

Community Heart & Soul®

Name of Town/City: Mercer County Better Together; Aledo, Eliza, Joy, Keithsburg, Matherville, New Boston, New Windsor, North Henderson, Seaton, Sherrard, and Viola.

Population: 15,618 (entire county)

Challenge: Galvanize the county as community by engaging missing voices in community visioning

Focus: Identify shared priorities and needs on both community and county levels

Key Tool: Community Network Analysis to establish networks; action plan to format the Mercer County Strategic Plan

Brief Description/Summary of Community:

Mercer County is a rural county in Western Illinois comprised of 11 population centers. It was historically a geographically divided community. Mercer County's communities have a strong track record of problem solving, volunteerism, and entrepreneurship. Historically, there has been a culture of valuing competition over collaboration, which was one of the reasons that Mercer County, Better Together was envisioned.

Mercer County Better Together "By the Numbers":

- \$2.2 million - impact on local economy
- \$250,000 - reinvested into technology needs at local schools
- \$150,000 - to revitalize 11 parks and recreation facilitation in Mercer County
- \$50,000 value - broadband expansion and downtown redevelopment planning
- Over 1000- number of Mercer County residents who provided feedback to build the Mercer County Strategic Plan

Local Condition:

Residents in Mercer County had a desire to work collaboratively to support their local economy through a countywide planning process. Mercer County Better Together was formed to support a common county vision, and the Community Heart & Soul process was used to guide communities in identifying county and community priorities as part of a countywide strategic planning process. It is important to note that school district consolidations helped residents understand the advantages of countywide collaboration.

Volunteer and Community Response:

Volunteers participated in the Community Heart & Soul steering committee, public sessions for data gathering, and public forums. Over 1000 county residents provided data through forums, stories, sessions, and online surveys.

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Heart & Soul Outcomes:

Many outcomes are related to community and county planning, including the establishment of the Mercer County Endowment Fund, the creation of the Mercer County Mental Health Action Program, the Mercer County Strategic Plan, and the Downtown Viola redevelopment plan.

A Broadband Expansion Plan was created to increase fiber access in Mercer County, and technology needs in the school district were identified and funded.

Mercer County is also proud of the revitalization of 11 parks and recreation facilities throughout the county.

Through this work, countywide legislative advocacy was strengthened at state and federal levels.

Mercer County Better Together transitioned from a countywide planning process to a 501(c)3 nonprofit community and economic development organization. This serves as the backbone organization to accomplish priority work identified through the Community Heart & Soul planning process and outlined in countywide Action Plan.

