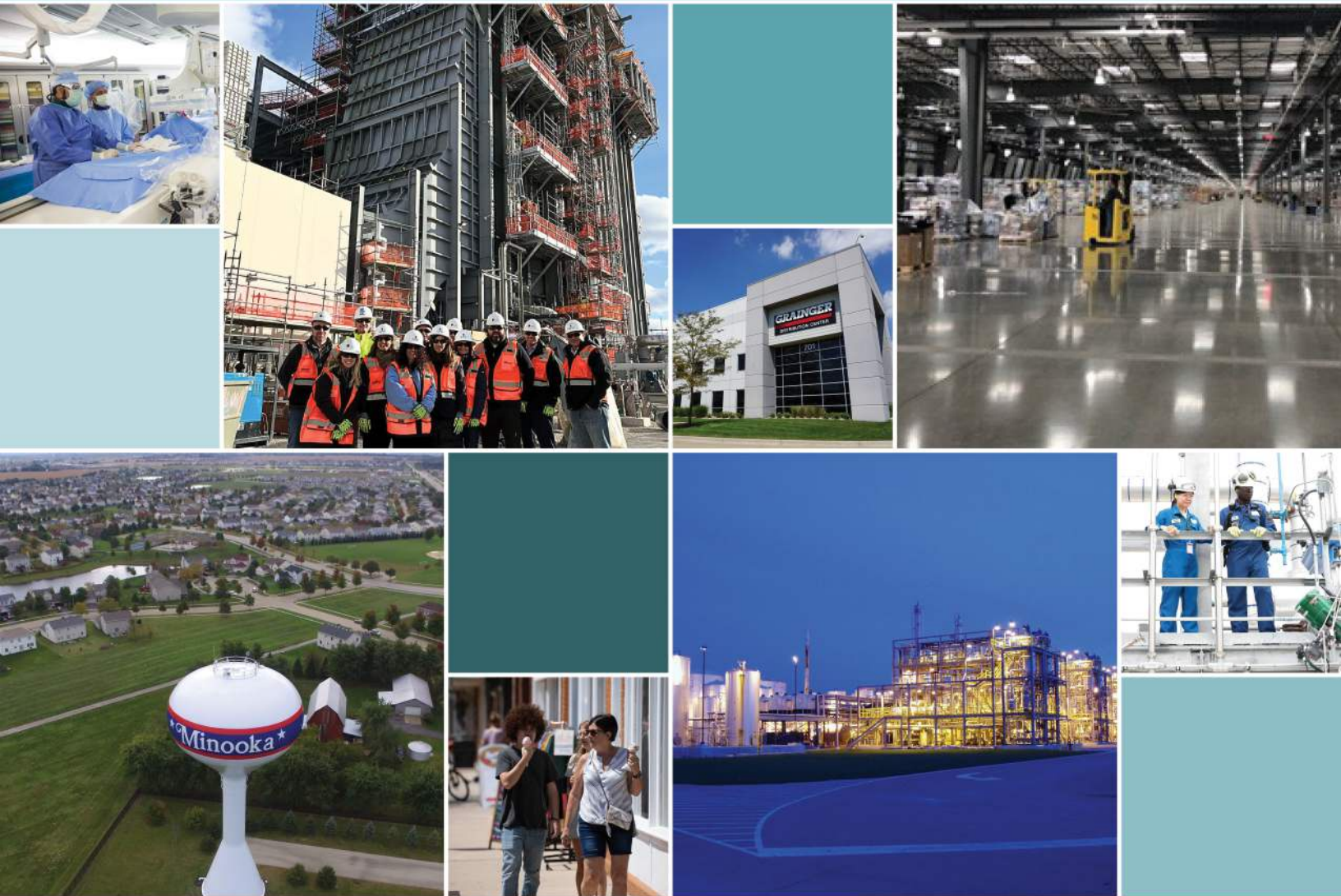




ADVANCING GRUNDY

Grundy County Economic Diversification and Resiliency Plan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TIP Strategies, Inc., would like to thank the project steering committee members who were instrumental to the planning process.

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Serving Grundy County since 1993, the Grundy Economic Development Council (GEDC) is a not-for-profit organization that fosters partnerships among business, labor, community, and education sectors to attract investment and create jobs. Working with these local entities, the GEDC strives to produce a strong and successful business environment in Grundy County. When investors, site selectors, and industry leaders are looking to locate or expand their business, the GEDC serves as the primary resource for information, including available property listings, incentives, and demographics.

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Established in 1947, the Grundy County Chamber of Commerce & Industry's mission is to support its membership, promote economic development, and preserve and enhance the quality of life in the County. The Grundy County Chamber & Industry is a 500-plus membership organization that includes the Channahon Minooka Chamber as a division of the Grundy Chamber. Memberships include benefits from both chambers.

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Image credit: All images used in this report are courtesy of Grundy County Economic Development and the Grundy County Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

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1



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Advancing Grundy

Situated in northern Illinois, Grundy County (the County) is beloved by residents for its rural charm, agricultural history, and exurban lifestyle. With approximately 60,000 residents, the County serves as both a rural haven and an extension of the Chicago metropolitan area. Its proximity to Chicago and desirable transportation network have spurred industrial development and attracted individuals and families seeking less densely populated areas with lower housing costs that are located within commuting distance of metro Chicago. However, its proximity to Chicago also poses challenges. Steady population gains and continued industrial expansion have highlighted the need to better balance growth with the preservation of the area's rural character and standard of living. In addition to requiring a more deliberate approach to growth management, the County's success in attracting talent and jobs has sparked concerns about how best to manage the downsides of industrial growth, including reducing dependence on any single sector, while maximizing economic opportunities.

The community responded to a call to action in 2020 with the threatened closure of the Dresden Generating Station. As the nation's first privately financed nuclear power plant, Dresden has long been an anchor that shaped Grundy County's population growth, identity, and economy. The threat of closure understandably sparked significant concern, as the plant's loss would have severely impacted the County's economy. Motivated residents and businesses mobilized under the #savedresden movement to work collaboratively to prevent Dresden's closure. Due to this grassroots advocacy and legislative support, the closure was averted. While the loss of the plant was avoided, the community understood the need to safeguard its economy from a potential closure in the future and to diversify its economy.

In 2022, the Grundy Economic Development Council (GEDC) and the Grundy County Chamber of Commerce (the Chamber) applied for and received a grant from the US Economic Development Administration (EDA). The grant assists communities affected by nuclear plant operations with planning for and developing more diverse and resilient economies. With Grundy County contributing a 20 percent match, bringing the total to \$600,000, and the North Central Illinois Council of Governments (NCICG) administering the grant, the community embarked on the [Grundy Resiliency Project](#) (#resilientgrundy). The resiliency project aims to assess economic impacts, explore competitive diversification strategies, address decommissioning challenges, and enhance capacity. The first phase of the project started with an in-depth economic analysis conducted by the University of Michigan Economic Growth Institute in 2023. The resulting [Comprehensive Economic Overview](#) details several findings pertaining to Grundy County's economic performance, including industry, workforce, population, and real estate analyses. Phase two combined the results of this baseline study with stakeholder input to craft a road map that identifies opportunities and action steps for building a more diverse and resilient economy.

The *Advancing Grundy: Grundy County Economic Diversification and Resiliency Plan* (*Advancing Grundy*) recognizes the need for a thoughtful, community-backed approach to sustained economic growth. In centering diversification and resilience, this plan seeks to help safeguard the County against economic disruption and to establish a stable economy that can withstand and recover from future shocks, such as economic downturns, industry shifts, or unforeseen weather events. Creating such a plan required a holistic look at wide-ranging factors that encourage and threaten economic prosperity—some of which fall outside the GEDC's and the Chamber's scope. As such, successful implementation of this plan will require broad-based community commitment and ongoing support from various partners within the County.

Project Approach

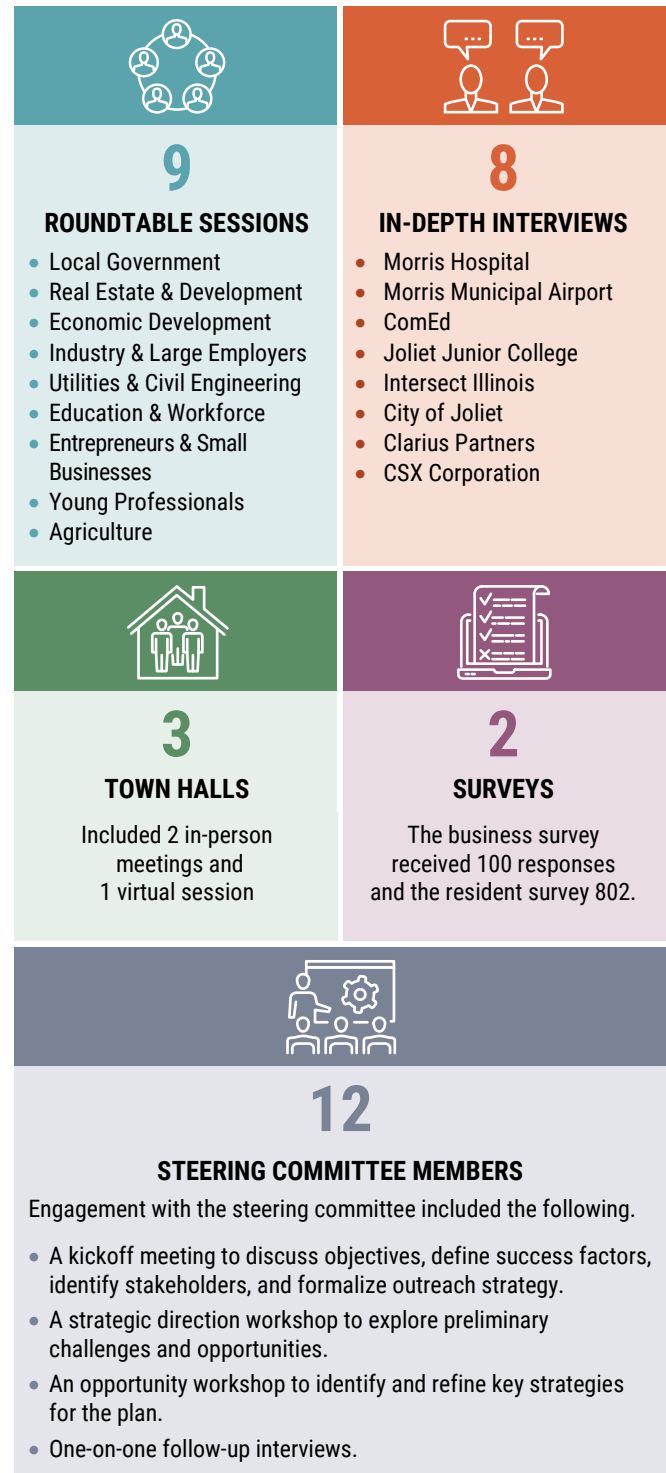
Launched by the GEDC and the Chamber in the spring of 2024, the *Advancing Grundy* strategic planning process was guided by the *Advancing Grundy* Steering Committee (the Committee) with support from TIP Strategies, Inc. (TIP). The Committee represented diverse interests of the community from the public and private sectors. The project began with a review of the economic analysis completed by the University of Michigan and previous planning work undertaken by the County and its communities.

The background review was supplemented by extensive stakeholder engagement to gather meaningful information, raise awareness of economic issues, and build support for the plan. This process, displayed in Figure 1, included virtual and in-person meetings with dozens of public and private sector leaders. A series of topic-based, in-person roundtables were held, along with one-on-one interviews and three community town halls. In addition, two online surveys, one for residents and one for businesses, were conducted from mid-June to mid-July. Results from both surveys are included in the Appendices, beginning on page 35. These touchpoints helped the consulting team better understand the economic development opportunities and challenges facing Grundy County and provided context for the quantitative analyses completed by TIP's research team.

Industry data analysis for the *Advancing Grundy* plan included the review and compilation of multiple datasets from public and proprietary sources. An analysis of strategic industry growth areas, the built environment, and industry benchmarking data was delivered separately as an interactive data visualization. Insights from the qualitative and quantitative analyses were incorporated into an analysis of Grundy County's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) and are reflected in the Strategic Action Plan section beginning on page 17.

Stakeholder input, in combination with findings from the quantitative analyses and TIP's expertise, informed the development of desired outcomes, strategies, and action items, which are the core of the plan.

FIGURE 1. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW



Through an iterative process with the Committee, the consulting team identified, refined, and finalized the goals and strategies for community review and input. The consulting team then worked with the committee to prioritize strategies and identify the resources and partners needed to ensure an actionable plan during an in-person opportunity workshop in July 2024.

While the plan is intended to steer the County's economic prosperity for the next five years, it also positions the County for growth well beyond that period. As such, the accompanying implementation matrix (delivered separately) allows for plan flexibility, accommodating any updates and adjustments needed to seize new opportunities as they arise. The matrix also includes a funding inventory that lists potential federal funding sources, as well as agency partners, which can help Grundy County resource the plan's implementation.

Strategic Framework

The *Advancing Grundy* strategic framework (Figure 2, page 6) illustrates the priorities and values identified by Grundy County stakeholders and leadership. The plan vision statement directs the resulting strategic recommendations along four areas of opportunity, each of which was informed by five guiding principles. While *Advancing Grundy* was not specifically undertaken as a comprehensive economic development strategy (CEDS), its strategic framework and planning process align with the EDA's CEDS requirements, enabling it to be used as the basis to secure future funding.

The plan's vision statement provides clear direction and inspiration while grounding strategies and actions in shared desired outcomes identified by Grundy County residents and the project steering committee. Now and in the years to come, it will help the County's leadership prioritize efforts, guide decision-making, and ensure a methodical approach to directing growth that can also adapt to any future changes in circumstances. While *Advancing Grundy* outlines economic development efforts for the next 5 years, the vision statement conveys where the community aims to be in 10 to 15 years. Created by the Committee and based on extensive community input, the vision statement also sets the foundation for leveraging regional opportunities, addressing challenges as they arise, and elevating a future-forward approach.

