

The Herkimer County Community Development Strategic Plan

January, 2022

FAIRWEATHER
CONSULTING



COMMUNITY
WORKSHOP

Steering Committee

Mark Blask, Mayor, City of Little Falls (Chair)
Richard Adams, Mayor, Village of Frankfort
Glenn Asnoe, Supervisor, Town of Frankfort
David Berkstresser, Supervisor, Town of Webb
Jim Bono, Chairman, Herkimer County Legislature
Tim Daly, AVP, Berkshire Bank, Ilion
Dominic Frank, Supervisor, Town of Herkimer
Harrison Hummel, CEO, Hummel's Office Plus
Cathleen McColgin, President, Herkimer Community College
Mark Netti, Mayor, Village of Herkimer
Peter Rovazzi, Supervisor, Town of German Flatts
Jim Wallace, County Administrator

Partners & Funders

Herkimer County government
The Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties
Local municipalities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The creation of Community Development Strategic Plan for Herkimer County was begun when the Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties, Herkimer County government, and county municipalities teamed to sponsor a project to foster a shared vision for a more prosperous future for Herkimer County. The process involved using data to analyze existing conditions along with extensive public outreach to understand what is happening on the ground in Herkimer County communities and understand the needs and aspirations of the people, businesses and other organizations throughout the County.

Business Outreach

Outreach to employers sought to find sectors or types of businesses that were doing well in the County. The results of these interviews highlighted a commitment to innovation on the part of these firms. Many of them are second- or third generation businesses in the County. The new generations have identified new production technologies, new markets or even new products that revive the profitability and prospects for the company. Other firms are start-up businesses that have carved out a niche in larger markets. Still others are larger institutions or not-for-profits that have sustained themselves by innovative retooling of long-standing business models. Herkimer County would benefit if these success stories were better known and it was easier for other entrepreneurs to learn of similar opportunities found in Herkimer County and get access to resources needed to take full advantage of them.

Community Engagement

COVID-19 struck just as this project was about to launch initial community engagement activities. The pandemic paused public-facing activities altogether for months, and ultimately required a different approach that emphasized safety precautions and accommodated the realities of rapidly changing conditions and public appetite for participation. The resulting process focused more on one-on-one and small group interviews and focus groups, touring communities to make observations and connect with community members on the ground, and using a virtual events series to connect with people across the county, and shifting the emphasis to support and encourage early action.

It also includes extending more activities into 2022, to continue reaching more people and building energy for implementation. While the pandemic has been a dramatic hardship to many, these new digital channels also represent an investment into future community engagement and communications; by building them now and working to build an audience, it will be easier for future organizers and efforts to connect with people across the county.

Key Finding: Its Happening in Herkimer County

While often overlooked by the media and even its own residents, Herkimer County is fortunate to have a culture of innovation dispersed throughout businesses, organizations and communities. During the creation of this plan, it became clear that, when it comes to innovative approaches to business, civic life and community development, it is happening in Herkimer County! Thus the title for this project was born.

On the other hand, the geographic extent and diversity of the County coupled with its relatively low population density has left Herkimer County without a central crossroads, a single place where County residents and/or business people can easily come together for meetings or accidentally encounter one another in the course of one's day. Given this, it is no surprise that there is a propensity for many innovations and activities in the County to take place in isolation and for others in the County to be unaware of these successes.

The Herkimer County Community Development Partnership

The key task for the Community Development Strategy is to support and nurture innovation by building connections among the County's innovators so they can maintain their energy and inspiration, share best practices and be better connected with sources of intellectual, logistical and financial support. This can be accomplished through the creation of an organization that specifically serves as a meeting grounds and crossroads for the area, building connections among successful communities, organizations and enterprises and others seeking a way forward in the County.

The central recommendation of the Community Development Strategic Plan is the creation of a formal organization, the Herkimer County Community Development Partnership, intended to serve a catalytic node in a network that links established innovative approaches in the County to those currently seeking solutions or opportunities. Working through that network (and expanding it at the same time) requires an approach that is flexible and agile. It is recommended that the Partnership be constituted as a private, not-for-profit organization if it is to have the agility and flexibility to identify and respond to these key issues and opportunities.

Implementing the Plan

Building an effective County-wide partnership will require the following steps:

Step 1. Establish a formal organization to provide stewardship for the Community Development Partnership.

Implementation of this strategy will require multifaceted, sustained action that can only be carried out by professional staff. These efforts would be the responsibility of executive director of the Partnership overseen by a board of directors of four to six individuals.

Step 2. Continue Community Engagement.

Once established, the Community Development Partnership will continue the Community Engagement process that was begun by Community Workshop in 2021.

Step 3. Cooperate on Catalytic Projects.

Reaching out to communities and enabling them to take on projects important for their improvement is at the heart of the Community Development Partnership. The Partnership will spend much of its time identifying catalytic projects and helping communities assemble the resources and expertise they need for success.

Step 4. Develop an Annual Community Development Agenda for Herkimer County

Going into its second year of operation (i.e., 2023), the Partnership will create a prioritized community development agenda to guide its work over the course of that year, developed in close consultation with the constituencies of Herkimer County through the ongoing community engagement, possibly including an annual community development leadership summit.

Step 5. Continue to Build & Broaden Partnerships.

As new needs, new opportunities and new projects are identified, new relationships will be required. Thus, the Partnership must work continuously to build and broaden its partnerships throughout the County and beyond.

The Road Ahead

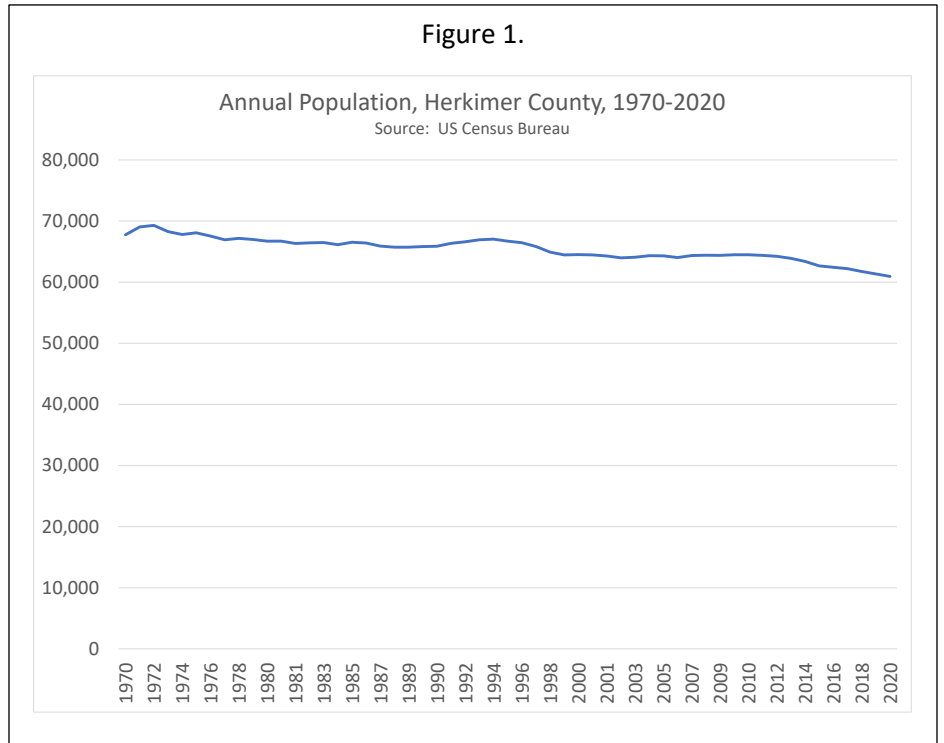
The specifics of the implementing this plan will be revised as circumstances evolve. The Community Development Strategic Plan is put forth here as guide to enable the communities of Herkimer County to discover, harness and benefit from the creative energies and ideas found throughout this remarkable place.

Contents

Introduction	1
The Planning Process	2
What the data tells us: economic & demographic statistics on Herkimer County	2
The Post-Pandemic Economy in Herkimer County	5
What business people and community members tell us: It’s Happening in Herkimer County	9
The Community Engagement Process.....	11
Goals and Inquiry Priorities	11
Process: It’s Happening in Herkimer County	12
Methods.....	13
Community Engagement Findings and County Vision.....	18
A Countywide Vision: Key Themes	18
Drilling Down: Needs, Opportunities, and Solutions	18
Solutions and Successful Models.....	22
Conclusion: Community Development in Herkimer County Needs a Central Crossroads/Meeting Grounds.....	25
The Plan: Keeping it Happening in Herkimer County by Fostering Connections and Innovation.....	27
The Herkimer County Community Development Partnership.....	28
Step 1. Establish a formal organization to provide stewardship for the Community Development Partnership.....	28
Step 2. Continue Community Engagement.....	29
Step 3. Cooperate on Catalytic Projects.....	31
Step 4. Develop an Annual Community Development Agenda for Herkimer County	32
Step 5. Continue to Build & Broaden Partnerships.....	32
Implementation Plan	33
APPENDICES	35

Introduction

This community development strategic plan has been produced to address what is seen as long-term stagnation in Herkimer County. That sense is best reflected in its long-term population trends. Herkimer County’s population has fallen over ten percent in 40 years, from 67,739 in 1970 to 60,945 in 2020 (see Figure 1). As documented by the County’s annual Risk Assessment reporting, this population loss has been accompanied by an aging population, lower than average household incomes and lower rates of the population with college degrees.¹



In the 2017 Risk Assessment Report, a Teen Assessment Project (TAP) Survey has several questions which examine young people’s perception of the community. As indicated in the 2013 survey, “over three out of every five teens surveyed (64%) said that they were at least interested in staying in the Mohawk Valley as adults. Of those, nearly a quarter (23%) said they were likely to stay, but 41% said despite being interested they would be unlikely to stay. Over one-third (35%) indicated they were not at all interested in staying in the area.”

