University of Illinois Extension
Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

November Snapshots
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Rural business transition planning series aimed to help stabilize local economies

A University of Illinois Extension Community & Economic Development team of educators came together and built a strategy to help local officials and administrators, as well as researchers, identify ways to use succession planning to retain local businesses in rural communities, as current owners retire or otherwise move away. The sessions covered major trends in rural businesses, best practices used in rural areas, and opportunities to work with local leaders and residents to stabilize local economies.

Michael Delany and Richard Proffer, Illinois Extension educators joined by Extension Specialist Joseph Malual worked together to create the five-part series offered over the course of three months and offered through Extension's Local Government Education program. The live webinars involved multiple universities and 515 registrants from Illinois and seven states, with an average of 75 participants per live-session. Participants represented economic developers, local government officials, business owners, community development practitioners, and Extension professionals in other fields.

Recordings of each webinar have been shared on Illinois Extension Community Economic Development YouTube page in the Local Government Education Rural Business Transitions video playlist. Those videos have additional exposure, over 230 views as of October 2026.

The team had cooperation from the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University in recruiting speakers including Jarvis Tyrell Curry, Ph.D. with University of the Cumberlands, Tessa Conroy, Ph.D. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Mike Palmieri and Chris Cooper with Ohio Employee Ownership Center at Kent State, Stacy Mullins with Iowa Center for Employee Ownership at University of Northern Iowa and Norman Walzer, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs.

A sixth webinar developed from the collaboration between Illinois and Minnesota CED Extension programs. It featured rural business succession case studies based on work done by Minnesota. This webinar provided qualitative and quantitative views on the topic and highlighted success stories from small rural businesses who had successfully transitioned from one owner to another.

The team is working on developing phase two of curriculum based on the webinars, attendee's comments, and literature review. Phase three is to implement the curriculum across Illinois through the CED program. Phase two is slated to roll out in late 2027.

Richard Proffer
Community and Economic Development Educator
rproffer@illinois.edu

College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences.
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