PLAN VISION STATEMENT

Grundy County's economy prospers through a strategic and sustainable approach to growth by supporting its industrial-friendly environment and vibrant small business community, while retaining and attracting quality jobs, creating an adaptable environment, and enhancing quality of place.

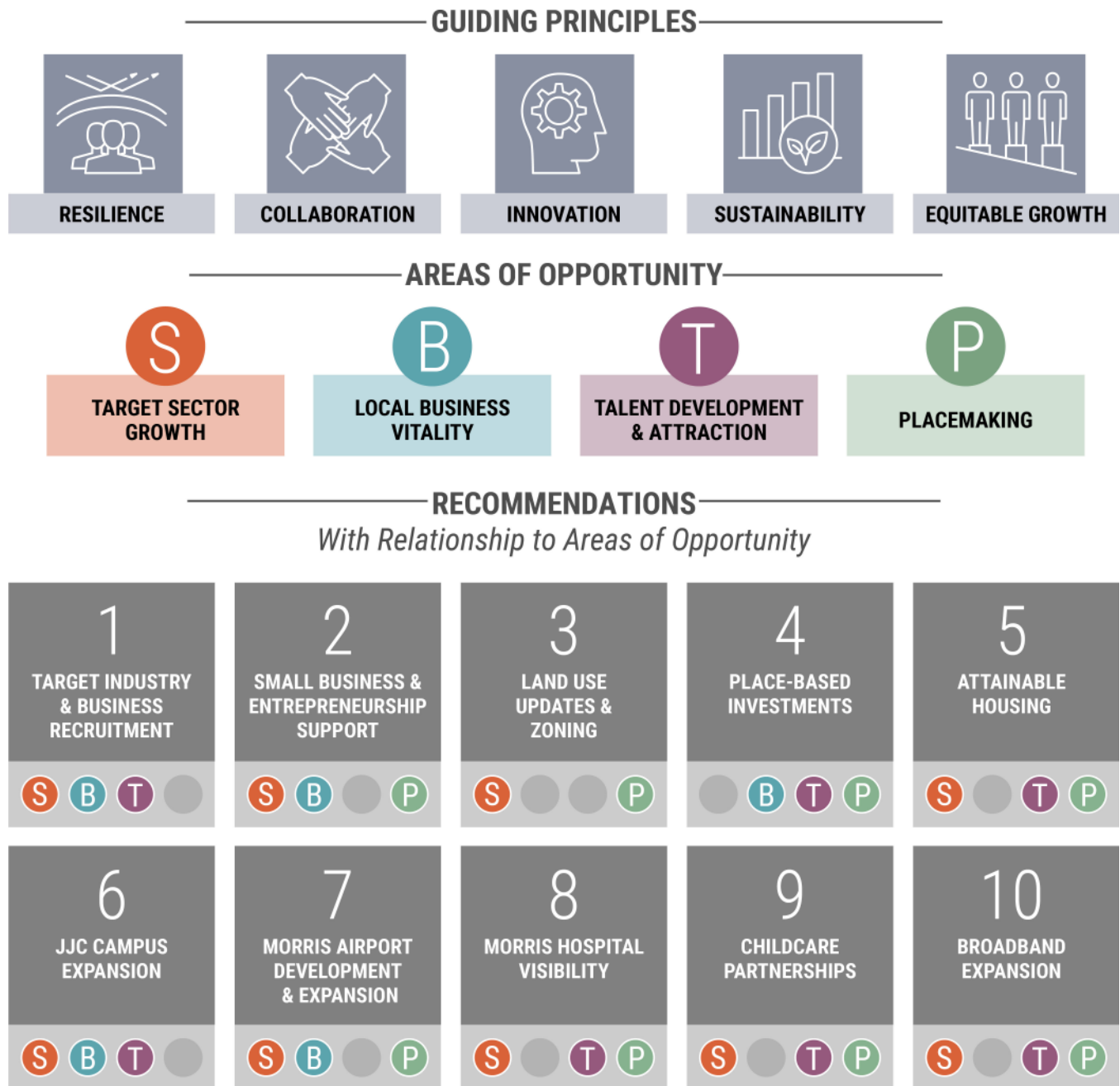
The Committee identified the following guiding principles for the plan. Each guiding principle embodies the economic development values that Grundy County stakeholders hold as essential for shaping and evaluating bold ideas and potential strategies related its economic growth.

- **RESILIENCE.** Building an adaptable and diversified economy that can withstand disruptions and quickly recover from challenges.
- **COLLABORATION.** Encouraging partnerships across sectors, organizations, and communities to better leverage resources, share expertise, and create synergies.
- **INNOVATION.** Driving growth by fostering a culture of creativity and experimentation, supporting research and development, and embracing new technologies and entrepreneurship.
- **SUSTAINABILITY.** Prioritizing a holistic approach to growth that balances economic growth with environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and organizational stability.
- **EQUITABLE GROWTH.** Ensuring that economic benefits are distributed fairly across all community segments, address disparities, and promote expanded opportunity for all residents.

Four recurring areas of opportunity emerged as having the most significant potential for growth and resilience. These areas were selected based on various quantitative and qualitative factors, including stakeholder feedback, survey responses, industry trends, and existing conditions. The following areas of opportunity represent the overarching categories shaping the recommendations in the Strategic Action Plan. Each strategy addresses one or more opportunity area as indicated in Figure 2 (page 6).

- TARGET SECTOR GROWTH.** Strategies related to this opportunity area pinpoint sectors that can spur significant development and job creation based on analyses of market trends, local assets, and potential economic drivers. Nurturing these sectors involves concentrating on industries or areas with the greatest potential for growth and impact in Grundy County. Emerging targets include energy-intensive businesses and advanced manufacturing operations, as well as traditional sectors with revitalization potential, like power, chemical manufacturing, and transportation and logistics. By prioritizing these areas, Grundy County can channel resources, incentives, and support to stimulate economic activity, attract investment, and foster a dynamic and competitive local economy.
- LOCAL BUSINESS VITALITY.** Creating a conducive environment for small local businesses to thrive is fundamental to fostering economic growth and community resilience. Strategies for supporting the local business community include providing access to resources, funding, and business development services. This can include initiatives that offer marketing support, tax incentives, or low-interest loans to local entrepreneurs; facilitate networking opportunities; and promote a buy local culture. Continuing to strengthen local businesses will not only boost the Grundy economy but also enhance community ties and help retain wealth in the region.
- TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND ATTRACTION.** Developing and retaining talent that meets the needs of current and emerging industries is crucial for sustaining the County's economic growth and competitiveness. The skilled trades, in particular, play a vital role in maintaining the County's infrastructure and contribute directly to its economy by providing stable, well-paying jobs and attracting new industries that rely on specialized labor. Noteworthy initiatives that help ensure Grundy County has an adaptable, skilled workforce include expanding and aligning educational and vocational training programs; fostering sustainable partnerships among schools, businesses, trade organizations, and industry leaders; and creating pathways for career entry and advancement. Investing in talent development and attracting skilled professionals will enhance the County's economic vitality and support innovation and productivity across industry sectors.
- PLACEMAKING.** A broad range of initiatives aimed at improving resident quality of life and creating appealing places that attract and retain residents, businesses, and visitors are encompassed by this opportunity area. Enhancing the physical and social environment of Grundy County's communities involves efforts that revitalize the County's downtowns, prioritize and invest in infrastructure improvements, and create outdoor spaces that support community events and cultural activities. By creating vibrant and attractive places, Grundy County can foster and maintain a strong sense of community; boost local pride; and enhance its appeal as a preferred destination for living, investing, and visiting.

FIGURE 2. PLAN FRAMEWORK



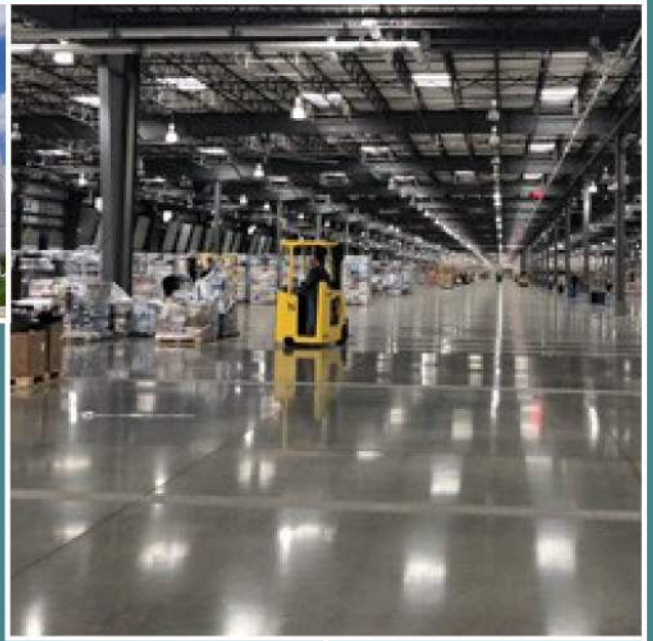
The Way Forward

Grundy County's assets, including its existing employers, location in the Chicago metropolitan area, highly desirable quality of life, and engaged and motivated residents, provide a strong foundation for the future. However, the County must take a more deliberate and measured approach to economic development to secure that future and create a sustainable, prosperous, and resilient economy. This more deliberate approach starts by looking beyond Chicago and the broader Midwest. In today's global economy, communities must consider how they are positioned to compete nationally and even internationally. To remain competitive, the County must commit to thoughtful industry retention and recruitment efforts, an environment that supports small business vitality, a skilled and flexible workforce, and the creation of quality places.

Advancing Grundy builds on the momentum of #savedresden and sustains the collaboration among partners and stakeholders that will help to ensure a strong and resilient future for the County and its residents. The Grundy Resiliency Project, including this planning process, convened public and private sector leaders from across the County to chart a path forward. The four critical areas of opportunity established in this process now serve as the County's points of reference. These opportunity areas, further categorized as high-priority items, along with the associated strategies and actions, are detailed in the Strategic Action Plan section.

The way forward requires sustained momentum. Regular meetings involving broad, countywide representation from residents and industry leadership will help ensure that the County remains on track and can respond to challenges and opportunities as they arise. Frequent touchpoints will keep residents and leaders abreast of shifting conditions and provide an avenue to reach joint solutions. *Advancing Grundy* guides efforts across a range of organizations and jurisdictions, thus requiring active leadership and engagement from regional partners to drive successful implementation. It also requires monitoring and potentially increasing the capacity of critical players, such as the GEDC and the Chamber. Finally, this plan is intended to be flexible and adaptable. A dynamic plan will allow the County to be responsive to new opportunities, including federal and state funding, to advance the community's vision.

2



SUMMARY BACKGROUND

Planning Foundation

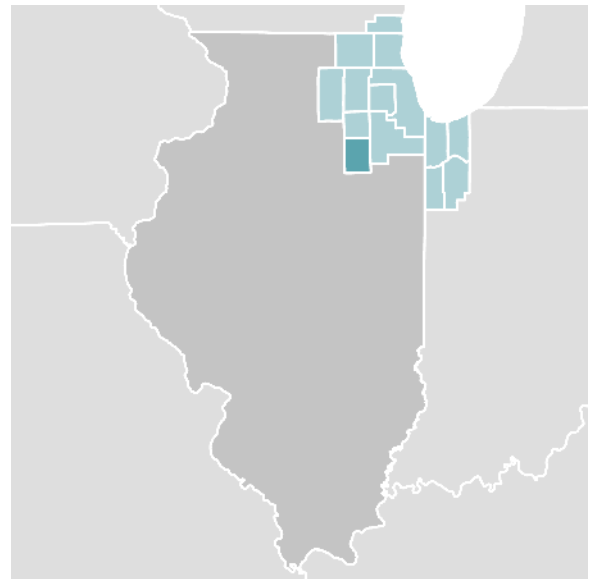
This section provides an overview of Grundy County's geography and natural setting, as well as its physical and cultural assets. Observations gleaned from stakeholder engagement, as well as a review of prior planning documents and reports, formed the basis of the qualitative review. In addition, this section outlines relevant findings from a detailed quantitative analysis of Grundy County's strategic growth areas (delivered separately) and a SWOT analysis prepared by TIP. Data on the County's demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including its labor force, was compiled separately and findings were integrated into the planning process (see text box).

Grundy County Profile

Grundy County is situated in the northern part of Illinois, bordered by Kendall County to the north, LaSalle County to the west, Livingston County to the south, and Will County to the east. Approximately 50 miles southwest of Chicago, it lies within the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI metropolitan statistical area (MSA) and offers strategic access to major highways like I-55 and I-80. Its location within a dense network of transmission lines as well as logistics and transportation infrastructure support both regional and national supply chains. The County's geography includes a relatively flat topography with minor rolling terrain and river valleys including those shaped by the Illinois River, which cuts through the northern portion of the County.

A diverse environmental landscape—characterized by its mix of agricultural land, forested areas, and waterways—makes it well-suited for farming, agriculture, industrial, and recreational operations, all of which have been significant contributors to the local economy. Grundy County has six state parks and features numerous natural areas, including wetlands and small lakes, which contribute to its ecological diversity and provide habitats for various wildlife species. The landscape also provides valuable natural resources, including fertile agricultural land, water

FIGURE 3. GRUNDY COUNTY LOCATION
WITHIN THE CHICAGO-NAPERVILLE-ELGIN MSA



Source(s): TIP Strategies, Inc.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC DATA

As part of phase one of the Grundy Resiliency Project, a thorough analysis of the County's demographic and socioeconomic conditions was conducted and detailed in the [*Comprehensive Economic Overview*](#). For the purposes of this phase of the plan, the key demographic findings from that report are highlighted below as they relate to the *Advancing Grundy* plan. Grundy is growing at a faster rate than surrounding counties, except for Kendall County. The population is younger, a median age of 38.3, compared to the state and the nation. Grundy County residents have higher educational attainment at the high school and some college and associate degree levels but fewer completed college degrees. While rural, the County's poverty rate is one-half that of the state and the nation and lower than most of its surrounding counties. These findings underscore the need for more targeted focus on talent development and continued expansion/spreading of economic opportunity to its residents.

resources, and forested areas. Historically, the County's rich soil made it a profitable place for farming operations, particularly for crops such as corn and soybeans. In addition to supporting agricultural production, the Illinois River and its tributaries provide essential water resources for recreational use. The County's forested areas and wetlands contribute to natural flood control and support local wildlife. Sustainable management of these natural resources is critical for balancing economic development with environmental conservation, ensuring long-term ecological health, and preserving outdoor recreation assets.