It was in response to this sense of malaise and decline that the Community Development Strategic Planning process was begun. The Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties, Herkimer County government, and county municipalities teamed to sponsor a project to foster a shared vision for a more prosperous future for Herkimer County, focusing on promising economic sectors such as tourism, agri-business and advanced manufacturing, while also strengthening the capacity of the County’s communities to better themselves and collaborate on projects of mutual benefit.

¹ Cite the Risk Assessment Report

The Planning Process

In 2019, a team of consultants was hired to facilitate the Community Development Strategy. Fairweather Consulting of New Paltz, NY was the team leader, focusing on economic development. Community Workshop of Bethel, VT led the community engagement process. EDR of Syracuse provided digital mapping and spatial analysis. The Community Development Strategic Plan process began in early 2020, with intermittent delays and changes in schedule due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The process involved using data to analyze existing conditions along with extensive public outreach to understand what is happening on the ground in Herkimer County communities. The results of that process are described in these pages.

[What the data tells us: economic & demographic statistics on Herkimer County](#)

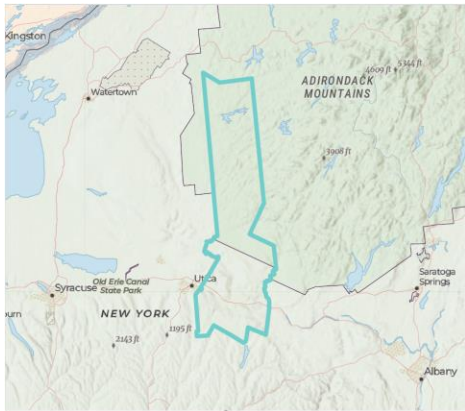
Despite popular perceptions, overall economic and demographic trends for Herkimer County are not much worse, nor much better than most of the rest of the Mohawk Valley and Upstate New York. Figure 2 is an infographic comparing those areas in terms of income, demographics, education and employment. While Herkimer County lags in many of these indicators, it often only trails the Mohawk Valley or Upstate by a factor of five percent or less. Clearly, it would be better if the County led in most if not all of these indicators. But the good news is that, while Herkimer County shares many of the problems and issues of Upstate New York, its burden is not unique or unprecedented. And as the analysis below indicates, this is a county with ample opportunities.

Figure 2. Infographic Comparing Herkimer County with the Mohawk Valley & Upstate New York, 2020.

Herkimer County

Mohawk Valley

Upstate



INCOME



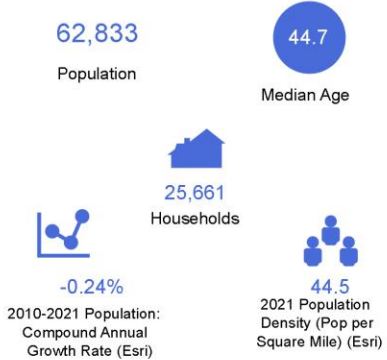
INCOME



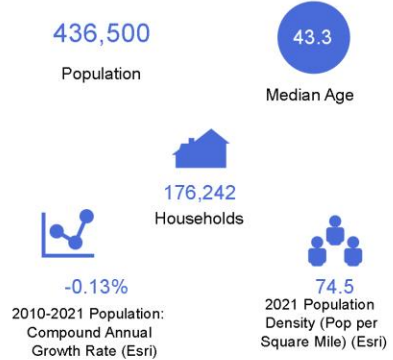
INCOME



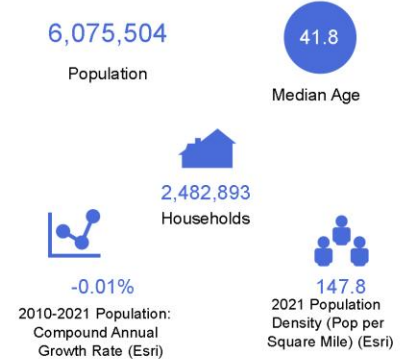
DEMOGRAPHICS



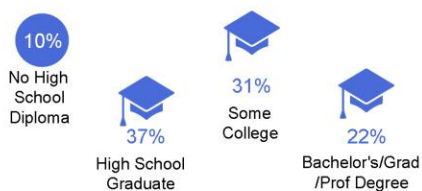
DEMOGRAPHICS



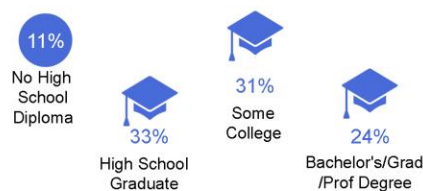
DEMOGRAPHICS



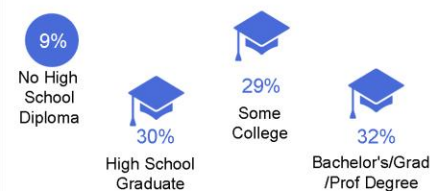
EDUCATION



EDUCATION



EDUCATION



EMPLOYMENT



EMPLOYMENT



EMPLOYMENT



Source: compiled by Fairweather Consulting using ESRI Business Analyst.

Review of Economic Sectors/Clusters

One of the most important findings from the economic analysis is that economic diversification should be an important consideration in Herkimer County’s economic development. The County has seen substantial growth in employment in what is variously termed Fabricated Metal Manufacturing or Downstream Metal Manufacturing such that it accounts for between one-third to one-half of all manufacturing jobs in the County. This has been driven by the arms manufacturing centered in the Village of Ilion. While this has been an historic mainstay for that community and the County as a whole, the arms industry is in a time of flux and uncertainty. Clearly, the County should focus on retaining and, if possible, growing this industry. But at the same time, it is equally important to grow and/or attract other industries that can provide additional sources of employment and income to the County.

The analysis provided in the appendices to this report identifies other economic opportunities for the County. In Table 1, they are placed in three categories.

“Strong opportunities” already have a significant presence in the County or are a logical outgrowth of existing businesses.

“Niche opportunities” may be experiencing little growth in the larger region, but for which Herkimer County may have particular advantages.

“Stretch opportunities” are those that currently do not have a sizeable presence in the County, but are found in the Mohawk Valley. The stretch opportunities would require the County’s economy to improve its ability to attract and retain the workforce needed to support these clusters.

Table 1. Potential Industry Targets for Herkimer County.

Strong Opportunities:

- Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing
- Truck Transportation/Distribution
- Animal Production & Aquaculture
- Waste Management & Remediation Services

Niche Opportunities:

- Specialty Trade Contractors
- Merchant Wholesalers of Durable Goods
- Professional Scientific & Technical Services
- Administrative & Support Services
- Paper Manufacturing
- Textile Mills

Stretch Opportunities:

- Electrical Equipment, Appliance & Component Manufacturing
- Food Manufacturing
- Wood Product Manufacturing

Housing Market Gap Analysis

Like much of Upstate New York, Herkimer County has experienced little or no population growth. The continuing economic challenges and slow population growth dampen overall prospects for growth in the housing market. In the foreseeable future, there will not be a population or housing boom in the County or Region that will dramatically improve the market. Yet current changes underway in the County point to emerging gaps in the housing market.

Senior Housing: As in most markets in Upstate New York, Herkimer County is seeing its population age. As shown in the data, most of the senior population in the County is currently in one-unit, single-family housing. As that population continues to age, it will need options for multi-unit housing that is better configured to that population—smaller units that are easier to maintain. This will hold true even after the COVID pandemic subsides.

Starter Housing: Up to the onset of the COVID pandemic, the job increases in the Mohawk Valley were concentrated in lower paying occupations, and this affected the housing market. Households that were able to buy a house had housing costs that were below 30 percent of their income—an industry rule of thumb to measure housing affordability. On the other hand, almost one-third of all renters in the County had housing costs above the 30 percent threshold. This has two implications. First, if the pre-COVID trends return and many of the new jobs in the region are lower paying, it will be more difficult for those households to purchase a home. Second, this means that more households will be renting and may face burdensome housing costs as a result. Thus, there is a need for more affordable starter housing in the County, including a mix of single-family homes along with attached units such as apartment and condominiums that can be priced to meet the needs of this growing segment.

Upscale Second Homes: Herkimer County already has a small niche in this market, particularly in northern towns such as Webb. In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, it is possible that demand for such housing will increase as more affluent households seek alternatives to densely populated areas enabled through remote working.

The Post-Pandemic Economy in Herkimer County

This community development strategic plan began in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. This section summarizes the impact the pandemic has had on the economy. As shown in Table 2, Herkimer County has begun recovering from the worst of the pandemic. According to preliminary estimates from economic data firm EMSI, during the period from 2020 to 2021, the County saw a modest gain in overall employment including increases in retail trade (87 jobs), professional & technical services (12 jobs), accommodation & food services (49 jobs), offset by the loss of 79 jobs in manufacturing. As indicated in Table 2, the performance was comparable (and in many cases

slightly better than) the experience of the Mohawk Valley, the North Country, Upstate New York and the State as a whole.

