. A survey of businesses on PA state Route 950 that are within the Borough of Reynoldsville, but not along Main Street was conducted to determine which businesses would be included on the planned future signs. These businesses may have been neglected in the past, as RCA focused on the 'core' businesses of the downtown/Main Street area. Reynoldsville Community Association hopes to continue to mine these newly aware business owners for new volunteers, sponsors, and partners, as they move forward into projects that help raise community awareness, action, and pride.

One such partner is Smith's Landscaping which is one of the businesses located on State Route 950, within the borough. This is a new direct partnership for RCA and one that may prove to be beneficial as more and more public space improvement projects are implemented in the community. Often local businesses want to help and contribute to the community, but often they just don't know how to do so. The RPIC initiative has provided opportunities to be part of the solution, and hopefully, additional future partners and businesses will follow.

Completing the project within the timeline was a challenge. Securing permission from property owners, once determined, for sign placements was also a little daunting. Communicating the type of sign and agreeing on locations, as well as how it was being funded, was time-consuming. Several landscaping companies would not provide a bid, as they did not want to undertake installing the proper drainage necessary to prevent erosion around the sign. This was an unexpected aspect of this project, as it is on a hill. The only advice for other organizations pursuing a similar project would be to consider infrastructure for any project. Stormwater drainage can be damaging to even the simplest of projects.

The limited time frame made it difficult to execute a new and innovative project. This is the next phase and continuation of a previous project that did not include landscaping and

drainage. The additional signs made possible by this mini grant were a dream for some future grants.

The "WELCOME TO REYNOLDSVILLE" sign was purchased using a previous grant, but the landscaping and drainage that was necessary to preserve the integrity of the sign base was not part of the previous grant. The sign was designed by the community. Four designs were displayed at several businesses with an invitation to vote for your favorite, and the purchased sign is a result of that vote.

Although the sign is amazing and brings a little more pride to those who live and love in Reynoldsville, it was not landscaped, not polished, and missing the finishing touches that help frame the sign, as well as protecting it from the forces of nature.

The three additional signs purchased with this mini grant will be made to complement the larger, existing sign. The three additional signs are purposed to identify the community to travelers approaching from the three remaining directions. The sign on PA Route 950 will, in addition to welcoming travelers, show directional arrows with corresponding business names.

Reynoldsville Community Association has had an ongoing goal of making Reynoldsville a community of which to be proud. Bringing pride and ownership to community members will require more than new signage. But the community feels as though it is a step in the right direction.



Juniata River Blueprint Communities

MOUNT UNION, MAPLETON, AND SHIRLEY TOWNSHIP



The **Juniata River Blueprint Communities (JRBC)** of Mount Union, Mapleton, and Shirley Township are supported by staff from the Center for Community Action. On a daily basis, and especially during the pandemic, these communities have ongoing concerns around drugs, crime, and litter, but JRBC is looking at ways to engage the youth and the rest of the community in providing solutions to these issues. In the last few years they were able to implement their community gardens which functioned at full capacity and involved volunteers from across the generations. The community gardens provided an opportunity to utilize a previously completed project of the community mobile tool shed, while providing an opportunity for community togetherness, all while providing fresh produce and a sense of pride among the residents. The gardens were also a great location for a new community event, the first annual Pepper Eating Festival.

JRBC recognized that there may be more opportunities to involve local businesses as community leaders, and to provide opportunities to bring them into the

conversation, as this was pursued in 2022 and 2023. Moving forward, JRBC will be focused on the basics of working to create a safer and cleaner community, and the RPIC project focused on that in 2022.

The community is most proud of the collaborative projects that have been completed through the USDA RPIC initiative. An example of these partnerships are the benches in Linear Park in Mount Union. This park consists of a walking trail along a former railroad and a newly renovated retaining wall. By placing benches along the walking trail, the community has become more inviting for all. It has opened the door for community members who were unable to use the walking path due to

lack of resting areas required to support their physical abilities to be able to get outside and utilize the walking path. This simple and basic installation provides a fundamental opportunity for residents to get outdoors, get a little exercise, run into old friends, and maybe even make some new friends. Although a simple project, the collaboration that was required by various groups and how everyone worked together to see this through and complete the project so quickly is a source of great community pride.