While desirable for large-scale industrial development, the relatively flat topography and the presence of the Illinois, Des Plaines, and Kankakee Rivers and the Mazon and Aux Sable Creeks makes the region more prone to flooding. While the County has not experienced a major flooding event in a few decades, it is at a moderate level of flood risk.¹ Furthermore, these risks are only expected to increase due to a changing climate marked by stronger and more frequent rain. Significant flooding events are a noteworthy threat to the County's economy beyond the damage caused to residential and commercial properties. Disruptions to the road and rail infrastructures would impede the movement of goods and services and significantly interrupt operations at Dresden. At the time of writing this report, some municipalities, such as Channahon and Minooka, had comprehensive plans addressing flooding. However, the last comprehensive plan addressing the matter for the County was completed in 2014.

Grundy County experiences a temperate continental climate with four distinct seasons. Summers are typically marked by warm and humid days. Winters are cold, with frequent below-freezing temperatures and occasional snowfall. Spring and autumn are characterized by moderate temperatures and lower humidity, making them ideal for a range of outdoor activities and agricultural operations. This climate variability supports an assortment of agricultural products, outdoor recreation, and tourism opportunities.

Beyond Grundy's geographic and physical strengths, the County has additional assets that contribute to its desirable lifestyle. Education and training assets, including the Grundy Livingston Kankakee Workforce Board, the Joliet Junior College (JJC), and the Grundy Area Vocational Center (GAVC), are invaluable to the County. As critical players in the County's workforce development efforts, they provide essential training programs and skill-building initiatives for residents. Another notable asset, the Grundy County Historical Society Museum was founded over a century ago to preserve and display the County's Midwestern heritage. Similarly, the location of several Grundy County communities along the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Area helps to enrich the area through heritage tourism visits and to solidify the County's place in Midwestern history. The Morris Theatre Guild and the Coal City Theatre Department present a variety of theatrical productions showcasing local talent. The County's annual festivals, including the Grundy County Fair, the Corn Festival, and the Liberty Arts Festival, celebrate local traditions and foster community spirit with activities, entertainment, and outdoor performances. Ongoing efforts throughout the County support local artists and provide venues for visual arts, often featuring rotating exhibits and providing art classes. Current and planned murals add to the visual appeal of public spaces, highlighting local creativity. Additionally, the County's public libraries are a mainstay asset, offering programs and workshops that further promote community engagement and cultural enrichment. Collectively, these amenities contribute to the cultural vibrancy of Grundy County, providing residents and visitors with numerous opportunities to explore and enjoy art, history, and culture.

¹ "Does Grundy County Have Flood Risk?" Flood Factor® [Mapping of Flood Risk for Grundy County](#) by First Street Technology, Inc.

Industry Diversification Analysis

TIP conducted a strategic analysis of Grundy County's diversification opportunities along three lines. An analysis of in-demand jobs in established target industries and future opportunities helped identify strategic growth areas for the County. A review of commercial property trends and infrastructure assets informed the team's understanding of development opportunities in the County. Finally, an examination of employment trends across the region and relative to peer regions sheds light on Grundy County's competitive position. Data collection began during the initial phase of the engagement, and the analytical work continued into the final phase. An in-depth analysis, the *Grundy County Industry Diversification Analysis*, was delivered as an interactive data visualization, the menu of which is shown in Figure 4. The remainder of this section details important findings from this analysis.

FIGURE 4. MENU OF THE GRUNDY COUNTY INDUSTRY DIVERSIFICATION ANALYSIS (INTERACTIVE DELIVERABLE)

 STRATEGIC GROWTH AREAS	 COMMERCIAL PROPERTY & INFRASTRUCTURE	 INDUSTRY BENCHMARKING
• Target Definitions • Target Concentrations • Target Demand Patterns • Qualifications • Skills in Demand • Occupations in Demand • Trends & Credentials • Target Demographics • Target Earnings • Target What If...? Scenarios	• Commercial Property Comparison • Commercial Property Share of MSA • Commercial Property Maps • Land & Infrastructure • Commodities Transported • Freight Flow Concentrations • Freight Flows	• Benchmark Criteria Selection • Employment Trend • Employment Recovery • Annual Job Change • Industry Sector Employment • Industry Sector Trends • Industry Sector Net Change • Industry Sector Concentration

Source(s): TIP Strategies, Inc.

Grundy County has a strong existing industrial base to build on and diversify.

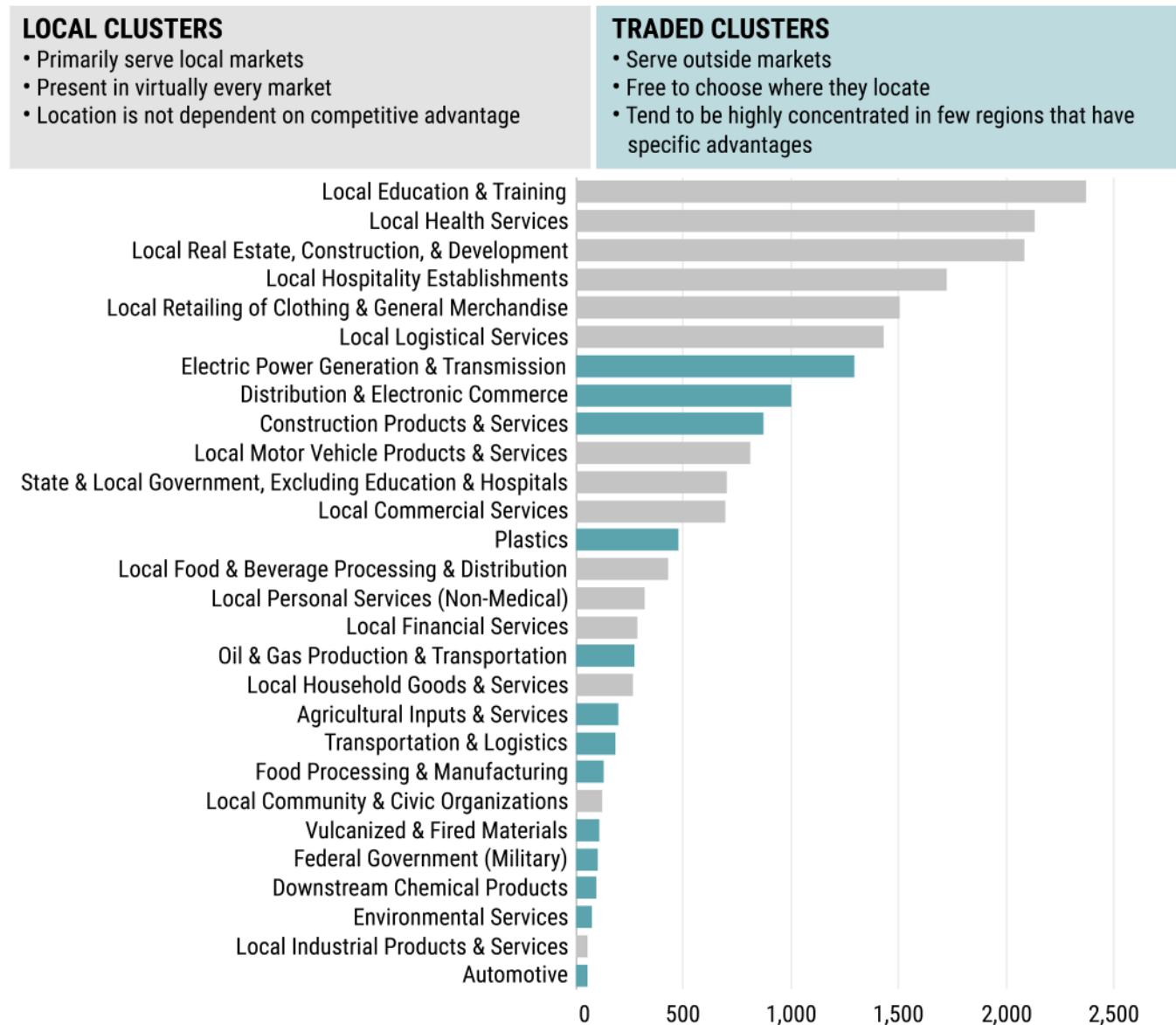
Grundy County's biggest strength lies in its location. As an outlying county of the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin MSA, Grundy County is in the growth path of the nation's third most populous metropolitan area, one which boasts massive industrial importance. The Chicago combined statistical area's 13 Illinois counties alone exported more than 382 million tons of freight in 2022, valued at nearly \$806 billion. Because of this proximity to Chicago and the presence of major industrial infrastructure in Grundy County—with four Class I railroad lines and two interstate highways within County boundaries—the County has a strong foundation as a growing industrial hub. Industrial activities make up some of Grundy County's most significant economic clusters. Despite declining employment numbers, Electric Power Generation & Transmission² remains Grundy County's largest traded industry cluster by job count, followed closely by both Distribution & Electronic Commerce and Construction Products & Services (Figure 5). These traded clusters, or those that serve outside markets, reflect Grundy County's unique strengths and the employment impacts of both the Dresden Generating Station and recent investments in distribution centers. As the County wishes to diversify its existing industrial strengths, opportunities lie in expanding its

² Throughout the document, formal titles for industries and occupations assigned under federal naming conventions (i.e., the North American Industry Classification System or the Standard Occupational Classification system) are capitalized. References to industries and occupations that do not align with these standards are not capitalized.

portfolio of traded sector industrial square footage. Only 1 percent of the Chicago MSA's 1.3 billion square feet of industrial space is found within Grundy County, but a wealth of available land presents wide-ranging opportunities for continued strategic growth. Further investment in the County's industrial infrastructure will foster its ability to attract a variety of industrial users, such as chemical manufacturers, transportation and logistics firms, and energy-intensive businesses, helping meet the demand stemming from a growing metropolitan region and global shifts in consumer behavior.

FIGURE 5. EDA INDUSTRY CLUSTERS, JOB COUNT

GRUNDY COUNTY, ILLINOIS, EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY CLUSTER, 2023



Source(s): US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS); Lightcast 2024.2—Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; US Economic Development Administration, Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, Harvard Business School; TIP Strategies, Inc.

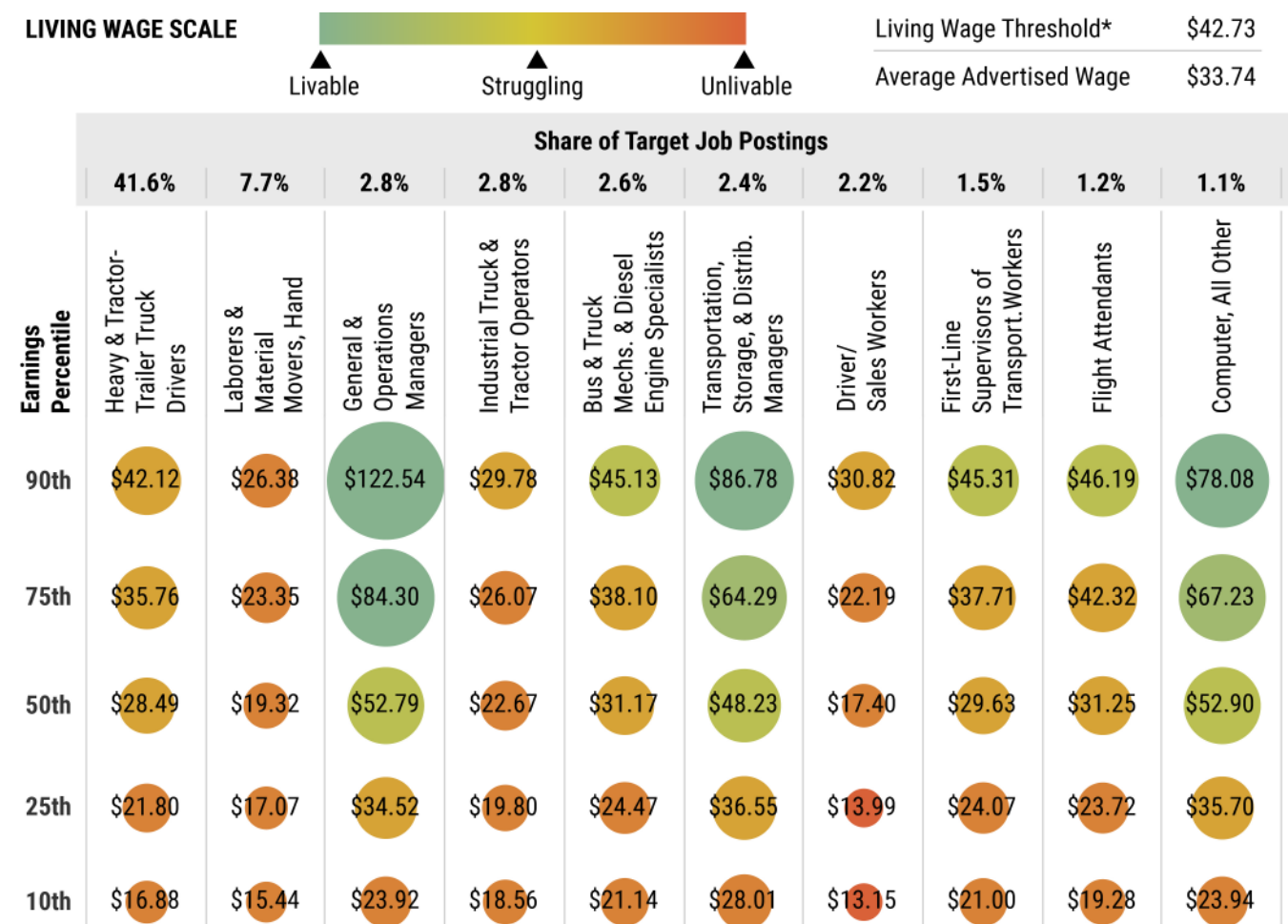
Note(s): Only includes clusters with at least 50 jobs in Grundy County, Illinois, in 2023.