While the future course of the pandemic is highly uncertain, thus far, Herkimer County has begun a recovery that is at least on pace with the surrounding areas. By and large, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated trends already present in the economy, in some cases creating disruption and hardship, but also leading to new opportunities. These are summarized below.

The Effect on Tourism, Hospitality and “Mom & Pop” businesses

One of the most dramatic and damaging impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been its effect on main street businesses and tourism-related enterprises. Similarly, the pandemic has wreaked havoc on hospitality, not only in Herkimer County, but across the globe. An early report by McKinsey described it this way:

COVID-19 has caused an unprecedented crisis for the tourism industry. International tourist arrivals are projected to plunge by 60 to 80 percent in 2020, and tourism spending

Table 2. Change in Employment, 2020-2021.				
	New York	Upstate	Mohawk Valley	Herkimer County
Total Employment				
Jobs (2020)	9,607,306	2,819,227	189,640	17,139
Jobs (2021)	9,656,725	2,819,102	190,047	17,286
Job Change %	1%	(0%)	0%	1%
Manufacturing				
Jobs (2020)	411,409	245,897	16,035	2,005
Jobs (2021)	409,638	247,940	16,135	1,926
Job Change %	(0%)	1%	1%	(4%)
Retail Trade				
Jobs (2020)	841,886	290,790	22,320	2,489
Jobs (2021)	823,231	285,428	22,166	2,576
Job Change %	(2%)	(2%)	(1%)	3%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services				
Jobs (2020)	753,507	158,807	5,758	357
Jobs (2021)	764,270	160,167	5,815	369
Job Change %	1%	1%	1%	4%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation				
Jobs (2020)	160,064	35,302	2,296	225
Jobs (2021)	156,843	34,412	2,326	229
Job Change %	(2%)	(3%)	1%	2%
Accommodation and Food Services				
Jobs (2020)	538,599	173,859	11,812	1,456
Jobs (2021)	521,110	169,015	11,675	1,496
Job Change %	(3%)	(3%)	(1%)	3%
Source: compiled by Fairweather Consulting using EMSI data.				

is not likely to return to precrisis levels until 2024. This puts as many as 120 million jobs at risk.²

On the other hand, many tourism enterprises have seen increases in business in the aftermath of the pandemic. With theater, concerts and social gatherings unavailable in the pandemic, many turned to outdoor recreation or outdoor venues as an alternative source of distraction and solace. New York State Parks saw dramatic increases in visitation and camping in 2020 and 2021. That year was also a banner year for the Herkimer Diamond Mines. So, while the pandemic has caused much hardship for small businesses and many in the hospitality sector, it has also accelerated the growth of some opportunities.

The Rise of the Remote Worker & “Space as a Service”

The pandemic has also accelerated changes in the way office space is used in business. One aspect of this is the rise of remote working as a permanent feature of business. This began out of a need to isolate and socially distance during the pandemic. But firms and employees soon became convinced of the potential long-term advantages of this arrangement. A poll by the consulting firm Gartner indicated that “48% of employees will likely work remotely at least part of the time after COVID-19 versus 30% before the pandemic.”³ It is not yet clear what the role of remote work will be in the post-pandemic economy.

As workers discovered the possibilities of remote work, many have sought to relocate to smaller, less densely populated areas as a means to avoid contracting Covid-19. This could be a potential source of new residents and workers for rural areas such as Herkimer County. At the same time, the rise of remote work has also given rise to a re-thinking of how to use office space itself. If workers are no longer bound to a particular office as part of their job, companies have been reconsidering how they use space to get their work done. A recent University of Oxford study described what this will look like:

Offices will no longer just be places to come to work every day, but will become collaborative/creative spaces, perhaps visited twice a week. Consequently, companies might choose to have more local, suburban and smaller offices, closer to where people live, in order to reduce commutes – a multi-site or dual-hub solution.⁴

² Margaux Constantin, Steve Saxon, and Jackey Yu, “Reimagining the \$9 trillion tourism economy—what will it take?” McKinsey & Company, August 5, 2020

³ Mary Baker, “9 Future of Work Trends Post-COVID-19,” *Smarter with Gartner*, June 8, 2020.

⁴ Richard Darby and Tom Darby, The post-pandemic future for city centre office space, University of Oxford, July 6, 2020

Thus, one potential opportunity associated with the pandemic is the attraction of remote workers to the County, coupled with the possibility of spaces in main street areas dedicated to co-working and the new types of offices that could arise in the aftermath of Covid-19.

The Transformation of Warehousing and Distribution

The rise of on-line shopping during the pandemic has led to new approaches to warehousing and distribution in order to better serve changing consumer demand.

The humble shed can be as good an investment in the e-commerce era as shovels were in the gold rush. . . The future is likely to be ever closer to large urban or suburban areas as online retailers strive to shorten delivery times. . . New warehousing might combine storage with light manufacturing, creative industries, a gym & coffee shop—re-using an abandoned shopping mall.⁵

In previous times, the most efficient system for warehousing and distribution involved extremely large warehouse facilities to gain economies of scale. In the Covid (and likely post-Covid) economy, that has given way to the creation of smaller warehouses located closer to markets to serve proliferating demand more quickly. As evidenced by the Amazon facility being developed in Frankfort, Herkimer County's location on I-90 make it a potential candidate for these new types of facilities.

Convergence & Hybridization in Food & Retail

The changes in retail and distribution described above have contributed to another trend which is a potential opportunity for Herkimer County: accelerating convergence and hybridization in food and retail. As retailers seek to provide a reason for shoppers to patronize “bricks and mortar” stores, and restaurants seek ways to entice diners to return, establishments that used to be separate will be combined into a single enterprise. A recent report by the Brookings Institution describes it:

“Convergence and hybridization will accelerate in food retail. . . IKEA was already a furniture showroom, warehouse, and restaurant. High-end grocers were encouraging shoppers to have a beer. Restaurants were increasingly not just dine-in, but fast-casual or mobile food trucks. . . . Americans will return to eating much of their food prepared outside the home. In 2017, jobs in leisure and hospitality (which includes all bars and restaurants) grew to outnumber jobs in retail trade. The pandemic is a setback, but not a reset.”⁶

⁵ Economist, 5/30/2020

⁶ Brookings Institution, *The ABCs of the post-COVID economic recovery*, May, 2020

This trend could also provide opportunities for the villages and hamlets in the County as retail combines with food and even co-working.

The Post-Covid Economy: A mix of Challenges and Opportunities

As this overview indicates, as the pandemic recedes, Herkimer County will be confronting a mix of challenges and opportunities. Responding effectively will require creativity and innovation. Fortunately, as the next section of the report documents, these are not in short supply in the County.

What business people and community members tell us: It's Happening in Herkimer County

As indicated in the appendices, while the employment data generally provides reasonable estimates of economic activity by sector, that data is never completely reliable within the sectors of a rural economy that has small numbers of either employers or employees. This is why the analyses has been supplemented with a variety of interviews involving employers and others with first-hand experience and knowledge of the Herkimer County economy. In addition, the community development strategy has involved extensive community engagement led by Community Workshop. This section summarizes what was learned through that outreach.

Outreach to Employers

The outreach to employers sought to find any particular sectors or types of businesses that were doing well in the County. In such cases, it is particularly helpful to get the perspectives of employers with distinct business models that have enabled them to succeed in situations where firms with traditional models have faltered or failed. John Piseck, the Director of the Herkimer County Industrial Development Agency was instrumental in providing contacts to major employers in the County as well as identifying such “niche” success stories in the County for interviews. The 21 interviews completed for this analysis are provided in Table 3.

The results of these interviews highlighted a commitment to innovation on the part of these firms. Many of them are second- or third generation businesses in the County. Typically, the newer generation has come into control of the enterprise just as the firm's traditional market in in a state of decline or transformation.

The new generation has identified new production technologies, new markets or even new products that revive the profitability and prospects for the company. Other firms are start-up businesses that have carved out a niche in larger markets. Still others are larger institutions or not-for-profits that have sustained themselves by innovative retooling of long-standing business models.

One theme that occurred across many of these interviews was a concern for skilled workers or talent. Employers were generally very satisfied with the skills and dedication of long-term employees, but were concerned that, in the face of population declines and the ongoing prospect of younger people seeking their futures elsewhere, it may be difficult to replace those workers as they retire. This concern led many of those interviewed to encourage the continued improvement in the appearance and vitality of local communities as a way to retain talented young people and to make it easier to recruit workers from out of the area. If that can be done, it would make it easier to continue to grow innovative and creative enterprises in the County.

Table 3. Employers/Business Related Enterprises Interviewed.