Juniata River Blueprint Communities

MOUNT UNION, MAPLETON, AND SHIRLEY TOWNSHIP

An anticipated outcome of this project is the increase in visitors to the park. The installation of the benches within a park that was once just a walking trail has attracted new residents to enjoy and appreciate this public space. An unintended and unexpected outcome has been the new conversations that have been started among Borough Council members, the Planning Commission, and other various groups on ideas for collaboration to continue to add to the park. The addition of the benches has provided a catalyst for the local leaders to consider expanding new amenities such as trash receptacles, trees, and lighting in a space that had often been ignored and underutilized.

The project, although simple, required involvement from many people and groups which provided additional hurdles and challenges to the project. The thought had to be carefully placed into the purchase of the benches themselves with careful consideration on the installation. Safety and maintenance were the reasons behind this. The park is privately owned, so written permission to install the benches was required prior to the progress of the project. The buy-in of the Borough Council to agree to install the benches and assume responsibility for maintaining the benches once installed presented an additional challenge due to the lack of available staff time.

Communication between all parties involved was extremely important during this process. Any advice for communities to pursue a similar project is around clear and consistent communication among all. Consideration of all parties involved and their role both during and after the implementation of the project was important. Given private ownership, written permission for the benches to be permanently placed and owned and maintained by separate entities was the first necessary step to move forward with the project.

It was important to have as much involvement from each necessary group as possible to ensure that the project could be implemented quickly, efficiently, and did not create future issues. Listening to concerns and possible issues with the project helped direct the decision-making process. Theft and vandalism were concerns that were raised when discussing placing the park benches. For this reason, careful consideration was given to the park benches chosen. The installed benches were permanently mounted into the ground

to prevent theft and add a layer of safety to the benches. They are also coated in anti-graffiti paint and can easily be cleaned in the event of vandalism.

If given more time to consider future and additional needs, trash receptacles and doggie waste bag posts were considered to be purchased with the grant funding. There were concerns raised regarding the ongoing costs associated and maintenance of both items. If time had allowed, more research and effort would have been placed into exploring options to be able to purchase these additional items, and ways to financially support them would have been explored.

The most recent project included four metal benches that were installed along Linear Park in Mount Union along a former railroad. This was completed as part of a multi-million dollar retaining wall improvement project that runs parallel to the park. The initial vision for the park included benches, trees, a fence and more, however, efforts to add these additions stalled after the completion of the retaining wall. Residents with physical abilities were limited in using the park due to the lack of rest areas. By installing the benches, the park can be used more frequently by residents with limited physical abilities. Community members, in general, are now able to spend more time in the park due to the ability to sit and enjoy the area. Current efforts are underway to construct a mural on part of the retaining wall within the park. The benches will aid residents in being able to sit and enjoy the community mural.

The project directly aligns with revitalizing the PA Ave Neighborhood, as identified in the JRBC 5-year strategy. It also supports neighborhood beautification efforts. The park trail is used for walking, running, and biking. This reinforces efforts to support an increase in multi-modal transportation opportunities along the park and offers opportunities for users of all ages and abilities to use the community resource.



*The pandemic has brought several issues
or needs of the communities*

into the forefront for youth leadership development,
entrepreneurial development and support, and property
maintenance support – these will be some of the additional areas
of focus that will continue, even after the end of the RPIC project,
and PDC has begun to discuss other potential funding sources to
continue these efforts.

Initially, the Allegheny-Clarion River Valley Region (ACRVR) Blueprint Community program, including Emlenton, Foxburg and the City of Parker, were part of the PA RPIC project, but withdrew as their focus was no longer in alignment with the RPIC project. The US Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA-RD) - Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) grant was awarded to the Pennsylvania Downtown Center in the fall of 2020. The project will continue through the fall of 2022. Pennsylvania Downtown Center would like to thank the USDA Rural Development Innovation Center, and their additional partners: PA Department of Community & Economic Development (DCED), Federal Home Loan Bank (FHLBank) of Pittsburgh, and the local community programs for their dedication to their communities and to this effort.





PENNSYLVANIA
Downtown Center
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Helping *you* make *your* town a better place.

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