Attracting higher-quality, higher-paying jobs will position the County for long-term success.

Both industry and workforce diversification will allow Grundy County to serve an increasingly valuable industrial role within the Chicago market. One aspect of this approach is shifting to attracting higher-quality, higher-wage jobs in target industries. Despite being a relative industrial strength for Grundy County, Transportation & Logistics represents a typically low-quality, low-paying industry for local workers. For single-income households with two adults and two children, median earners in 7 of the top 10 Transportation & Logistics jobs fall below the living wage threshold MSA-wide. Further, the average advertised wage for Transportation & Logistics jobs (\$33.74) is well below the living hourly wage (\$42.73). In the industry's two most common jobs, Heavy & Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers and Laborers & Material Movers, Hand (which together make up nearly one-half of the target industry's job postings) even those in the 90th percentile of earners make less than the living hourly wage (Figure 6). The high share of these postings is likely due to the high turnover rate (41.6 percent).

FIGURE 6. TRANSPORTATION & LOGISTICS, TOP 10 OCCUPATION EARNINGS

PERCENTILES SHOW THE VARIATION IN ESTIMATED EARNINGS WITHIN AN OCCUPATION AND ACROSS OCCUPATIONS



*The living wage threshold shown is the minimum earnings needed to cover basic cost-of-living-adjusted expenses for households with two adults, one working, and two children.

Source(s): BLS; Lightcast 2024.2—QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; Glasmeier, Amy K. Living Wage Calculator, 2024, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); TIP Strategies, Inc.

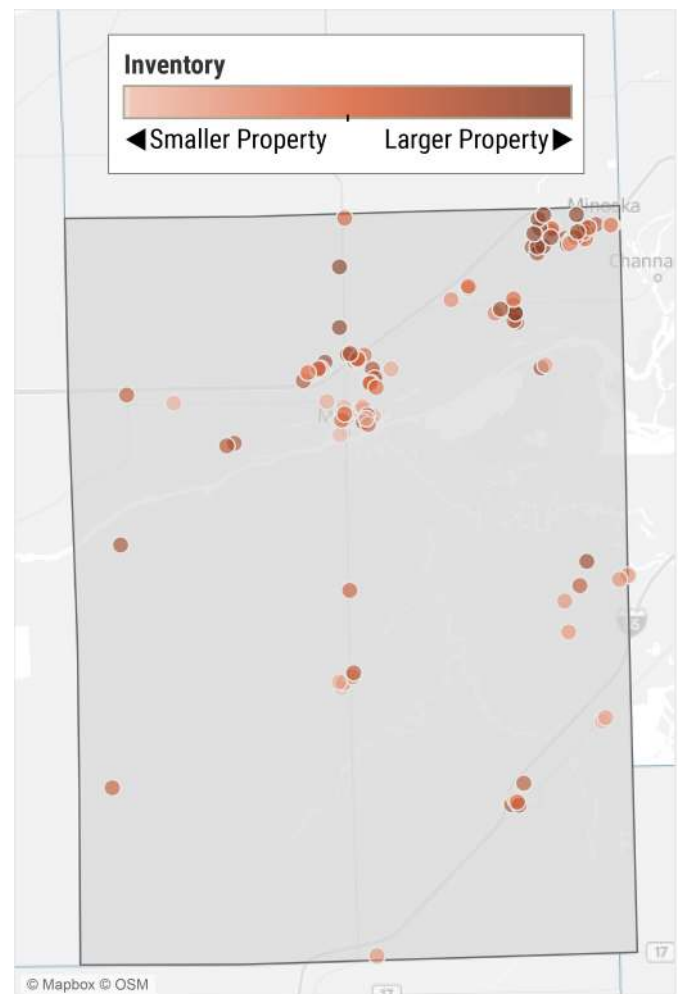
Note(s): Job postings include non-staffing, unique, newly posted job postings for full-time, part-time, and flexible positions, excluding internships, between August 2022 and July 2024 in the Chicago MSA. The five circles for each occupation represent estimated earnings at the 10th, 25th, 50th (median), 75th, and 90th percentiles in 2023 USD. The circle size indicates the estimated hourly wage within that percentile range. The color of each circle indicates if the percentile wage is above (green), about the same (yellow), or below (red) the selected living wage.

Still, there is room for Grundy County to further expand high-wage employment for residents within the industry's higher-earning jobs, where the barrier to entry is relatively low. The typical entry-level education required for Transportation, Storage, & Distribution Managers is below the college level, and Computer, All Other typically requires no related work experience. As the County continues to enhance its logistics infrastructure and diversify its industrial production, it has an opportunity to market itself as an affordable alternative to Chicago's central counties, attracting outside businesses offering higher-wage jobs. Additionally, quality-of-life and quality-of-place improvements can spur both business and workforce attraction. Throughout the Community Visioning Survey (see Appendix A. Community Visioning Survey), respondents praised Grundy County's high quality of life while communicating a strong desire to protect and improve lifestyle amenities, like outdoor recreation facilities, retail and grocery options, and investments in the County's education and childcare services. Such improvements, in addition to the development of workforce housing, will allow the County to market itself to Chicago and beyond as an amenity-rich, attractive place for relocation.

With an abundance of available land, Grundy County must be strategic about land use.

Grundy County has a wealth of available land, with large swaths of developable parcels enjoying proximity to the County's Class I rail lines, major roads, and the Illinois River. Where it is not superseded by local zoning, much of the County's land with access to critical transportation infrastructure is zoned for industrial use to protect it from other use types. While this land availability presents ample opportunity for development of commercial real estate, there is a need to ensure that sites are strategically selected, positioning the County for long-term success. As the Chicago MSA has expanded, the County has already invested some of its available land in industrial real estate, placing its newest, largest industrial facilities along major road corridors. Fulfillment and distribution centers in Morris and Minooka enjoy easy access to the rest of metropolitan Chicago due to their locations along I-80 and IL-47 (Figure 7). The creation of a site readiness program would enable the County to identify greenfield sites that are suited for commercial and industrial development and make them shovel-ready by conducting necessary due diligence and making improvements to infrastructure and utilities. This proactive step would increase Grundy County's competitiveness within the Chicago market by expediting the business attraction process. It would allow Grundy County to spur construction rates, which currently lag MSA-wide rates, and to work toward a long-term vision of future land use, ensuring industrial development occurs in areas with access to critical freight infrastructure.

FIGURE 7. INDUSTRIAL PROPERTY INVENTORY
GRUNDY COUNTY, ILLINOIS



Source(s): CoStar Group; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Note(s): Inventories are measured in square feet. All data are estimated by CoStar as of late May 2024 and represent a snapshot in time.

Target industry sectors present diverse opportunities for economic growth.

As Grundy County seeks sustainable economic growth, creating a diverse local economy anchored by multiple industry sectors can increase resilience. In economic sectors where it is already strong, the County can capitalize on these strengths through industry diversification. Among identified peer regions (Denton County, Texas; Jefferson Parish, Louisiana; Kenosha County, Wisconsin; Kent County, Michigan; Shelby County, Indiana; and York County, Pennsylvania), Grundy County had the highest concentration of jobs in the energy sector by far. While electric generation remains a strength for the County, investments in photovoltaic manufacturing or biofuel production represent ways to build a resilient and diversified energy economy that encompasses a wide range of qualifications and occupations. In other target industries where the skills and qualifications of the existing workforce align with employer needs, such as Chemical Manufacturing and Transportation & Logistics, investments in improved infrastructure and real estate offerings would facilitate business attraction efforts bringing higher-wage jobs to the County and increasing its standing in the region.

Finally, in emerging target industries with a limited presence in the County, like electric vehicle components and data centers, Grundy County has an opportunity to invest in workforce development, upskilling local workers to meet the labor qualification demands of these specialized, often high-wage, industries. Across all target industries, there is a deficit of specialized skills that job postings are looking for. The demand for skills that cut across multiple target sectors, like project management, auditing, and finance, is not met by the supply of jobseekers. By aligning local education offerings with emerging industry demands and fostering partnerships between education institutions and businesses, Grundy County can develop a workforce that is both appropriately skilled for target industries and well connected to local employers, keeping skilled workers in the community after program completion.

SWOT Analysis

During the early phases of the project, the consulting team gathered qualitative input from local stakeholders in the County concerning local economic development issues. In addition, TIP conducted quantitative data analyses to understand Grundy County's competitive position in the region. The results of these efforts informed the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis, summarized in Figure 8.

The four components of a SWOT analysis can be defined as follows.

- **Strengths:** Assets and resources that can be built on to grow, strengthen, and diversify the local/regional economy.
- **Weaknesses:** Liabilities and barriers to economic development that could limit economic growth potential.
- **Opportunities:** Competitive advantages and positive trends that hold significant potential for the attraction of new businesses, investments, and skilled workers.
- **Threats:** Unfavorable factors and trends (often external) that could negatively affect the local/regional economy.

FIGURE 8. GRUNDY COUNTY SWOT SUMMARY

 Strengths	 Weaknesses
• Geographic location • Proximity to major highways (I-55 and I-80) and airports • Strong and expanding industrial sectors • Affordable land and living costs • Availability of land and prime industrial sites • High quality of life • Morris Municipal Airport • Morris Hospital & Healthcare Centers • Joliet Junior College (industry collaboration) • Energy	• Limited attainable housing • Infrastructure gaps at prime sites • Dependence on energy sector • Gaps in broadband access • Limited workforce development institutions • Brain drain (loss of highly skilled or educated workers) • Childcare shortages • Prevalence of lower-wage positions • Shortage of middle-management workers
 Opportunities	 Threats
• Industry diversification (energy, chemicals, transportation, distribution, and logistics) • Strategic business and industrial park development • Riverfront and downtown development • Tourism and recreation development • Joliet Junior College expansion	• Increased truck traffic • Increased automation • Environmental and weather concerns • State governance • Limited access to higher education

3



STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

1. Target Industry and Business Recruitment

Enhance the economic vitality of the County by actively recruiting target industries and businesses that align with the community's strengths and needs.

The strategies in this section outline ways the County can strengthen and diversify its industrial base through targeted business recruitment efforts. First, continuing to nurture relationships with state and regional partners will help ensure the County stays informed of industry trends and new opportunities. The second strategy highlights how to foster collaboration and information sharing among industry leaders as a means to foster innovation. Establishing a site readiness program for targeted industries, in collaboration with local governments, landowners, developers, and utility providers, will ensure that the County is prepared to meet the needs of prospective businesses. The final two strategies outline ways to increase the County's visibility and enhance the GEDC's capacity to drive economic prosperity in the community.

Strategies and Actions

- 1.1. Stay abreast of emerging opportunities in the target industry sectors that strengthen and diversify the County's economy. (See Appendix C. Target Industry Sectors, page 39)
 - 1.1.1. Continue to work with Intersect Illinois to attract new investment from domestic and international firms. Similarly, maintain close collaboration with municipalities, property owners, and utility partners to respond to state-level requests for information for business recruitment.
 - 1.1.2. Enhance the GEDC's involvement in and support of promising regional initiatives, such as the Midwest Alliance for Clean Hydrogen, to stay abreast of trends and increase the County's presence.
 - 1.1.3. Strengthen the ecosystems that support existing industry by encouraging growth in high value-added supply chain elements. This can be done by leveraging information gathered from business retention and expansion visits, networking, and state business intelligence to identify suppliers, vendors, and customers of existing companies for targeted recruitment.
- 1.2. Foster collaboration, information sharing, and innovation by facilitating partnerships among industry leaders.
 - 1.2.1. Establish councils or advisory committees consisting of industry leaders from the target sectors to provide insights on industry needs and challenges. Prioritize the establishment of these groups based on need and impact.
 - 1.2.2. Convene public and private sector leadership via networking events and state-of-the-industry forums to share knowledge, discuss trends, and explore collaboration opportunities.
 - 1.2.3. Maintain ongoing industry collaboration with the JJC and the GAVC, to ensure industry-focused training programs that are aligned with business needs.
- 1.3. Establish a site readiness program for targeted industries (in partnership with local governments, landowners, developers, and utility providers).
 - 1.3.1. Assess and document current site conditions by developing a comprehensive inventory of prime sites, especially in industrial corridors near the Dresden Generating Station; the I-80 communities of Channahon, Minooka, Morris, and Seneca; and the Coal City region near Reed Road.
 - 1.3.2. Work toward improving current site conditions and readiness assets for prime sites referenced in Action 1.3.1 including infrastructure, utility access, and environmental needs.

- 1.3.3. Work with local authorities to ensure that zoning regulations are aligned with intended uses and that all required permits and approvals are in place.
- 1.3.4. Develop digital and print marketing materials that highlight the features and advantages of the ready sites.
- 1.3.5. Use trade shows, industry conferences, and direct marketing efforts to promote the available sites to potential investors, businesses, and site selectors.

Site Readiness Toolkit | Greater Portland, Oregon, Area

For the past two decades, various partners in the Portland area have maintained a catalog of important sites (over 25 acres) to ensure a steady supply of regional industrial and commercial properties. Each site is assessed and ranked based on its development status, ranging from fully prepared to those with significant limitations. The Regional Industrial Site Readiness Inventory is updated approximately every five years to ensure accurate evaluations. Expanding these efforts, the regional government in Portland along with 18 partners, rolled out the [Site Readiness Toolkit](#) in 2020 to facilitate the development of underutilized land regionwide. This initiative builds on the inventory with data from [Metro's Economic Value Atlas](#), which illustrates concentrations of targeted industries, infrastructure, and demographic insights, as well as the [Equitable Development Index Tool](#), which promotes equitable results in development.