Name	Organization
Chad Polus	Fiberdyne (fiber optic products & custom installs)
John Piseck	Herkimer County IDA
Christian Mercurio	Mohawk Valley EDGE
Colleen Smith	Beardslee Buffalo (water buffalo meat & milk)
Jerry Stucchi	JGK Associates (consulting)
John Scarano	Herkimer Chamber (Ret.)
Kelly Noonan Green	Water Safari (amusement)
Kevin Crosley	Herkimer ARC (supported workshops, etc.)
Lisa Betrus	Basset Health (health care)
Michael Libertore	HPK Industries (disposable medical apparel)
Richard Italia	RemArms (firearms)
Robin Hill	CAP-21
Steven Naegele	CTM (precision machine shop)
Suzie Jones	Jones Family Farm (specialty dairy/meats)
Wayne Evans	Tractor Supply
Zackary Rasmussen	Casestry (on demand manufacturing for promotional products)
Deborah Carhart	CAP-21
Christine Reynolds	Dolgeville Forward
Dave Warner	My Little Falls, LLC (publishing)
Deborah Kaufman	Embella (strategic marketing consulting)
Scott Flansburg	Herkimer 9 (tourism/downtown revitalization)

In sum, the creativity and resilience demonstrated by many of these organizations is a marked contrast to the popular image of Herkimer County as a stagnant backwater. Clearly, in both the profit and not-for-profit sectors, the entrepreneurial spirit is at work in the County. Herkimer County would benefit if these success stories were better known and it was easier for other entrepreneurs to learn of similar opportunities found in Herkimer County and get access to resources needed to take full advantage of them. Enabling greater sharing of information and expertise across these enterprises and the communities in which they operate would spur even more creativity and growth in Herkimer County.

The Community Engagement Process

Community engagement can mean a lot of things, from informing people about the process and findings to gathering input, involving them in project decision-making, and empowering them to lead future work. In this process, community engagement had two major purposes: 1) to get to know the county, its people and communities in ways that data can't reveal; and 2) to cultivate a growing network of people who are working on community development solutions.

Community input serves as a critical supplement to economic and spatial analysis, allowing us to build a more nuanced understanding of Herkimer County's current situation and people's vision for the future. To create a complete picture, we focused on gathering information and qualitative feedback from people representing a diverse set of perspectives and geographies, including those who are often not part of planning conversations.

Community engagement is also about laying the groundwork for plan implementation and action, which was perhaps more important in Herkimer County than in other areas. Because of the county's unique geography and history, there is not a strong countywide identity; nor are there many existing countywide communication channels, networks, coordination systems, or organizations dedicated to countywide coordination. The lack of countywide communication channels and resources made countywide community engagement especially challenging, but also highlighted a distinct need and provided an opportunity to begin creating systems, channels and directories that can serve the county in the future.

Goals and Inquiry Priorities

At the start of the project, Community Workshop led a workshop with the Steering Committee to identify goals for community engagement and priority questions for understanding community needs, perspectives, and priorities.

Community Engagement Goals

Gather input and info from stakeholders on countywide vision and key community development planning questions

Inform stakeholders about the planning process and outcomes and build support for outcomes

Identify and build relationships with community leaders and organizations (formal/informal, new and potential)

Key Inquiry Questions

What’s Herkimer County’s identity and vision for the future?

- How does the county define itself, and what makes it unique?
- What should Herkimer County’s future look like?
- How does our vision and sense of identity differ around the county? How is it the same?

Where do people see opportunity?

- What’s going well in communities and neighborhoods?
- Where do people need help accessing opportunity?
- What assets and resources do we have? Where is there progress?

What are the best ideas for action?

- What’s working now that could be expanded or replicated?
- What ideas or efforts are energizing communities?
- What ideas from other places are worth trying?

Process: It’s Happening in Herkimer County

The project name and brand (“It’s Happening in Herkimer County”) were designed to deliberately shine a light on all the positive things that are happening to move Herkimer County forward, and to begin changing the narrative. The public engagement process overall, likewise, was designed to find, nurture, and celebrate initiatives, people and ideas that are already advancing community development.



COVID-19 struck just as this project was about to launch initial community engagement activities, which were originally designed to include a range of in-person community forums, meetings and events. The pandemic paused public-facing activities altogether for months, and required the consulting team to take a different approach that emphasized safety precautions and accommodated the realities of rapidly changing conditions and public bandwidth for participation. The resulting process focused more on one-on-one and small group interviews and focus groups, touring communities to make observations and connect with community members on the ground, and using a virtual events series to connect with people across the county, and shifting the emphasis to support and encourage early action. It also includes extending more activities into 2022, to continue reaching more people and building energy for implementation.

Timeline



Methods

Given the realities and limitations of COVID-19, the eventual engagement process focused on combining a range of different techniques to hear from people representing diverse perspectives and experiences – including those who are less likely to participate in many planning processes. It also emphasized a balance of “asynchronous” engagement (activities that people could engage in at any time) and scheduled activities or conversations. The three categories of Key Inquiry questions above formed the basis for all community engagement activities – whether surveys, interviews, meetings, virtual events or other activities. Each of the specific methods or channels listed below offered an opportunity to reach different stakeholders and ask those questions in formats or settings that worked for them. The major themes from these conversations are summarized below, and more detailed results will be available in an appendix.

Digital Platforms and Communications Infrastructure

The project team shifted to more heavily emphasize digital platforms during the pandemic, which are essential for reaching people who are available at different times and in many different places, as well as those who are uncomfortable or unable with participating in person. These new digital channels also represent an investment into future community engagement and communications; by building them now and working to build an audience, it will be easier for future organizers and efforts to connect with people across the county.

Website

itshappeninginherkimer.org

A robust, interactive project website has been a hub for engagement activities and will support ongoing implementation work. The website includes ways for people to participate and engage as they browse, links to surveys and polls, event registration and recordings, a compilation of plans and resources in the county, and a growing inventory of stories and innovative strategies in community development (from Herkimer County and beyond).

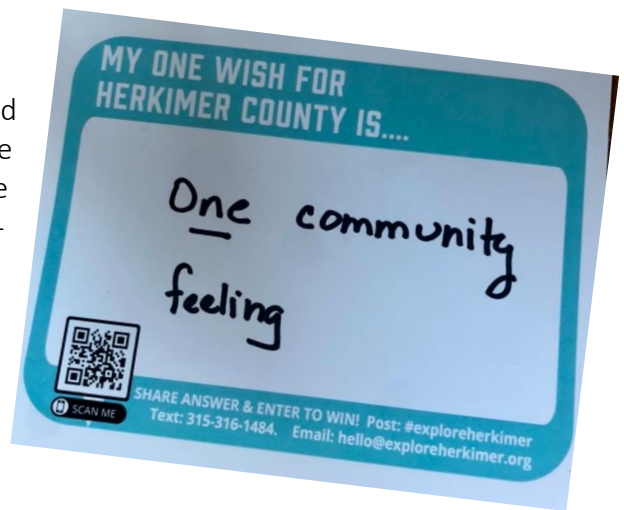


Email and social media

The project also launched a Facebook page (@itshappeninginherkimer) and has established a contact database to support ongoing email updates and communications. The Facebook page offered an opportunity to ask key questions to a different audience, as well as to share events, activities, stories and opportunities.

Online survey, polls, and quick input opportunities

The project offered ways for people to offer input and ideas online in several formats. People browsing the website could respond to questions right on the page through a series of comment boxes and forms. A chat-based survey format offered people an opportunity to share more ideas and input all at once. Postcard versions of the short questions were available for meetings, and hosted by several businesses.



Interviews, Roundtables and Community Visits

In addition to the business interviews conducted by Fairweather Consulting, Community workshop conducted a series of interviews, conversations, community visits and roundtables to hear from people representing a wide variety of community roles interests, demographics, and regions of the county. It was also an opportunity to see and capture images and stories of community challenges and assets while making observations of gaps and opportunities.



Community Leader Interviews and Roundtables

Community Workshop met with community leaders and groups representing a wide variety of municipalities, services and issue areas. The discussions focused on understanding the work they do, the needs and opportunities they see among their stakeholders and organizations, and the innovative solutions and collaborations that are already underway. The conversations were also a chance to begin sharing ideas and solutions from other communities.

On-the-Street Interviews and Community Visits

To better understand the conditions in each community and experiences of diverse stakeholder groups, Community Workshop conducted informal visits to each municipality in the county. The visits were an opportunity to identify businesses, assets and opportunities that might not appear on maps or in formal directories, and to talk with people on the ground who would be unlikely to hear about the process or come to formal meetings and events. It was also an opportunity to visit specific projects and sites with innovative work underway, to capture and share their stories.

6-Week Challenge & Microgrant Contest

With initial results and feedback in hand, Community Workshop organized a 6-week virtual "challenge" in the fall of 2021 including a series of virtual forums, survey and poll opportunities,

social media engagement and a microgrant contest. The series was designed to reach and engage different demographics and groups, and to offer a way that people could participate safely during Covid from any part of the county. Each virtual forum was recorded and shared in an interactive format, so that anyone could listen and respond to the discussion questions on their own time.

The four virtual forums drew over 100 registrations, including people who attended in person and people who requested to watch the recorded versions later. The relatively small groups at each forum allowed for rich discussion and the opportunity to begin building relationships across municipal and sector boundaries. A small contingent returned each week, and have expressed great interest in continuing to work on community development in their communities.

HERKIMER COUNTY ITSHAPPENINGINHERKIMER.ORG

IT'S HAPPENING IN HERKIMER COUNTY

6-WEEK CHALLENGE

WIN **\$2,500** IN PRIZES AND MICRO GRANTS. MAKE HERKIMER COUNTY A BETTER PLACE FOR ALL.