- 1.4. Showcase the County's competitive advantages by expanding marketing promotion and site selector engagement.
 - 1.4.1. Elevate the brand and image of the County at regional (Midwest), national, and international levels. Efforts include developing clear, concise messaging highlighting the County's power and water assets.
 - 1.4.2. Improve the County's digital presence by creating unified messaging across community websites. Coordinate regularly with partners (municipalities and the Chamber) to maintain up-to-date, consistent messages and marketing themes that emphasize business attraction.
 - 1.4.3. Manage other online sources of information actively—such as the Wikipedia pages for cities and the County—and ensure they depict an accurate and positive image of the County as a desirable business location.
 - 1.4.4. Leverage the existing business community to expand on personal experiences that showcase local business wins and successes. Testimonials can include in-depth profiles and testimonials from area business executives who endorse Grundy County as an ideal place to do business.
 - 1.4.5. Build local support for business attraction efforts by keeping local and County leadership informed of impacts and progress through reports and/or hosting in-person events.
- 1.5. Attract and increase the number of high-quality jobs.
 - 1.5.1. Establish the County's baseline criteria for high-quality jobs. At minimum this standard should include jobs that meet livable wage level (Grundy County Housing Authority's income limits and MIT's living wage calculator can be used as guides), offer clear career advancement opportunities, provide job security, and offer competitive benefits.
 - 1.5.2. Develop a measurement system to track the number of jobs that meet these criteria and set a goal to increase this number each year.
 - 1.5.3. Work with the JJC and employers to develop programs to create pathways to higher-quality jobs and upskill existing employees.

- 1.5.4. Tailor existing incentives to favor companies that have more jobs that meet these criteria.
- 1.5.5. Ensure an adequate supply of office space for the development and expansion of doctors' offices, labs, and testing facilities.

Moderate Income+ Jobs Criteria | San Luis Obispo, California

Recognizing that high-quality jobs are crucial to economic vitality, the city of San Luis Obispo, California, adopted head of household (HOH) jobs as an indicator for the city's labor market performance and as a mechanism for evaluating its progress on inclusivity and growth efforts. The initial HOH job classification was launched in 2012, then revisited during the city's strategic plan update in 2023 to assess how well the term aligned with San Luis Obispo's evolving inclusivity goals and national best practices. The process included reviewing multiple options to identify and monitor quality jobs. Ultimately, it was decided that adopting the housing department's established moderate-income criteria would improve alignment with existing references and enhance resident understanding. These guidelines also allow target income levels to be adjusted based on household size to reflect changing circumstances over time. The addition of the plus (+) symbol to moderate income indicates that jobs with earnings above the moderate level are encouraged, while maintaining the other criteria from the previous HOH job classification, such as career advancement, education, technical skills, employer-sponsored benefits, and job stability. The quality job indicator for the city is now termed Moderate Income+.

- 1.6. Continue to invest in and increase capacity and visibility of the GEDC.
 - 1.6.1. Evaluate the GEDC's revenue and membership model to ensure operations are efficient, sustainable, and capable of expanding over time.
 - 1.6.2. Expand data and research capabilities as well as current market intelligence to ensure a deep level of industry expertise.
 - 1.6.3. Leverage advanced software to maintain and enhance the database of available industrial sites while increasing efficiency and supporting responsiveness.
 - 1.6.4. Increase project management and staff capacity within the GEDC to support expanded investor relations and marketing functions.
 - 1.6.5. Position the GEDC as the County's industry thought leader. Amplify the GEDC's presence in, and continually highlight its value to, the community through increased information sharing, engagement, and convening.

2. Small Business and Entrepreneurship Support

Cultivate a thriving environment for small businesses and entrepreneurs by providing comprehensive support, resources, and networking opportunities that empower them to succeed and grow.

Grundy County's small business community is a critical component of its economic vitality. These strategies aim to meet recurring needs expressed by small business owners during stakeholder engagement. Among these needs is access to more and varied capital, business development resources, and mentorship. As such, action items geared toward addressing expressed struggles with securing funding, navigating the regulatory environment during startup, and accessing critical business development services are included. Ideas related to leveraging the new business incubator at the Entrepreneurial Business Center (EBC) are meant to help bolster the existing support system. Finally, enhancing small business resilience is addressed to help ensure the small business community effectively prepares for and is readily able to respond to natural disasters and economic challenges.

Strategies and Actions

- 2.1. Expand collaborative efforts between the Chamber and the EBC to reinforce support for the small business community.
 - 2.1.1. Increase the new incubator's physical presence and work in the region by hosting joint networking events, workshops, pitch nights, and panels in collaboration with the Chamber and local business groups to build relationships and raise awareness.
 - 2.1.2. Collaborate to determine, document, and monitor the most critical small business educational needs. This can be done through the annual survey of Chamber membership or a joint business needs survey (led by the Chamber and the JJC).
 - 2.1.3. Partner to highlight success stories as well as the contributions of small business owners and their impact on the regional economy.
 - 2.1.4. Engage the established business community or existing Chamber membership by starting a Chamber–EBC mentorship program or designing competitions that invite entrepreneurs to solve challenges of existing businesses. Leverage the community's pool of highly skilled executives to support the growth of local startups and high-growth small businesses.
 - 2.1.5. Join forces to amplify the voice of the small business community through advocacy. Together, the Chamber and the EBC can work to influence local government policies, create business-friendly regulations, and promote initiatives that benefit the startup community.
- 2.2. Provide marketing support to retail businesses.
 - 2.2.1. Expand cobranding and promotional campaigns. Create a buy local/shop local campaign with the Chamber, municipalities, the Morris Retail Association, the Coalers Business Alliance, and local businesses. Incorporate successful elements of Morris's Home for the Holidays initiative but extend it throughout the year.

Pasadena Loves Local Campaign | Pasadena, Texas

To help relieve financial burdens related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pasadena Economic Development Corporation (EDC) collaborated with the city of Pasadena and the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce to launch the Pasadena Loves Local campaign in late 2020. Originally conceived as a small business grants initiative, the campaign has been extended as a shop local effort and more. The EDC incorporates the Pasadena Loves Local brand into its business retention and expansion (BR&E) efforts, events programming, and talent strategies to align the community's growth with local small businesses. Through the Pasadena Loves Local BR&E program, the EDC and the chamber conduct engagement visits and surveys with local businesses to build relationships, provide technical support, and address risks to closure or relocation. They also feature small businesses in blog posts on the EDC website and in marketing materials like the *Pasadena Pulse* newsletter. Additionally, they host summits like the Small Business Resource Fair to help aspiring and existing small business owners learn about federal, state, and city support options, grow their networks, and join the Chamber. Finally, they hold job fairs that aim to connect Pasadena residents with the local retail and service industry.

- 2.2.2. Enhance the online presence of local retailers by leveraging the Chamber's online platforms. The Chamber can highlight individual businesses through posts, stories, and shout-outs, showcasing local products, events, and special promotions as a paid member benefit.
- 2.2.3. Replicate the Chamber's Morris, Coal City, and Minooka Business Banner Program in other municipalities.
- 2.2.4. Organize an annual business procurement and contracting fair that provides local businesses with direct access to procurement decision-makers (in government and large companies) and detailed information about upcoming opportunities.
- 2.3. Work with the Chamber, the EBC, and the Community Foundation of Grundy County to increase and improve funding opportunities available to small business owners.
 - 2.3.1. Create a rural business development fund that could offer low-interest loans, microloans, or small grants to new and expanding businesses.
 - 2.3.2. Launch a community-based investment fund that allows residents to buy shares or contribute capital to support local business.
 - 2.3.3. Strengthen partnerships with regional banks and credit unions to provide specialized funding products and services that are better tailored to local needs.
 - 2.3.4. Schedule ongoing informational workshops about US Department of Agriculture and other government funding opportunities and application processes to increase awareness and utilization of federal funding options.
- 2.4. Build small business resilience and the ability of the business community to prepare for and withstand natural disaster and economic downturns.
 - 2.4.1. Identify and evaluate financial mechanisms to provide small business emergency funding that business owners can access in the event of a crisis, similar to funding provided by the Chamber and the Community Foundation during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - 2.4.2. Ensure business owners are prepared for disruptions with actionable plans in place through education and improved access to continuity planning resources (templates, workshops, and sessions).
 - 2.4.3. Develop a local small business disaster response that includes (1) a disaster response framework that establishes clear communication channels for disseminating information before, during, and after a disaster; and (2) a response plan that outlines the steps for assessing damage and resuming operations. Leverage the Grundy County Community Organizations Active in Disaster to replicate a response framework tailored to meet the unique needs of the business community.

3. Land Use Updates and Zoning

Implement a strategic land use and zoning framework that promotes sustainable development and balances economic growth with preservation of the County's quality of place.

Strategic land use, including implementing needed zoning updates, is pivotal in supporting industry growth and development in the County. The strategies that follow provide actions the County and its municipalities can take to leverage land use and zoning policies as a means to support strategic business expansion, attraction, and investment. First, the strategies address steps the County can take to help ensure that development aligns with desired growth patterns and coincide with the broader vision for the community. They also offer approaches to use zoning practices in order to enhance and sustain the sense of high quality of place.

Strategies and Actions

- 3.1. Align zoning and regulations with current economic goals and desired growth patterns.
 - 3.1.1. Update the *Grundy County Comprehensive Plan* to ensure that the Land Use and Development Framework adapts to recent growth patterns including the current needs presented by the Canadian National Railway's proposed intermodal facility.
 - 3.1.2. Establish a cadence for regular evaluation and updating of the County's comprehensive plan.
 - 3.1.3. Coordinate land use and zoning regulations among the County and the municipalities through increased collaborative planning activities that allow leaders to gather and share input while ensuring that the comprehensive plan addresses local needs while promoting regional cohesion.
 - 3.1.4. Convene and educate municipal leaders on land use and zoning best practices through virtual and in-person learning and information-sharing sessions as well as workshops.
- 3.2. Support downtown development and mixed-use projects.
 - 3.2.1. Advance efforts to better leverage the riverfront for recreational and commercial use (see Strategy 4.1). Conduct a comprehensive overview of publicly owned land along the riverfront that could be repurposed or reused (e.g., for new or improved public trails and parks and mixed-use buildings).
 - 3.2.2. Secure investment to enhance access to the Illinois riverfront from downtown locations.
 - 3.2.3. Continue to advocate for passenger rail expansion into Morris and Minooka while ensuring sustained investment in the downtowns.
 - 3.2.4. Expand on incentive tools, such as Coal City's façade grant program, to encourage development along main streets and downtown areas. Work with the NCICG to create additional grant and community development assistance to communities countywide.
- 3.3. Encourage sustainable development that supports environmental stewardship, traffic control, and other quality-of-life factors.
 - 3.3.1. Lead by example by ensuring the County continues to develop and enhance sustainability practices in its daily operations.
 - 3.3.2. Leverage the County's Environmental Resource Conservation Office to develop sustainable solutions for industrial development (e.g., establishing criteria used to structure incentives).
 - 3.3.3. Explore the use of community benefit agreements to ensure growth aligns with desired outcomes and community priorities. For example, financial incentives, such as tax credits or rebates, for projects that incorporate sustainable practices, like installing solar panels or retrofitting buildings for energy efficiency or development incentives, including expedited permitting processes, for developments that meet sustainability criteria.
 - 3.3.4. Encourage local governments to require impact studies on proposed developments expected to increase traffic load and noise pollution.
- 3.4. Complement and build on the Grundy Moves transportation momentum and address concerns about increased truck traffic.
 - 3.4.1. Reconvene the steering committee formed during the Grundy Moves planning process to structure and champion the implementation of the plan recommendations.

- 3.4.2. Assume a broader regional approach, including Will and Kendall Counties at minimum, to address the truck traffic challenges. This could include conducting a joint freight mobility study, possibly led by the Will County Governmental League, or establishing a regional task force or committee.
- 3.4.3. Maintain communication and share information with residents about truck safety data to ensure perceptions align with reality.

4. Place-Based Investments

Maintain a high quality of place while creating vibrant spaces that enhance community identity, foster community, and support economic vitality.

Quality of life was frequently referenced throughout stakeholder engagement and in the resident survey. Strategies in this section address the physical and social attributes that make a community attractive and desirable, such as its amenities, cultural offerings, and overall aesthetic appeal. The actions outlined address the concept of place from the standpoint of creating a favorable environment that is a means for driving economic growth, attracting talent, and retaining residents. As Grundy County's lifestyle amenities attract and retain skilled professionals and families, these actions are meant to capitalize on the County's existing assets. Included are ways to enhance the physical environment through well-planned development, outdoor spaces, and attractive public areas that further elevate the County's appeal.

Strategies and Actions

- 4.1. Develop and promote the riverfront and outdoor venues to attract tourists, boost local economic activity, and enhance recreational experiences.
 - 4.1.1. Create a comprehensive master plan that captures the community goals, vision, and design for potential Morris riverfront development.
 - 4.1.2. Boost marketing and promotion of existing signature events, such as the Corn Festival and the Rock the Block series, to attract day travelers from across Chicagoland and increase residents' awareness of events.
 - 4.1.3. Leverage municipalities and organizations to enhance event offerings downtown.
 - 4.1.4. Continue to partner with state and regional tourism boards to increase the County's visibility and promote its unique offerings just outside of Chicago.
 - 4.1.5. Enhance physical and visual connectivity of countywide attractions (e.g., heritage assets, parks, museums, downtown retail).
- 4.2. Enhance downtowns through collaborative visioning and planning (see Strategy 3.2).
 - 4.2.1. Promote and increase awareness of the NCICG's capacity-building resources among municipal leadership. Share success stories of how communities leveraged the NCICG's services.
 - 4.2.2. Encourage resident participation in municipal-level planning that aligns with the Grundy County vision. Coal City's 2024 strategic planning model serves as a successful local example of mobilizing and empowering residents to drive change. The team leadership model, structured around critical issues, can be duplicated countywide to help create dynamic, revitalized community centers.
 - 4.2.3. Ensure collective planning efforts by organizing visioning sessions and prioritizing approaches that preserve and celebrate the unique identity and charm of each municipality. Prioritize preserving,

enhancing, and celebrating local historic, cultural, and natural assets to attract visitors and improve resident amenities.

- 4.2.4. Establish a citizens' planning academy to educate residents and encourage active and informed participation in community development. The citizens' planning academy would be a countywide educational program designed to engage and inform community members about planning processes, local government functions, and development issues. Through workshops, lectures, and interactive activities, residents are taught how planning decisions are made and learn how to actively contribute to shaping their community's future. The academy can be structured with tracks that target the public as well as elected leadership.

- 4.3. Attract top talent by offering competitive opportunities and promoting a high quality of life.

- 4.3.1. Embrace and promote the County's high standard of living by targeting individuals and families that value a rural lifestyle.
- 4.3.2. Collaborate across sectors to create incentive packages that attract and retain residents, such as rural physician loan forgiveness programs or scholarship programs that require students to return after pursuing studies.
- 4.3.3. Explore opportunities to partner with state universities and medical schools to establish rural healthcare training or residency programs.
- 4.3.4. Establish a resident boomerang campaign to encourage former residents to return.

- 4.4. Support resident wellness through expanded partnerships among Morris Hospital and nonprofits, such as the Community Foundation of Grundy County and local United Way, on community initiatives that promote health, preventive care, and overall well-being.

5. Attainable Housing

Ensure the availability of attainable and varied housing options that meet the needs of professionals and families at various income levels.

The availability of adequate and attainable housing is a significant factor influencing the County's economic growth and resident well-being. Accessible housing options are critical for individuals and families employed in the local economy, particularly essential workers and those employed in lower-to-moderate income jobs. As the County increases efforts to develop and attract businesses, these strategies aim to support those efforts by increasing the availability of attainable housing. The need is particularly high among young professionals in entry-level positions and seniors on reduced incomes and will require a collaborative effort to address. These strategies support gathering and disseminating data-backed information to encourage open discussions on how more affordable housing options align with and advance community objectives and initiatives. Actions to bring together local and County government representatives, community organizations, and real estate professionals to collaborate on developing housing solutions are included. By implementing these strategies, the County can ensure that its housing options meet the needs of these demographics.

Strategies and Actions

- 5.1. Conduct a comprehensive housing study to assess current needs, identify specific gaps, and inform targeted housing strategies for future development.
 - 5.1.1. Identify housing partners, such as the Three Rivers Association of Realtors, the Grundy County Housing Authority, or the Illinois Realtors, to champion the study's initiation.

- 5.1.2. Secure funding for the study and for the planning and resources that will be needed to implement the recommendations.
- 5.1.3. Ensure the community is engaged during the study process through surveys and/or focus groups. Input must be gathered from a diverse group of residents to make sure the study reflects various perspectives and needs.
- 5.1.4. Develop a communication plan to ensure engagement and build consensus among the County's residents and leadership (see Strategy 5.2) throughout the study, planning, and implementation periods.
- 5.2. Provide targeted information and foster open dialogue about how attainable housing can support community goals and initiatives.
 - 5.2.1. Develop a clear and compelling message that articulates what attainable housing is and why it is crucial for County and local government employees, essential workers, and young professionals. The message should also communicate the benefits of attainable housing for the community, such as economic stability, reduced commute times, and improved quality of life for residents.
 - 5.2.2. Use data and research to quantify housing needs and economic impacts. Gather and present data on the local housing market, including gaps in affordability and the impact on essential workers and businesses. Use studies that link attainable housing to increased local spending and reduced turnover in essential jobs.
 - 5.2.3. Supplement quantitative data with case studies and personal stories to illustrate and personalize how attainable housing supports local businesses and residents while strengthening the economy.
 - 5.2.4. Create public forums where community members and elected officials can discuss attainable housing challenges, gather feedback, address concerns, and build consensus.
 - 5.2.5. Leverage business leaders, nonprofits, and advocacy groups to build a coalition in support of attainable housing and amplify the message to reach a wider audience.
 - 5.2.6. Involve residents in planning sessions to discuss and develop attainable housing solutions and maintain transparency about progress and successes.
- 5.3. Convene local and County government, community organizations, and real estate industry professionals to support the creation of housing that targets middle-income workers and seniors.
 - 5.3.1. Form a collaborative task force of public and private stakeholders charged with advancing attainable housing strategies.
 - 5.3.2. Encourage the development of mixed-use projects that combine residential, commercial, and community spaces to create vibrant, walkable neighborhoods.
 - 5.3.3. Address infrastructure challenges (roads, utilities, and public services) that hamper new housing development.
 - 5.3.4. Invest in amenities, such as parks, schools, and recreational facilities, that would enhance the area's sense of place and attract new residents.
 - 5.3.5. Create tax incentives for affordable new home construction and redevelopment in downtown Morris.

6. Joliet Junior College Campus Expansion

Support the expansion of the JJC into the community and enhance access to workforce development opportunities that meet local industry needs and foster economic growth.

The potential expansion of the JJC into Grundy County represents a significant opportunity for economic and workforce development. The college has well-established relationships with County employers and a strong reputation for providing high-quality education and workforce training in the region. The strategies that follow illustrate methods to better align the County's economic development goals with workforce development efforts. The actions presented here are meant to maximize the opportunities for the expansion, not only to enhance educational access but also to help address—and possibly prevent—skill gaps. As such, attention is placed on steps to ensure a workforce that is well-positioned to meet the demands of local industries, support business growth, and able to progress in local careers. By continuing to nurture collaborations among the college, local businesses, and community organizations, the County will enhance the overall impact of the expansion and contribute to a more robust and dynamic local economy.

Strategies and Actions

6.1. Align and prioritize educational programs with local industry needs.

- 6.1.1. Nurture existing and establish new partnerships between educational institutions and businesses to ensure relevant training and skill development.
- 6.1.2. Stay abreast of local job market data (in-demand skills, industry growth trends, and employment gaps) to ensure program design, expansions, and funding align with critical skills and job requirements.
- 6.1.3. Expand skilled trades training programs, which help maintain consistent standards across the industries, to ensure workers have the skills needed to meet desired industry qualifications.
- 6.1.4. Expand internships, apprenticeships, and career pathways in partnership with the Grundy Area Vocational Center, skilled union trade organizations (including the Will & Grundy Counties Building Trades Council, IBEW 176, and Carpenters Local 174), and local businesses.
- 6.1.5. Establish scholarship funds supported by local employers to support students pursuing careers in high-demand fields.
- 6.1.6. Implement joint systems for ongoing feedback from employers and industry partners on the effectiveness of educational programs and the readiness of graduates. Continually assess the alignment of educational outcomes with industry needs.

6.2. Position the new campus location as a hub for innovation and skills training.

- 6.2.1. Leverage intelligence from industry relationships to develop cutting-edge programs that address emerging industry demands.
- 6.2.2. Create a shared space or satellite office for the EBC to increase awareness of the program and encourage student startup ventures.
- 6.2.3. Foster innovation through competitions and hackathons to encourage creativity and problem-solving among students and community members.

- 6.2.4. Engage the community through free/low-cost workshops, seminars, and events that showcase the college's role in innovation and skills training. This can also include hosting open houses and tech expos that highlight the college's new programs, facilities, and success stories.
- 6.3. Retain talent by offering targeted professional development programs and incentives to keep skilled workers.
 - 6.3.1. Collaborate with local businesses to offer tailored training programs that include company-sponsored incentives, such as tuition reimbursement or paid training time.
 - 6.3.2. Develop a vibrant professional community around the college by hosting industry-specific forums, workshops, and roundtables.
- 6.4. Expand mentorship and networking opportunities that connect emerging professionals with established leaders.

7. Morris Airport Development and Expansion

Enhance regional connectivity, stimulate economic growth, and improve accessibility for commercial and recreational travel.

Morris Municipal Airport serves as a gateway for both business and recreational travel. As a critical infrastructure asset owned by the city of Morris, the airport offers essential connectivity that can catalyze economic development and stimulate economic growth. Recognizing the significant value of the airport, the Illinois Department of Transportation has committed \$15 million for critical improvements through its Aeronautics Division's Transportation Improvement Plan. This investment aims to enhance airport facilities and support local and regional economic growth, highlighting the state's dedication to developing vital transportation infrastructure. These strategies will aim to enhance the airport's capacity and capabilities, maximizing the planned runway expansion. The recommendations related to improving the airport facilities and services are intended to help attract corporate flights, encourage business travel, and support the transportation needs of local industries. Leveraging these opportunities effectively requires continued investment in the airport's physical improvements and expansion. As such, the steps presented below aim to raise awareness among residents and stakeholders about the airport's economic impact as well as build support for the airport. Ultimately, the strategies that follow are directed toward enhancing the airport facilities and services, promoting corporate and industrial use, and building community support for this County asset.

Strategies and Actions

- 7.1. Leverage current data on the airport's impact to encourage continued investment and increase awareness of airport improvements.
 - 7.1.1. Evaluate the need to conduct a follow-up assessment after significant improvements have been completed. The state commissioned a study in 2019 that included 2020 and 2021 data (to adjust for impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic), which has been used to build consensus around investment in the airport. An updated study following improvements would further validate the airport's importance.
 - 7.1.2. Use the results from the study to determine specific areas where the airport can drive economic development and support regional growth.
 - 7.1.3. Execute a five-year investment plan that builds on recent upgrades to runway infrastructure, prioritizes facility upgrades, and details new technology required for improved operations.

7.1.4. Communicate results and planned investments as part of the awareness campaign. Ensure public awareness of significant improvements underway and in the pipeline over the next few years. Improvements funded by the city and state's transportation improvement plans include:

- adding self-serve fueling to increase fuel sales and drive new traffic by spring 2025 (city-funded project);
- constructing a new cross-wind runway (state-funded project);
- widening and strengthening the existing runway (state-funded project); and
- constructing hangars on the north side of the airport (city-funded project).

7.2. Promote the airport to business and residents as a valuable community asset.

7.2.1. Continue to inform the community of the regional impacts of and economic opportunities provided through the airport. The annual State of the City address has historically proven to be a valuable communication tool. As developments progress, periodically report on the outcomes of strategic investments to stakeholders, highlighting successes and remaining areas for improvement. Alternatively, an annual or short quarterly impact report can be leveraged to outline achievements, challenges, and plans for the airport.

7.2.2. Communicate the value add provided to local corporations (due to the airport's presence) and highlight the benefits of investing in increased capacity.

7.2.3. Continue targeted marketing strategies, including marketing partnerships with Intersect Illinois, to attract and retain corporate aviation and showcase the benefits of increased corporate flying.

7.3. Reestablish the airport's presence and position as a significant County asset and gateway.

7.3.1. Engage stakeholders from across the County in collaborative planning efforts. Establish an advisory committee with representatives from relevant stakeholder groups to provide input and support the development and implementation of the five-year investment plan. To ensure the committee can effectively address the complexities of airport operations and craft creative solutions, it should be comprised of individuals representing a range of entities and perspectives, including the following:

- Airport management
- Local and County government officials.
- Industry representatives.
- Transportation planners and local aviation experts.
- Environmental representatives.
- Tourism and economic development officials.
- Public relations or communication professionals.

7.3.2. Partner with local retailers and organizations to revisit tourism development opportunities at the airport, such as reviving the air show, resuming aviation lessons, or securing pop-up locations for local restaurants on-site.

7.3.3. Open the airport to the community by hosting aviation-themed events or community gatherings, such as an airport day, where residents can explore aircrafts and learn about aviation. Promote existing efforts such as the Morris chapter of the Experimental Aircraft Association's Young Eagles program.

Fly-in and Community Aviation Day | Dubois, Wyoming

As the “third highway” into town, the Dubois Municipal Airport is a strong asset for the city of Dubois, Wyoming, whose proximity to Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks attracts many summer visitors. Every August, the airport hosts the Annual Fly-in and Community Aviation Day. Pilots and technician specialists from across the region are invited to fly in the night before as spectators watch. The next day, the airport serves a \$5 breakfast to recoup event funds. Throughout the event, professionals in the field volunteer to conduct educational activities, like search-and-rescue training and stationary showcases of the aircraft to teach visitors and residents about plane operations and maintenance. In addition, the airport partners with the Young Eagles, a national volunteer aviation education program, to offer free plane rides for youth ages 8 to 17. The Aviation Day draws regional awareness and support for the airport’s operations and serves as a family-friendly community event.

8. Morris Hospital Visibility

Increase awareness of Morris Hospital’s role as a critical community asset, while driving job creation in the healthcare sector and enhancing overall resident health and quality of life.

Morris Hospital serves as a vital County asset and provides essential healthcare services that enhance the well-being of residents. As a Level II trauma center, Level II perinatal care provider, and Primary Stroke Center, it is a regional hub for preventative care and emergency services, ensuring that the region’s residents have access to needed medical support. Beyond its primary function, the hospital contributes to the local economy by creating jobs, attracting healthcare professionals, and generating revenue that can be reinvested in community initiatives. As such, the strategies in this section prioritize the maintenance and growth of a skilled talent pipeline that supports and advances the County’s healthcare sector. Strategies promoting community health and wellness are included to help enhance awareness of the resources available to residents and position the hospital as an invaluable community partner. Approaches to inform community leaders and the broader public about the significant economic contributions of healthcare services are also included to help foster a healthier, more informed, and economically vibrant Grundy.

Strategies and Actions

- 8.1. Maintain and grow the pipeline of talent needed to support and advance the County’s healthcare sector.
 - 8.1.1. Expand collaborative efforts with the JJC and explore opportunities to develop an allied health-related training curriculum to be delivered at the potential Morris location.
 - 8.1.2. Expand and continually strengthen coordination among Morris Hospital, other healthcare-related employers, the GAVC, and the JJC to match graduates to available positions, ensuring they remain in the region. The hospital has long-established and strong relationships with both partners, which should be maintained.
 - 8.1.3. Continue to conduct career fairs in conjunction with employers, the GAVC, and the JJC to recruit in-demand healthcare occupations to the area. Promote the reputation of the County’s healthcare entities and relatively high wages of healthcare occupations.
 - 8.1.4. Partner with the JJC to upskill workers within the healthcare sector, as well as build awareness of career opportunities in the sector and provide them with the skills to fill the most in-demand jobs.
 - 8.1.5. Work with medical education institutions and healthcare systems to increase medical residency positions to increase retain top health talent within the region.