- 11/8** **IMAGINE** HERKIMER COUNTY vision forum
- 11/15** **EXPLORE** HERKIMER COUNTY opportunity forum
- 11/22** **CONNECT** HERKIMER COUNTY networking night
- 12/13** **ACTIVATE** HERKIMER COUNTY project pitch night

NOV 8-DEC 19. SURVEYS, EVENTS, STORIES, SOCIAL CHALLENGES & MORE. LEARN MORE & SIGN UP ONLINE. FREE AND OPEN TO ALL.

Virtual Forum Series



Vision forum. The virtual series kicked off with interactive conversations and chat activities that allowed participants to share their visions for Herkimer County or their individual



Opportunity forum. The consultant team shared a snapshot of their early economic development and community engagement findings, and key opportunities they see.

communities and respond to what we've heard.



Networking and story night. The agenda included an overview of inspiring project ideas and solutions from Herkimer County and beyond and opportunities for participants to get to know each other and share what interests them.

Participants discussed what they heard and shared their perspectives.



“Pitch night” and idea workshop. Participants pitched project ideas for the microgrant contest and shared feedback and resources with each other for strengthening projects.

The final phase of the challenge was a microgrant contest, with \$1,000 in cash prizes available to support quick, small community projects proposed by participants. Thirteen people submitted project ideas from all over the county, representing a wide range of community development goals and solutions. The contest was an opportunity to kickstart a handful of small projects very quickly, but also to learn more about what projects and ideas are resonating with formal and informal community leaders, to identify people interested in working on projects, and to identify potential projects or directions for the plan implementation phase. The projects and winners offer a powerful snapshot of the most important challenges and opportunities in the county, and are summarized below.

Community Engagement Findings and County Vision

The community engagement process combined primarily qualitative input and observations from a wide variety of sources. To analyze that varied information, we listened for core themes or values – what people most want for their communities and county – and then drilled down to better understand those themes, how they differed among different demographics or regions, and what actions could best support them.

A Countywide Vision: Key Themes

Across Herkimer County, we heard six common themes in people’s vision for the future:

Vital Villages and Main Streets

Vibrant and attractive downtowns and community centers, with safe streets, restored historic buildings, and diverse shops and activities

Healthy, Affordable and Livable Communities

Affordable, equitable and convenient access to quality food, housing, transportation, childcare, healthcare, education, broadband and other essentials

Thriving Local Economy and Economic Opportunity

Year-round economies that balance services for locals and visitors, revitalize Main Streets, offer well-paying jobs, and create opportunities for entrepreneurs

Authentic and Sustainable Places

Unique communities that celebrate, protect and enhance their distinctive local history, traditions, landscapes, and cultures

Diverse Recreation, Cultural and Social Activities

Fun, varied, and accessible social and recreational opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds including arts and culture, outdoor recreation, history and community

Engaged, Informed and Inclusive Culture

Strong and collaborative networks of volunteers and community groups, accessible information and leadership opportunities, and openness to including and welcoming diverse people

Drilling Down: Needs, Opportunities, and Solutions

We explored each of these vision themes in depth by observing what’s happening on the ground, talking with people representing different perspectives, and gathering more input or perspectives to test assumptions or better understand conditions, barriers and opportunities. Below are more detailed overviews of what we heard and saw, alongside potential solutions and models for advancing each aspect of the vision. Full discussions of each theme are available in the appendix.

Most of these details are based on people’s reported perceptions; further study or data analysis would be necessary to conclusively demonstrate trends or causal links.

1. Vital Villages and Main Streets

- Vacant and blighted properties are both a key problem and key opportunity for improvement. Mainly intact historic streetscapes and buildings are a remarkable asset for many downtowns and Main streets, but large-scale restoration will require creative business models and incentives like shared spaces and cooperative business models, pop-up shops and temporary business arrangements, and social enterprises.
- Low-cost beautification, streetscaping, placemaking and public space improvements can go a long way in catalyzing change and reinvestment. There is significant grassroots energy to lead these projects, but organizers need ways to coordinate and find each other and need support from municipalities and property owners to navigate permitting, insurance, and logistical needs.
- Pop-up markets and events (such as food truck rallies or artisan markets) can help expand and diversify offerings when permanent retail space is lacking and can help entrepreneurs and cottage shops test and develop business offerings before making permanent investments in spaces or business infrastructure.

2. Healthy, Affordable and Livable Communities

- Rural and remote communities are struggling the most with access to services like preventive care, dental, mental health, and family/social services. Lack of access to providers is compounding other problems for residents and communities (such as poverty, chronic disease, and substance abuse), or is forcing workers and residents to leave. Rural service “hubs,” mobile services, rural transportation options, and “circuit rider” approaches all show promise for delivering services efficiently in rural areas.
- Cooperative regional and countywide approaches to broadband development can help capitalize on major state and federal infrastructure investments to fill gaps in service areas and allow more people to access business, remote work and education opportunities. Libraries, municipalities and other service providers can offer free WiFi access, trainings, loaner devices and other assistance to help individuals connect.
- Housing is one of the most significant and expensive needs, and conditions vary across the county.
 - In Adirondack communities with severe shortages of affordable workforce and rental housing, regional collaborations are working to develop multi-pronged approaches including workforce housing development, new policies, and creative shared housing models.
 - In the Mohawk Valley, people expressed a need for higher quality affordable housing and strategies to address blighted properties, “missing middle” housing that serves middle income households, and accessibility retrofits to aging housing stock, which will enable older adults to age in place.
- Bike and pedestrian infrastructure and trail development can increase mobility and physical activity options, with multiple benefits: boosting wellness and chronic disease

prevention, reducing transportation costs, attracting tourists and visitors, and creating social activities and street life.

- Collaborative food access programs and creative business or nonprofit models can fill gaps in availability of healthy food options (from food pantries and free food shelves to co-ops and farmers markets), which exist in both dense neighborhoods and rural areas. Countywide collaborations can help coordinate resources across municipalities.
- Approaches to affordability and livability will be most successful when they break out of silos and focus on identifying the people, families or communities that most need help. That requires community-wide education, so that people understand the ripple effects of underserved regions and populations.
 - When people can't find housing or services in communities like Old Forge and are forced to leave, then businesses and communities are left without workers and volunteers, which means tourists begin to take their dollars elsewhere. With a disproportionate amount of county tax revenue coming from the North Country.
 - In villages and neighborhoods where revitalization is a priority, insufficient services can compound mental health, substance abuse problems, crime and safety risks that in turn undermine revitalization efforts and local businesses.

3. Thriving Local Economy and Economic Opportunity

- Stronger information, communications, and networking opportunities can help more start or grow small businesses and enterprises; many people have visions and plans, but need help accessing start-up costs, mentorship and business planning, or connections to vacant spaces or market opportunities.
- There are two common refrains in Herkimer County and across the U.S., which seemingly conflict: “we need jobs” and “we need workers.” Both are true in their own ways. Businesses and employers are scrambling to find workers and fill essential jobs including retail and hospitality, construction, teaching, nursing, and social services. Many workers are unable to accept or fill many of the jobs that are available because of low wages, insufficient training, lack of transportation or childcare, Covid-related health risks or concerns, or the stress and lack of flexibility in many service sector jobs. Developing higher-paying industries and job training programs can increase wages and grow local wealth while attracting new workers, while some industries may need to recruit and support more visiting workers from other places. Other critical industries may need help finding creative ways to increase wages or provide attractive benefits that draw essential workers like teachers, librarians and civic employees, health care and social service workers.
- Co-working and shared business spaces (or just free public WiFi hotspots) can help reduce costs for small businesses and the self-employed, make remote work more viable for rural residents, build social connections and networks and support innovation.
- People of color shared many experiences of how racism, discrimination or harassment have hampered their business opportunities, forced them to move or change jobs, or simply made it harder to work, get loans, find clients, or gain respect from colleagues.

People of different genders, sexualities and religions, youth and seniors, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups face similar hurdles; growing economic opportunity for all will require acknowledging and addressing these barriers and helping people who are impacted to overcome them.

4. Authentic and Sustainable Places

- People hold deep values and attachments to unique character of their Herkimer County communities and neighborhoods and envision growth that will protect and enhance this character.
 - North Country residents value the natural and scenic lands, working forests and outdoor recreation opportunities, and the close communities and independent spirit of Adirondack towns.
 - Mohawk Valley residents express strong appreciation for the rich local history of the area, including existing historic architecture and streetscapes, spirit of innovation and invention, affordable housing and amenities, and strong traditions and civic institutions.
 - In Herkimer County's rural southern communities, people value the rural lands and small working farms, quiet lifestyles and slower paces, traditional agricultural communities and institutions like granges and volunteer fire departments.
- Adaptive reuse and restoration of historic buildings will be key to Main Street revitalization in many communities and will require creative models and incentives. Developing local history sites and exhibits, walking trails and other experiences can help attract visitors to the area while restoring elements that matter to local people.
- Climate change is already impacting Herkimer County; communities and businesses must act quickly to limit and mitigate negative impacts, pivot and adapt to changing conditions, and prepare to capitalize on opportunities.
 - Developing more year-round recreation and tourism economies can help North Country communities guard against economic losses that may come with warmer winters and reduced skiing and snowmobile tourism
 - Community supported agriculture, farm cooperatives and local food markets can help protect growers from financial risks and losses that come with more unpredictable weather and storms.
 - Proactive community planning and policy development can help municipalities steer change and prepare for likely growth pressures from climate migration

5. Diverse Recreation, Cultural and Social Activities

- Social and recreational opportunities for youth emerged as a top priority – particularly after school options for children, arts and cultural activities for those less interested in sports, and nightlife options for college students and young adults. Empowering youth and students to develop and shape their own social and recreational opportunities and spaces

can help ensure that the activities fit their interests, while building leadership skills and attachment to their communities.