- 8.2. Promote community health and wellness by increasing awareness and knowledge of available and accessible health and well-being related resources.
 - 8.2.1. Organize countywide recognition events to showcase resident champions who have helped improve community health and well-being outcomes. Use these events to educate existing and aspiring healthcare talent of different careers opportunities in and local impact of the sector.
 - 8.2.2. Encourage healthcare leaders' participation in activities such as County/regional boards to promote local healthcare awareness among County and business leadership.
 - 8.2.3. Evaluate additional opportunities to cross-promote and collaborate on community wellness initiatives along with the Morris Community YMCA (Healthy Happens Here series) and the Will-Grundy Medical Clinic.
 - 8.2.4. Promote the reinstatement of Morris Hospital's Wellness Wednesdays, which provides routine health screenings for uninsured and underinsured residents.
- 8.3. Inform community leaders and the community at large about the jobs and dollars brought into the community through healthcare services.
 - 8.3.1. Leverage findings from the *Comprehensive Economic Overview* to engage and inform the community how the healthcare sector contributes to local and regional economies.
 - 8.3.2. Commission a third party to conduct an economic impact analysis to better understand and inform other community leaders and the community at large about the jobs and dollars brought into the community through hospital projects.
 - 8.3.3. Leverage the findings from the analysis to support fundraising efforts, demonstrate value to the community, and advocate for additional local support.

9. Childcare Partnerships

Increase access to and affordability of childcare services, ensuring that families have the support they need for healthy workforce participation.

The availability and affordability of quality childcare is of growing concern nationwide. Access to affordable and reliable childcare that supports working families is a critical need identified by residents in stakeholder engagement and in both surveys. These strategies address this need through comprehensive and collaborative approaches to increase the number of childcare providers and childcare facilities. Specifically, they outline practical steps to tackle the childcare challenge through industry partnerships, community initiatives, as well as through local government involvement. Implementing actions grounded in a combined effort will provide much needed support to the County's working families while bolstering economic growth through increased childcare options.

Strategies and Actions

- 9.1. Leverage community support organizations like the YMCA and the United Way to increase awareness of issues and lead the charge in developing solutions.
 - 9.1.1. Launch a community survey to better understand childcare needs.
 - 9.1.2. Convene public and private partners around early childcare issues and provide a platform to discuss and address barriers facing providers and families.
- 9.2. Encourage industry partnerships and initiatives that provide tailored childcare options, including solutions for shift workers.

- 9.2.1. Explore opportunities for businesses that operate on shiftwork to establish on-site 24/7 childcare facilities, possibly as joint ventures.
- 9.2.2. Promote the benefits of subsidizing childcare costs for employees and offering childcare benefits as part of compensation packages.
- 9.2.3. Share success stories of companies that have implemented effective childcare solutions, highlighting the benefits to employees and businesses.

Youth Academy Industrial Park Childcare Facility | Clarksville, Tennessee

In the summer of 2024, the Clarksville-Montgomery County Economic Development Council partnered with Montgomery County, the Clarksville-Montgomery County Industrial Development Board (IDB), and the Tennessee state economic development department to meet childcare needs in a key industry hub, South Industrial Park. The IDB leveraged innovative economic development tools to accomplish this. First, it sought to create a public-private partnership through issuing a request for proposal to operate the childcare facility. It incentivized bids through a 10-year payment in lieu of tax (PILOT) agreement, which would lessen property tax burdens for the winner. Finally, the IDB donated an unused parcel of land near the industrial park for the facility, which will generate new property tax revenue. The Youth Academy, which already operates two facilities in the community, won the proposal. As part of their offer, one-half of the center's 800 slots are discounted for industrial park partners and military-affiliated families. The facility also has extended care hours and school transportation services to meet these families' unique childcare challenges. Through this partnership, 130 new childcare jobs have been created.

- 9.3. Reduce barriers to creating new childcare facilities and sustaining existing operations as well as increasing the number of childcare providers.
 - 9.3.1. Expand technical assistance for childcare businesses.
 - 9.3.2. Explore opportunities to expand grant and other funding resources for childcare facility development and expansion.
 - 9.3.3. Streamline licensing and regulatory processes to make it easier for new childcare providers to enter the market and expand their services.
 - 9.3.4. Encourage partnerships between childcare training providers and local governments that incentivize participation in training programs that increase the number of qualified childcare professionals.

10. Broadband Expansion

Ensure that all residents and businesses can benefit from reliable internet connectivity to support education, economic development, and overall quality of life.

Access to affordable and reliable broadband is a driver and necessity to economic growth. The completion of NCICG's Broadband Recovery Plan was a notable first step in enhancing internet access in Grundy County (and six surrounding counties). While the study results in the plan proved that Grundy County often fared better than many of its peers (affordability, speed, and reliability), there is still room to improve broadband availability and speeds, particularly among underserved and unserved residents. As the County is currently in the process of commissioning an in-depth broadband analysis and feasibility study, as a part of the Grundy Resiliency Project, the strategies here address organizing that effort and positioning the County for successful implementation.

Strategies and Actions

- 10.1.** Create a diverse/multisector task force or action committee to lead efforts in broadband expansion from the commissioning of the plan to the implementation of strategies that result from the effort.
 - 10.1.1.** Determine relevant stakeholders, including local government officials, community organizations, businesses, and residents, who should be involved in the task force. Ensure stakeholders adequately understand and can represent the residents who are directly impacted by the issue.
 - 10.1.2.** Leverage the task force as a champion of the effort, creating opportunities for community input through surveys or public forums and increasing awareness of the study period and planning process.
- 10.2.** Charge the task force with overseeing and monitoring the implementation of the action plan.
 - 10.2.1.** Establish subcommittees or working groups (subsets of the larger task force), if needed, to evaluate and adjust the plan as well as report on the work.
 - 10.2.2.** Ensure the task force communicates, and is transparent about, progress made on the plan, celebrating successes along the way.
- 10.3.** Evaluate the need to institutionalize the work of the task force, likely at the County-level, before it disbands. Depending on the needs outlined in the resulting report, the task force's work could be developed into a new program or agency. Alternatively, an existing community organization might roll it into a current program or effort.

4



APPENDICES

Appendix A. Community Visioning Survey

As part of the strategic planning process, TIP conducted an online survey of residents' vision for Grundy County, Illinois. The survey was open for a one-month period between June 18, 2024, and July 19, 2024, and drew 802 respondents. The survey instrument opened with basic questions about respondent location and demographics. The remainder of the survey included eight questions directed at respondent perceptions of and visions for Grundy County. All responses were confidential.

Nearly all respondents (98.5 percent) were located in a Grundy County ZIP Code. Generation X (304 of 802 respondents) was the dominant age group in the survey, followed by Baby Boomers (226), Millennials (215), Gen Z (34), and pre-Boomers (23). The majority of respondents were female (68.7 percent). The survey was not designed to be a scientific sample, though the pool of respondents was large enough and stratified enough to provide convincing strategic feedback. As a result, the survey yielded valuable and relevant input from residents in Grundy County.

Question-by-question survey results were provided as an interactive data visualization using Tableau Public. The major findings of this survey, including those presented in this section, were used to guide the direction of the strategic plan.

Supporting Local Businesses

Throughout the survey, respondents demonstrated a strong desire to both support local businesses and attract outside businesses to create new jobs. Small businesses were identified as the County's second highest regional strength (with an average score of 3.4 out of 5.0), while job opportunities were identified as its fourth lowest (2.8). The phrases "attracts businesses," "supports small businesses," and "creates jobs" were the three most selected ways in which the local economy can better support residents. Respondents also were of the view that investments that leverage a vibrant small business culture, such as downtown revitalization, riverfront development, and tourism and recreation investments would have the strongest positive impact on the County. A desire for both business attraction and support was further demonstrated by respondents' selection of economic development planning priorities, with attracting new businesses (4.0 out of 5.0), business expansion and retention (3.9), and downtown revitalization (3.9) selected as three of the top four priorities.

Maintaining a High Quality of Life

Respondents took note of Grundy County's high quality of life, identifying it as the County's greatest strength (with a score of 3.5 out of 5.0), with respondents closely associating "community" with the County (selected by 273 respondents—more than any other word or phrase). Related to desires to bring new businesses into the community, there is also a strong interest in protecting and improving available lifestyle amenities, with respondents identifying "investments in amenities to increase quality of life" as their second highest economic development planning priority (3.9 out of 5.0). The majority of respondents (52.9 percent) see the development of shared outdoor and recreational spaces as a major County priority in the near future. Additionally, expanding childcare services and investing in local schools were called out as ways in which the community can improve local quality of life. Respondents also called for an increase in available retail and grocery options, pointing to other developed Chicago suburbs, like Naperville and Plainfield, as aspirational.

Limiting Industrial Development

Although respondents closely associated the word "industrial" with Grundy County (215 responses, the second most of any word or phrase), there was a strong negative sentiment toward further industrial development in the community throughout the survey. Among potential investments, respondents identified the creation of a rail

intermodal facility and investment in transportation, warehouse, and logistics facilities as having the lowest potential for a positive impact on the County's quality of life (with scores of 2.6 and 2.5 out of 5.0, respectively). Additionally, respondents ranked industrial attraction as the County's lowest planning priority (3.0). While the survey suggests a desire to strengthen local transportation infrastructure and increase available jobs within the community, respondents indicated that a further increase in freight traffic and development of rail depots and warehouses is at odds with the rural character of the County. Taken as a whole, survey responses convey a preference for growth that leverages local businesses and green space rather than logistics, protecting a small-town feel.

Enabling Affordability

Respondents identified cost of living as the County's third lowest regional strength (2.7 out of 5.0), and every age cohort selected "affordable" as the word that most captured their vision for the County's future (324 total responses). Concerns about housing and property ownership, social services, and limited high-wage job opportunities characterized responses about affordability. Although residential housing development was identified as the second lowest planning priority (3.1), 163 respondents selected "increases housing availability or affordability" as a way in which the County can better support its residents. Respondents expressed interest in an expansion of affordable childcare services and traditional workforce development programs to enable the local workforce. The priority respondents placed on a diversified tax base and access to quality job opportunities throughout the survey is likely connected to concerns about the County's affordability. These concerns are also evident in the high priority assigned to attracting new business (4.0) and business recruitment and expansion (3.9), efforts that would help shift the tax burden from residential property owners while also providing increased employment options.

Appendix B. General Business Survey

As part of the strategic planning process, TIP conducted an online survey of businesses in Grundy County. The survey was open for a one-month period between June 18, 2024, and July 19, 2024, and drew 100 respondents. The survey instrument opened with basic questions about business location and employment characteristics. The remainder of the survey included nine questions directed at respondent perceptions of and business outlook for Grundy County. All responses were confidential.

Nearly all respondents (92 percent) were located in a Grundy County ZIP Code. Generation X (44 of 100 respondents) was the dominant age group in the survey, followed by Millennials (26), Baby Boomers (25), Gen Z (3), and pre-Boomers (2). The survey was not designed to be a scientific sample, though the pool of respondents was large enough and stratified enough to provide reasonable strategic feedback. As a result, the survey yielded valuable and relevant input from business decision-makers in Grundy County.

Question-by-question survey results were provided as an interactive data visualization using Tableau Public. The major findings of this survey, including those presented in this section, were used to guide the direction of the strategic plan.

Limited Worker Availability

Finding and retaining qualified workers was the most commonly identified challenge for business success in Grundy County (15 responses), with respondents remarking that the existing local talent pool is underdeveloped. Other identified challenges such as the County's rural location (3), lack of workforce housing (3), and competition from larger markets (5) represent barriers to attracting a skilled workforce to the region. Respondents placed a high value on career education within the County, with the JJC Entrepreneur & Business Center perceived as the most valuable economic development program (3.6 out of 5.0). While respondents suggested that local leadership can support the existing workforce by incentivizing middle housing and developing career education opportunities, they also identified diverse business attraction as an opportunity to increase the local labor pool.

Chicagoland Growth

Grundy County's proximity to Chicago was a recurring theme throughout the survey, with respondents identifying some of the opportunities and challenges that this presents. Respondents were largely optimistic about Grundy County's opportunities for growth, with the County's growth prospects receiving a score of 3.9 out of 5.0 across all responses. "Attracting diverse businesses" was the most frequently identified opportunity for economic growth (11 responses), with the expected population and job growth due to Chicagoland's ongoing growth (7) and the County's stock of available land (7) also frequently selected. As Grundy County's municipalities seek to attract new businesses and skilled workers to their communities, respondents identified advertising to the Chicago region as a way in which the Chamber and the GEDC can support local businesses (7), second among all responses). Proximity to Chicago also poses challenges, as Grundy County seeks to balance its high quality of life and a growing population, as well as increased competition from surrounding communities like Kendall and Will Counties.