- Free, ongoing events and activities like food truck festivals impact many goals at once: they create regular social offerings for local people while still appealing to visitors, offer low-cost business development opportunities for vendors, increase dining or recreation opportunities with little cost to communities, and help revitalize and energize downtowns.
- Multicultural activities, events or programs can help increase connections and understanding among different groups in the county, showcase diverse assets and talents, increase appeal for younger residents and new arrivals, and reduce racism and discrimination.

6. Engaged, Informed and Inclusive Culture

- Stronger community information and communication channels can help people access critical information about services and offerings (public and private), which will increase use and participation. Improvements can be as simple as ensuring that every municipality or service provider shares phone and email contact info on their websites or developing directories or local businesses and service providers.
- Improved wayfinding signage and community-wide marketing and communication channels will help shine a light on existing businesses and services, increase customers and patrons, and highlight the rich energy and activity underway in Herkimer County
- Changing cultural and community norms and lifestyles mean that civic and volunteer organizations will also need to adapt to stay relevant and retain volunteers. Many youth and new residents are particularly eager to get involved, but don't feel welcome or don't know how to engage in communities. Many people today would prefer to volunteer for one-time projects rather than ongoing service clubs or committees. Volunteer fairs, fun and experimental projects, trainings and capacity building programs can all help encourage involvement.
- Fear of change can lead to entrenched tensions between different demographic groups and newcomers vs. longtime residents. Increased social opportunities and community events or structured community dialogues can help build bridges and understanding, while community organizations and institutions may need dedicated support or training to diversity leadership and examine practices that are not inclusive.

Solutions and Successful Models

All across Herkimer County, the country, and the world, communities are already hard at work addressing the challenges and achieving the goals described above. Following are brief snapshots of some Herkimer County efforts that have the potential to be models for other communities or issue areas. More stories and solutions from Herkimer County and around the country are available on the website and in the appendix.

The most successful innovations and approaches often impact multiple priorities or community values at once and often involve collaborations. The table below highlights which of Herkimer County’s key vision themes are impacted by the solution.

Table 4. Sample Solutions, Stories, and Collaborative Models							
Key: 1= Vital Villages and Main Streets; 2= Healthy, Affordable and Livable Communities; 3= Thriving Local Economy and Economic Opportunity; 4= Authentic and Sustainable Places; 5= Diverse Recreation, Cultural and Social Activities; 6= Engaged, Informed and Inclusive Culture; C= collaborations of multiple organizations, municipalities or other entities.							
Example	C	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mohawk Valley Community Market is a thriving reinvention of a Main Street department store in Herkimer; the large space hosts a group shop with approximately two dozen small businesses, each of which offers different products and services	•	•	•	•	•		
Enzo’s, also on Herkimer Main Street, has built one of the first parklets in Herkimer County; the sidewalk seating area enables people to dine safely outdoors during Covid while increasing appeal and streetlife		•		•		•	
Tagless is “free clothing store” filling another Herkimer Main Street space; it looks and feels like a clothing store and has revitalized a vacant space, using a non-profit business model and donations to cover rent and provide an essential community service	•	•	•	•			
AdkAction is leading a Broadband-for-All initiative in the North Country, creating a model for how to support a coordinated campaign to identify and fill gaps in service. With major statewide broadband investments in the works, AdkAction hosts a monthly conference call for local leaders, agencies, and interested community members; the calls provide updates and allow people to share tips and best practices. AdkAction is also working to identify specific households that may “fall through the cracks” of planned programs and investments, to ensure that no one is left behind.	•		•	•		•	•
Dolgeville and Little Falls have both joined the Connected Community Schools initiative (based in Rome). Participating	•		•	•			•

<p>schools create cooperative “hubs” that connect children and families to essential services like food, clothing, healthcare and more. The programs bring together teachers and school staff, agencies, businesses, faith communities and more to coordinate and pool resources. The overarching organization provides the model and support to local school chapters.</p>							
<p>The Herkimer County Hunger Coalition formed to help coordinate and support local food pantries, ensuring that people all over Herkimer County have access to food through a local pantry. The countywide coalition has been able to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars and organize a public relations campaign, identify service gaps and fill them with new pantries, and develop solutions or new programs that can be spread to all local pantries.</p>	•		a				•
<p>The Art Walk in Little Falls places artwork in vacant storefront windows; it improves aesthetics and vibrancy, encourages foot traffic and shoppers for existing businesses, creates a downtown attraction, and makes creative use of space until storefronts are rented again</p>	•	•	•	•		•	
<p>Think Local Little Falls and Main Street First work to promote local and Main Street businesses and attract customers, increasing marketing capacity and awareness and organizing projects and events that support the local economy overall</p>	•	•		•	•	•	•
<p>Rock City Centre is a new co-working hub in Little Falls, offering state of the art equipment and spaces for remote workers, entrepreneurs and small businesses. Concentrating innovators in one building increase the likelihood of collaboration and more innovation, while reducing overhead and business costs for members and visitors who need office space, high speed Internet, printers or other equipment.</p>	•	•	•	•			
<p>The Mohawk Valley Produce Auction in Fort Plain is an example of a robust, centralized market venue that allows Amish and other growers to sell in one location, which attracts more tourists and buyers from urban areas, restaurants, food co-ops and other entities that will pay more than customers at local farm stands.</p>	•			•	•	•	

<p>The weekly Ilion Food Truck Frenzy and Herkimer Downtown Chowdown create opportunities for dozens of food trucks each week, some of which go on to expand their businesses or open full-service restaurants, while also offering the community a wide variety of food options and free entertainment without the need for permanent spaces.</p>	•	•	•	•		•	•
--	---	---	---	---	--	---	---

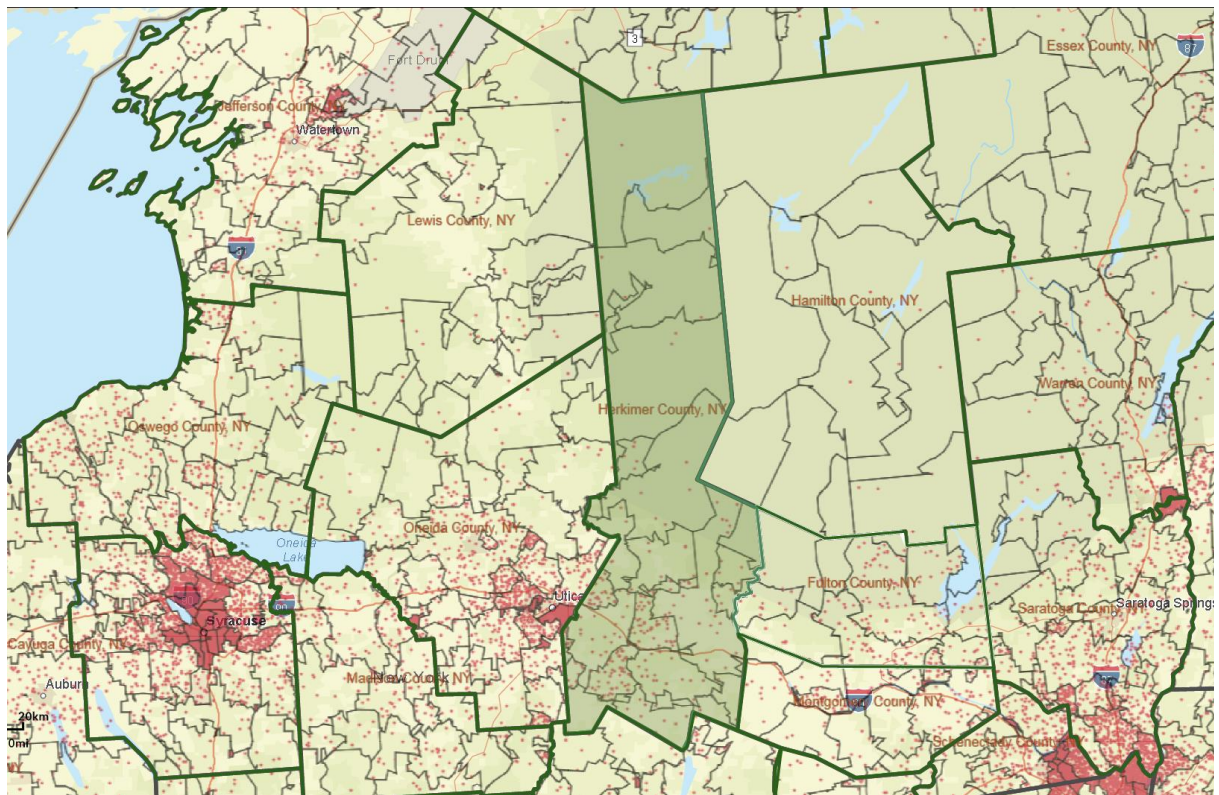
Conclusion: Community Development in Herkimer County Needs a Central Crossroads/Meeting Grounds

Herkimer County is fortunate to have a culture of innovation dispersed throughout businesses, organizations and communities. For example, public libraries throughout the County regularly have virtual meetings to coordinate programming and other activities. In the table above, the Connected Community Schools, AdkAction’s Broadband-for-All initiative and the Herkimer County Hunger Coalition are all examples of innovative, collaborative approaches to solve problems or seize opportunities. As the work of this community development strategic plan indicates, there are opportunities and needs for even greater collaboration. But, physical conditions can sometimes make this particularly difficult in Herkimer County.

Herkimer County has the greatest north-south expanse of any county in New York State. It’s northern area, primarily north of NYS Route 365 (Route 8), is largely contained in the Adirondack Park Preserve and as such has relatively little in the way of developed areas. The exception is the area around the Village of Old Forge located along NYS Rt 28. The Mohawk Valley portions of the County, primarily located south of NYS Rt. 365 along Route 5, contains most of the developed area within the County. Further to the South, are found the towns of Litchfield, Winfield, Warren, Stark which, in many ways are oriented to the Cooperstown area to the south of the County.

At the same time, the geographic diversity of the County—extending from the Adirondack North Country south through the Mohawk Valley and stopping just north of Cooperstown and the Leatherstocking area, coupled with the relatively low population density of the County has left Herkimer County without a central crossroads, a single place where County residents and/or business people can easily come together for meetings or accidentally encounter one another in the course of one’s day. This is clearly illustrated by the population density map in Figure 3. Unlike Oneida County, Saratoga County, Jefferson County and others contained on this map, Herkimer County has no single, dominant center. Given all of this, it is no surprise that this planning process has identified a propensity for many innovations and activities in the County to take place in isolation and for others in the County to be unaware of these successes.

Figure 3. Population Density by ZIP Code, 2019



Source: ESRI Business Analyst.

Despite the predilection for collaboration and creativity in Herkimer County, isolation can serve as a serious brake on innovation. While it is often common to think of an innovator as a “lone wolf,” developing their ideas in isolation, research on all types of human activity highlight the role connections and collaborations play in generating innovative and creative solutions to problems. The ability to make connections among one’s peers in business, government or at the community

level and *across different fields and professions* can vastly strengthen creative problem solving and performance.⁷

The key task for the Community Development Strategy is to support and nurture innovation by building connections among the County's innovators so they can maintain their energy and inspiration, share best practices and be better connected with sources of intellectual, logistical and financial support. As marketers Muller and Peres put it: "Overall, we find that growth is particularly effective in networks that demonstrate the "3 Cs": cohesion (strong mutual influence among its members), connectedness (high number of ties), and conciseness (low redundancy)."⁸ Clearly, the scope and pace of innovation and creativity in Herkimer County can be accelerated by overcoming isolation where it exists and building ever stronger connections among the individuals, organizations and communities seeking to better all aspects of life in Herkimer County.

The Plan: Keeping it Happening in Herkimer County by Fostering Connections and Innovation

As mentioned above, community innovation and development are happening in Herkimer County. The County has skilled and effective organizations addressing specific aspects of community and economic development. However, these efforts have been hampered by the lack of a network or central meeting place in the County to foster a sharing of information, ideas and resources. This constraint on Herkimer County's prosperity can be overcome through the creation of an organization that specifically serves as a meeting grounds and crossroads for the area, building connections among successful communities, organizations and enterprises and others seeking a way forward in the County.

There is precedent for this approach in rural areas. In the mid-1960s, the nine-county Hudson Valley region in New York was a largely rural area with no single dominant center, no one place where new ideas and resources could be shared and no capacity for regional planning and coordination. In response, business and community leaders formed Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress. Over the next half-century, that organization came to provide that badly needed meeting place and common ground, with a mission today to "to promote regional, balanced,

⁷ This research covers a variety of fields including technology development (c.f., Martin Babinec, *More Good Jobs*, Lioncrest, 2020), marketing (c.f., Eitan Muller & Renana Peres, "The effect of social networks structure on innovation performance: A review and directions for research" *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, March, 2019, pp. 3-19), rural development ("Can Social Innovation Help Rural Communities?" *The Young Foundation*, April 6, 2017.), urban planning (Bruce Katz and Julie Wagner, *The Rise of Innovation Districts: A New Geography of Innovation in America*, Brookings Institution, May, 2014) and a variety of other fields.

⁸ Eitan Muller & Renana Peres, "The effect of social networks structure on innovation performance: A review and directions for research" *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, March, 2019, p. 19.

sustainable, and equitable solutions that enhance the growth and vitality of the Hudson Valley.”⁹ Today the organization has a staff of six professionals providing networking events, conferences and policy research to a region that has grown to over 2 million in population.

There is a more recent example at a scale much closer to Herkimer County. In Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom (NEK) region (with population of approximately 64,000—the same size as Herkimer County, the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative was formed in 2018 “to improve the quality of life for all residents of the NEK through coordinated economic and community development.”¹⁰ In its short life, the Collaborative has fostered coordinated responses to the challenges of Covid-19, that have helped to address extending broadband connectivity while putting together partnerships to address housing, community vitality and business support in the region.

The Herkimer County Community Development Partnership

Similar to the NEK Collaborative, Herkimer County’s Community Development Partnership is not intended to be a comprehensive bureaucracy overseeing all aspects of community development in the county. There are already skilled people on the ground addressing many of these issues in both the private and public sectors. Rather the Partnership is intended to be a catalytic node in a network that links established innovative approaches in the County to those currently seeking solutions or opportunities. Working through that network (and expanding it at the same time) requires an approach that is flexible and agile. It is recommended that the Partnership be constituted as a private, not-for-profit organization if it is to have the agility and flexibility to identify and respond to these key issues and opportunities.

Building an effective County-wide partnership will require the following steps:

Step 1. Establish a formal organization to provide stewardship for the Community Development Partnership.

Implementation of this strategy will require multifaceted, sustained action that can only be carried out by professional staff. Therefore, one of the first steps in implementation will be to create and staff a private, not-for-profit Community Development Organization for Herkimer County. As indicated above, the role of this organization is a networking throughout the County and helping catalyze projects related to community development in the County. These efforts would be the responsibility of executive director of the Partnership overseen by a board of directors of four to six individuals.

The Board of Directors

The board of directors would serve as advisors to the executive director as well as serving as the policy/governing body for the Partnership. They should be broadly representative of the

⁹ <https://www.pattern-for-progress.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nekcollaborative.org/about-the-collaborative>.

geographic, economic and demographic diversity of Herkimer County. Their primary commitment would be to attend quarterly board meetings of the Partnership board. Suggested qualifications for board members include:

- A demonstrated commitment to community improvement as evidenced by participation in such activities as business development, organizing and/or participating in community responses to community wide issues, participating in local government and/or local civic or community organizations.
- An ability to engage people and/or organizations in pursuit of shared objectives as demonstrated through initiation and/or participation in collaborative efforts aimed at improving community quality of life.
- A capacity to think long-term and strategically on behalf of Herkimer County's Community Development Partnership.

Board members would be expected to serve an initial term of one to years, with subsequent terms of up to three years, with participation on the board limited to a fixed number of years (e.g., six years) before a member would have to step down from the board for at least one year.

The Executive Director

Once seated, the initial responsibility of the board would be to hire the executive director. This is expected to be a full-time position, with most of the person's time spent out in the communities of Herkimer County getting to know each one's issues, opportunities and important initiatives, and working with members of the community and others on important community priorities. A sample job description for this position is provided at the end of this document.

Step 2. Continue Community Engagement.

Once established, the Community Development Partnership will continue the Community Engagement process that was begun by Community Workshop in 2021. It is anticipated that Community Workshop will lead the engagement process in the first quarter to first half of 2022, with the executive director gradually assuming increased responsibility for this effort, and taking complete control of community engagement by the second half of 2022.

Consequently, in 2022, we will continue working with and engaging with more community partners and leaders as we share findings, move to support implementation activities, and continue learning about the nuanced needs and opportunities in Herkimer County. The fall microgrant contest offered one opportunity to learn about project ideas that County residents want to pursue, which both helps us to understand local needs and opportunities better and identify opportunities to support leaders and local initiatives. The thirteen contest applicants are listed below in Table 5 and showcase a remarkable range of local needs and opportunities for community development. The three contest winners are denoted with asterisks.

Table 5. Microgrant Contest Applicants and Winners

Key: 1= Vital Villages and Main Streets; 2= Healthy, Affordable and Livable Communities; 3= Thriving Local Economy and Economic Opportunity; 4= Authentic and Sustainable Places; 5= Diverse Recreation, Cultural and Social Activities; 6= Engaged, Informed and Inclusive Culture; C= collaborations of multiple organizations, municipalities or other entities.