Local Business Connections

Spotlighting local businesses was the most commonly identified action that the Chamber and the GEDC should pursue in order to positively impact local businesses (8 responses), with respondents calling for the use of "shop local" initiatives marketing small businesses within Grundy County. With limited collaboration identified as a common challenge for business success within the County (5), respondents placed a high value on the GEDC and the Chamber networking events (3.6 out of 5.0—the second highest scoring program), lauding networking

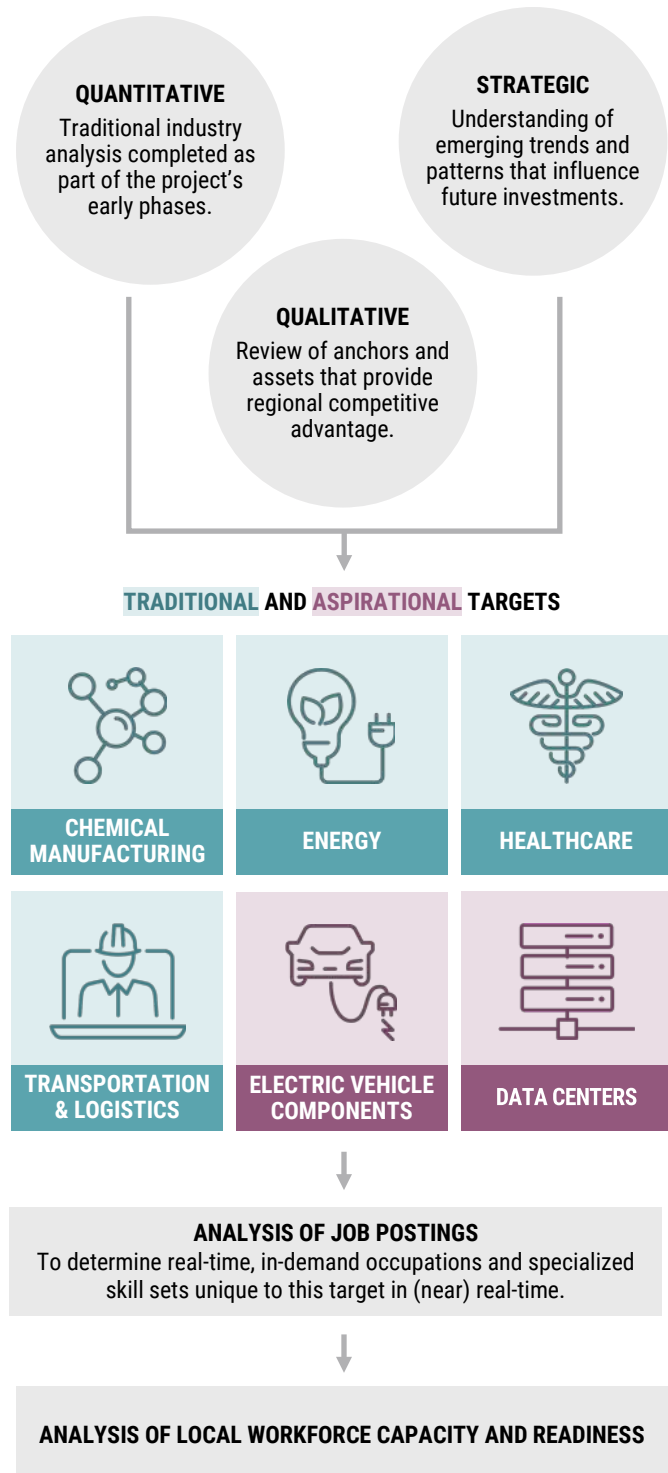
opportunities and partnerships among businesses across sectors. Despite this, the Chamber was the only type of community development organization from which more than one-half (75.0 percent) of respondents said they were currently receiving support, with the next closest, economic development organization, at 33.3 percent.

High Quality of Life

On average across all responses, quality of life ranked as the most important factor in keeping respondents' businesses in Grundy County (4.0 out of 5.0). As such, respondents identified actions that maintain this standard as those that the Chamber and the GEDC should pursue, including investing in community beautification, protecting local businesses, and incentivizing development that fits within the character and culture of the Grundy County community. While challenges to business success, like high property taxes and real estate affordability, can hinder quality of life, respondents identified opportunities for the County's economic growth that can contribute to the community's standard of living, such as improving restaurant and grocery options (6 responses), lowering the cost of living (4), and promoting public safety (3).

Appendix C. Target Industry Sectors

Framework



Methodology

The accepted framework for target industry analysis has traditionally relied on historical patterns of industry growth and concentration. But such methods reveal little about local workforce capacity and general preparedness for prospective investors. Nor do they reflect the modern era in which technology and industry definitions are fluid and rapidly evolving.

TIP's methodology is more responsive to today's workforce environment. The use of job postings reframes target industries from the employer's perspective rather than simply through the lens of historical government statistics. **Traditional** targets were defined by grouping EDA-designated clusters. For each traditional target, collective job postings in the Chicagoland region from the most recent 24-month period were analyzed. For emerging or **aspirational** targets that do not fit neatly into industry classification systems, an analysis was conducted of US postings for a list of nationally representative employers using the same 24-month period. This approach differs from an industry-occupation staffing matrix, which can be dated and somewhat opaque as to where hiring demands are tightest. Carefully selected samples of recent job postings are used to identify a target's most sought-after occupations and specialized skills in (near) real-time followed by an analysis of the local region's workforce readiness for targeted investments. This approach is devised to prompt strategic questions about the alignment of the region's talent pipeline with the current needs of employers.

Using an equity lens, TIP's analysis also documents patterns of occupational participation by race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Living wage thresholds are also considered for a mix of family household situations. This approach equips the local region with the information it needs to plan for an inclusive, target-ready workforce.

Description

TRADITIONAL TARGETS	
 CHEMICAL MANUFACTURING	Driven by advancements in sustainable practices and the growing demand for eco-friendly products, the chemical manufacturing sector will continue to offer opportunities for innovation. With the rise of specialty chemicals and emerging markets, companies can capitalize on diverse applications ranging from pharmaceuticals to renewable energy solutions. EDA Clusters: Downstream Chemical Products, Plastics, Upstream Chemical Products
 ENERGY	The energy sector is poised for expansion as communities seek to diversify their energy portfolios and reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Advancements in fusion technology and enhanced safety protocols are creating new pathways for investment, making nuclear a vital component of a sustainable energy future. EDA Cluster: Electric Power Generation and Transmission
 HEALTHCARE	Healthcare is experiencing rapid growth due to an increasing demand for personalized and preventive care, driving innovation in telehealth and digital health solutions. Community-focused initiatives and partnerships are creating opportunities for enhanced access to services and improved health outcomes for underserved/rural populations. EDA Cluster: Local Health Services
 TRANSPORTATION & LOGISTICS	As companies increasingly prioritize efficiency and sustainability, high-paying roles in transportation and logistics, such as logistics engineers and operations managers, are becoming essential for optimizing supply chains. Advancements in automation and AI are creating lucrative opportunities for experts in technology integration and process innovation, often commanding competitive salaries and benefits. EDA Clusters: Transportation and Logistics, Local Transportation Services, Pipeline Transportation, Warehousing and Storage
ASPIRATIONAL TARGETS	
 ELECTRIC VEHICLE COMPONENTS	Growing demand for electric vehicles (EV) is reshaping the automotive industry. Positioning the County as a hub for EV components can stimulate economic growth and job creation in high-tech manufacturing and engineering jobs. Proximity to major transportation routes and existing automotive supply chains allows the County to leverage its location to attract investment. Sample of Representative Companies: EnPower, LG Energy Solution, Li-Cycle, Microvast, Sila Nanotechnologies, Solid Power, StoreDot
 DATA CENTERS	With access to reliable and high-capacity power, Grundy County is a desirable location for data centers. While they require a significant amount of space, they will not add to industrial traffic and will help attract a pool of trained professionals in IT, engineering, and maintenance to support data center operations. Sample of Representative Companies: Amazon Web Services, CoreSite, Digital Realty, Equinix, Flexential, Switch, Vantage Data Centers

Appendix D. Evaluation Framework

To achieve Grundy County's vision of building a prosperous and sustainable economy while maintaining and enhancing its quality of place, it will be essential to track *Advancing Grundy's* implementation. An evaluation framework that provides transparent indicators and that outlines how progress will be measured is a vital component of the implementation process. Metrics should allow partners and stakeholders to track progress toward goals and to determine if strategies and actions are meeting desired objectives. An evaluation framework should include broad indicators of community health as well as distinct metrics that align with individual recommendations.

In addition to the evaluation framework, TIP provided an Excel-based matrix to guide *Advancing Grundy's* implementation. This flexible tool captures the recommended strategies and actions, along with an indication of roles and a proposed timeline for action. A lead organization is identified, which is responsible for the implementation of the task. In addition, supporting partners can be listed. These organizations can be collaborators or potential resources that can help move implementation forward. Finally, the implementation matrix includes an indicator to reflect the status of each strategy and action, as well as a place to capture achievements for reporting purposes.

FIGURE 9. SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX

	LEAD ORGANIZATION	SUPPORTING PARTNERS	TIMELINE FOR INITIATING ACTION					STATUS	PRIORITY	KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS / NOTES	
			ONGOING	0-6 months	6-12 months	1-3 years	3-5 years				
1. Target Industry and Business Recruitment. To enhance the economic vitality of the County by actively recruiting target industries and businesses that align with the community's strengths and needs.											
1.1. Stay abreast of emerging opportunities in the target industry sectors that strengthen and diversify the County's economy.											
1.1.1. Continue to work with Intersect Illinois to attract new investment from domestic and international firms. Similarly, maintain close collaboration with municipalities, property owners, and utility partners to respond to state-level RFIs for business recruitment.				■				COMPLETED	LOW		
1.1.2. Enhance GEDC's involvement in and support of promising regional initiatives, such as the Midwest Alliance for Clean Hydrogen, to stay abreast of trends and increase the County's presence.					■			NOT STARTED	HIGH		
1.1.3. Strengthen the ecosystems that support existing industry by encouraging growth in high value-added supply chain elements. This can be done by leveraging information gathered from business retention and expansion visits, networking, and state business intelligence to identify suppliers, vendors, and customers of existing companies for targeted recruitment.						■		ON TRACK	MEDIUM		
1.2. Foster collaboration, information sharing, and innovation by facilitating partnerships among industry leaders.											
1.2.1. Establish councils or advisory committees consisting of industry leaders from the target sectors to provide insights on industry needs and challenges. Prioritize the establishment of these groups based on need and impact.				■				ON TRACK	MEDIUM		
1.2.2. Convene public and private sector leadership via networking events and "state-of-the-industry" forums to share knowledge, discuss trends, and explore collaboration opportunities.						■		NOT STARTED	MEDIUM		
1.2.3. Maintain ongoing industry collaboration with Joliet Junior College and Grundy Area Vocational Center, to ensure industry-focused training programs that are aligned with business needs.				■				DELAYED	HIGH		
1.3. Establish a site readiness program for targeted industries (in partnership with local governments, landowners, developers, and utility providers).											
1.3.1. Assess and document current site conditions by developing a comprehensive inventory of prime sites, especially in industrial corridors near Dresden Station; the I-80 communities of Channahon, Minooka, Morris, and Seneca; and the Coal City region near Reed Road.							■	NOT STARTED	HIGH		
1.3.2. Work towards improving current site conditions and readiness assets for prime sites referenced in action 1.3.1 including infrastructure, utility access, and environmental needs.				■				COMPLETED	MEDIUM		
1.3.3. Work with local authorities to ensure that zoning regulations are aligned with intended uses and that all required permits and approvals are in place.			■					ON TRACK	LOW		
1.3.4. Develop digital and print marketing materials that highlight the features and advantages of the ready sites.					■			NOT STARTED	MEDIUM		
1.3.5. Use trade shows, industry conferences, and direct marketing efforts to promote the available sites to potential investors, businesses, and site selectors.						■		NOT STARTED	HIGH		

The indicators of community health, or baseline performance metrics, include publicly available data sources at the national level, which allow for longitudinal tracking and comparisons to peer and aspirational communities across the US. These metrics, described in Figure 10 (page 42), serve as a starting point to evaluate the County economy. Whenever possible, indicators should be disaggregated by gender and race/ethnicity to provide greater insight into these populations.

Sample indicators for tracking the plan's implementation are shown in Figure 11 (page 42). Additional metrics should be identified and incorporated during the plan's implementation as actions are completed and new strategies emerge. The format of the implementation matrix allows for necessary adjustments to ensure a responsive and dynamic plan. Because strategies and methods may need to evolve to adapt to new circumstances, the evaluation metrics should also be updated to accurately reflect progress on modified strategies. The frequency of monitoring will differ, depending on the metric and data source. Additionally, the SWOT analysis should be revisited regularly to assess the region's progress in addressing weaknesses and threats while leveraging opportunities and strengths.

Advancing Grundy centralizes all the County's economic development priorities into a cohesive strategic plan. It aligns economic development efforts and minimizes potential duplication. This evaluation framework fosters transparent communication regarding progress toward plan implementation and offers a way to assess whether the strategies are achieving the established objectives of the plan.

FIGURE 10. SAMPLE BASELINE PERFORMANCE METRICS
INDICATORS OF GENERAL COMMUNITY HEALTH AND PROGRESS

TOPIC	EXAMPLES
Demographics	Population trends, age, gender, and racial diversity
Socioeconomics	Household income, educational attainment
Housing	Housing affordability, homeownership rates, property values, and rental prices
Workforce	Labor force participation, unemployment rate, median income, and commuting patterns
Industry	Job growth by industry, location quotients of target sectors, commercial and industrial space, and new business formation
Quality of Place	Broadband connectivity, commute times, safety perceptions, and crime rates

Source(s): TIP Strategies, Inc.

FIGURE 11. SAMPLE PROGRESS METRICS
INDICATORS OF PROGRESS ON *ADVANCING GRUNDY'S* IMPLEMENTATION

RECOMMENDATION	EXAMPLES
1 Target Industry and Business Recruitment	Increase in the number of high-quality jobs based on established criteria
2 Small Business and Entrepreneurship Support	Establishment of community-based investment fund
3 Land Use Updates and Zoning	Number of training sessions delivered on land use and zoning best practices
4 Place-Based Investments	Creation of a citizens' planning academy
5 Attainable Housing	Increase in housing options for young professionals and seniors
6 Joliet Junior College Campus Expansion	Added training curriculum supporting target industries
7 Morris Airport Development and Expansion	Completion of the new cross-wind runway
8 Morris Hospital Visibility	Increased retention of healthcare providers
9 Childcare Partnerships	Increase in the number of childcare providers
10 Broadband Expansion	Increased connectivity

Source(s): TIP Strategies, Inc.



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