Example	C	1	2	3	4	5	6
Herkimer Hub* Revitalizing Herkimer Main Street one vacant storefront at a time, by engaging Herkimer High School students, faculty and alumni in cleaning up buildings, creating window displays, and developing other beautification projects and Main Street activities.	•	•		•	•	•	•
Dental Drive for Herkimer County* Collecting and distributing basic dental supplies to families and households who lack them to meet urgent needs and build awareness of an essential unmet need. A recent study showed that some Herkimer County households share a single toothbrush for multiple family members.	•		•	•			•
Webb Town Center Mural Project* A public mural that will highlight inclusion and common ground while beautifying the downtown area, designed by a local art intern and painted with the help of the community.	•	•			•	•	•
All Things Mohawk Valley A regional website that will improve regional information access and communications by consolidating basic business listings and information (hours and locations), local government contacts and municipal board meeting notes, events and opportunities.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Spring Scavenger Hunt Designing a community scavenger hunt that will offer a free family activity, increase physical activity healthy lifestyles, and engaging people in exploring local businesses, assets and amenities.	•	•	•			•	
Cultivating Love of Nature Through a Shared Family Experience Offering free, family-friendly workshops that deepen a feeling of belonging and connection to people and the natural world, leading to more environmentally friendly practices.			•		•	•	•
Millers Mills Heritage Center		•			•	•	•

Developing a rotating historical display for the Village of Millers Mills, which will celebrate and share local history and create an attraction and activity for visitors and local people.							
Rochester Hardwood Floors Expansion Support for a thriving regional business to open a third location in Frankfort, boosting the local economy and adding jobs.			•	•			
Parking Area for Historic Trinity Church Increasing access to a historic building for community events, historical programs, civic and social activities by restoring the damaged parking area.		•			•	•	
1,000 Books Before Kindergarten Encouraging preschool families to read at least 1,000 books in order to boost literacy and encourage lifelong reading habits, through an incentive program at Herkimer’s public library			•	•		•	
Historical Signage Painting and Restoration Working with volunteers to clean and repaint interpretive signage at historical sites throughout Herkimer County, beautifying the sites and encouraging more people to stop and discover them.	•	•		•	•	•	•
Adirondack Chairs for the Herkimer Downtown Chowdown Coordinating volunteers and BOCES students to build and paint Adirondack Chairs and purchase doggie stations; these amenities will increase gathering places and encourage people to spend more time in Herkimer’s Myers Park and at the Herkimer Dometown Chowdown.	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Through the Eyes of Our Seniors Engaging seniors in writing and sharing their personal stories, and collecting stories into a book; the project will empower and build connections among seniors and share local history and memories	•		•		•	•	

Step 3. Cooperate on Catalytic Projects.

Building and/or intensifying the momentum for community development projects in Herkimer County is essential for the success of the Partnership. As indicated above, reaching out to communities and enabling them to take on projects important for their improvement is at the heart of the Community Development Partnership. The Partnership will spend much of its time identifying catalytic projects and helping communities assemble the resources and expertise they need for success. This will include at least three types of activities: Immediate Actions, Vision Planning, and Building Connections.

Immediate Actions: In its first year of operation, the Partnership would continue engagement with the projects that emerged from this year's microgrant contest as listed in the table above, providing technical assistance and guidance with the further development and implementation of these projects. As resources become available, subsequent rounds of mini-grants would be awarded to maintain and broaden community engagement throughout the County.

Vision Planning: In addition to working on immediate actions, the Partnership would participate in the creation and execution of studies to establish long term strategic approaches for economic and community development. Among these are three critical ones that the Partnership should actively promote and collaborate with:

- Herkimer Village's Waterfront Planning Process is seeking to strengthen the link between its downtown and the waterfront and provide guidance for taking advantage of opportunities associated with tourism, waterfront development and downtown revitalization.
- Creating a Collaborative Planning Process for the Route 5 Corridor. The villages of Ilion, Frankfort and Mohawk are seeking to create a collaborative plan to enhance these communities that share the Route 5 corridor, strengthening each village's sense of place while enhancing the appearance of corridor.
- Living ADK's Economic Development Planning Process will seek ways to improve the economic vitality of the Central Adirondack region, providing significant benefits to communities in northern Herkimer County.

Building connections

Step 4. Develop an Annual Community Development Agenda for Herkimer County

At the end of its first year, the Partnership will have developed a better understanding of the issues, opportunities and key projects in the County and its communities. Going into its second year of operation (i.e., 2023), the Partnership should create a prioritized community development agenda to guide its work over the course of that year. The agenda will be developed in close consultation with the constituencies of Herkimer County through the ongoing community engagement, possibly including an annual community development leadership summit to enable those throughout the County to share information on or to learn about important local initiatives taking place in the County. It is expected that this agenda will be refreshed each year to reflect the changing conditions and priorities in the County.

Step 5. Continue to Build & Broaden Partnerships.

The Community Development Partnership is intended to support and catalyze the work of individuals, organizations and communities in Herkimer County. This will only be possible if the organization works continuously to build and broaden its partnerships throughout the County and

beyond. As new needs, new opportunities and new projects are identified, new relationships will be required. These potential partners will range from community organizations to local governments to small businesses to school districts, libraries and others.

Implementation Plan

Table 6 presents a prospective work plan. The specifics of the plan will be revised as circumstances evolve. It is put forth here as guide to enable the communities of Herkimer County to discover, harness and benefit from the creative energies and ideas found throughout this remarkable place.

Table 6. Sample Comprehensive Work Plan to Implement the Community Development Strategic Plan		
Activity	Dates	Responsible Party
Step 1. Establish a Formal Organization		
Recruitment of Community Development Partnership (CDP) Board of Directors	Jan. to Feb., 2022	Community Foundation Staff
Securing Funding to staff the CDP	Jan. to Mar., 2022	CDP Board of Directors
Formally filing papers to establish the Community Development Partnership as a not-for-profit organization	Mar., 2022	Community Foundation Staff
Hiring CDP Executive Director	Feb. to May, 2022	CDP Board of Directors
Step 2. Continue Community Engagement		
Continuing Community Engagement & implementation of microgrant projects	Jan. to Jun., 2022	Community Workshop overseen by Project Steering Committee
Community Engagement transitions from Community Workshop to Executive Director	Jun., 2022	Executive Director
Seek out new partners & catalytic projects in the County	ongoing	Executive Director
Step 3. Cooperate on Catalytic Projects		
Participate in Initiation of Community Vision Planning Projects	Jul. to Dec., 2022	Executive Director
Fund and initiate new round of community microgrants	Jul. to Dec., 2022	Executive Director & CDP Board

Table 6. Sample Comprehensive Work Plan to Implement the Community Development Strategic Plan		
Activity	Dates	Responsible Party
Step 4. Develop an Annual Community Development Agenda		
Initiate an annual county-wide Community Development Summit to identify county-wide and local priorities & projects	Sep. to Nov., 2022	Executive Director, CDP Board & Partners
Develop a draft annual Community Development Agenda with review by partners	Dec. to Jan., 2023	Executive Director, CDP Board & Partners
Step 5. Continue to Build & Broaden Partnerships		
Identify and secure cooperation of partners needed to implement key projects in Community Development Agenda	ongoing	Executive Director, CDP Board & Partners

APPENDICES

Draft Job Description, Herkimer County Community Partnership Executive Director

Full Report, Analysis of Existing Conditions

The report is quite large. Each section can be downloaded at this link:

<https://ln5.sync.com/dl/c184b1730/sn4cbbpu-p48zu6bu-33pa6qx4-f86nmwdy>

Full Report, Community Engagement

The report will be available in January, 2022

DRAFT Job Description, Herkimer County Community Partnership Executive Director

Overview of the Position

The Director, in partnership with the Board, works to implement the Herkimer County Community Development Strategy. This will involve supporting and fostering initiatives to improve community quality of life so that Herkimer County is attractive to and provides ample opportunities for residents, businesses and visitors. The Director manages the finances, staff, and initiatives needed for this purpose. The Director ensures financial sustainability by raising the budget in cooperation with the Board of Directors. The Director increases awareness of Herkimer County's Community Development Strategy by serving as the external face of the organization and developing partnerships in the many communities of Herkimer County and beyond.

Skills

- Ability to build and maintain strong relationships with Board for purposes of setting a strategic direction for the organization, building board capacity, fundraising, etc.
- Capacity to assess feasibility of initiatives to succeed given available sources of support (e.g., human resources, financing, civic/community support, etc.)
- Able to establish priorities among initiatives/projects
- Administrative skills, including ability to:
 - Broker partnerships/coalitions
 - Recruit and manage volunteers
 - Identify, secure and manage resources, including financial contributions and grants

Responsibilities

- Develop and maintain first hand familiarity with towns, villages and cities in Herkimer County, including:
 - Municipal elected officials
 - Business and Social Entrepreneurs
 - Civic groups
 - Civic institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, etc.)
- Build effective working relationships with County- and State-level agencies and organizations involved in community and economic development
- Work with the Board to develop an annual work plan that serves as a guide for annual activities by identifying topics to be addressed techniques to be employed and partnerships to be built or strengthened and other resources to be mobilized to further the organization's mission that year
- Consistent with the annual work plan:
 - Assist and/or catalyze local initiatives by
 - Convening the partners necessary for success
 - Communicating with partners to share ideas for best practices and other information that could improve the likelihood of success
 - Connecting those involved with sources information, expertise and funding that can move the project forward.
 - Organize working partnerships that can help support and sustain innovative community-based problem-solving and progress

- Inform community members and partners about important resources to sustain community initiatives through social media, webinars, gatherings and other appropriate means
- Advocate on behalf of Herkimer County's communities and their projects to County, State and Federal officials and agencies