

# I Rural Project 2021 Community Report

## What is the I Rural Project?

Rural communities in Illinois face an increasing demand by tourists for outdoor recreation activities. This growth in demand presents an opportunity for rural communities to reimagine rural tourism and sustainable development strategies. This project is a partnership between the Department of Recreation, Sport, and Tourism in the College of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and local Extension partners in your communities.

## Current project status

During the first year of the project, the team has:

- Conducted interviews with business owners, elected officials, tourism marketing professionals, and residents from all four communities
- Completed four hands-on visioning workshops, one in each community

Now we want to share some preliminary findings from all communities that we believe are valuable insights regardless of what stage of tourism development your community is in. On the back of this page, you'll find recommendations based on conversations in your own community.

## Next steps

We are working on a survey of recent and potential visitors from Illinois and the surrounding states to try to understand what motivates tourists to visit our rural communities, and how we can better attract them to the incredible destinations in Illinois.

**Questions?** Contact Dr. Joelle Soulard (jsoulard@illinois.edu) or Dr. Sharon Zou (szou@illinois.edu)

*This project is funded by an Extension Collaboration Grant.*

## Preliminary Recommendations

### Empower the community for tourism development

- Use visitor guides/social media to feature entrepreneurs who talk about their passion for their tourism-related businesses and what led them to become entrepreneurs
- Develop tourism advertisements that focus on residents, what makes them proud of their community, and their eagerness to welcome visitors in the community
- Invest in marketing, including gaining visitor insights
- Diversify tourism businesses and activities through business grants/loans

### Asset/Resource awareness + access

- Conduct an inventory of the attractions that tourists visit and find out which attractions are missing
- [Provide development grants/loans for business owners](#)
- Create strategies to find and keep event volunteers

### Leadership and regulations

- Promote continuity in government leadership
- Strengthen government official's knowledge of financial management
- [Identify zoning codes and sign ordinance for coherent streetscape](#)

### Collaborate to unlock tourism potential

- Encourage a bigger-pie mindset: more tourism = more opportunity for everyone
- Increase networking opportunities with nearby towns
- Develop mentor/mentee programs for entrepreneurs
- Track where tourists are going when they are visiting



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# Grafton

## Vision Statement

*To elevate Grafton IL as a premier week-long and year-round small river town destination through the provision of family-friendly fun, cultural and historic celebration, and natural beauty.*

## Strengths

1. Community pride and spirit to rally and help each other during challenges (floods, COVID)
2. A strong entrepreneurial spirit and work ethic
3. A great sense of pride regarding the accomplishments of growing businesses and turning Grafton into a budding tourist destination
4. A plethora of natural beauty from the views of the river to the bluffs and the foliage

## Challenges

1. Limited collaboration amongst businesses and natural resources agencies due to limited capacities
2. Need a central leadership to lead tourism development efforts
3. Increase business diversification (currently there are limited retail and restaurant options).
4. Lack of funding to upgrade downtown (e.g., streetscape, traffic/parking)
5. Continuing and worsening floods are a threat to businesses and growth

## Preliminary Recommendations

### Planning + Development

- Enhance leadership from city for Grafton's tourism planning and development efforts, such as communicating the tourism development vision to the community, organizing annual planning events, offering monthly business networking, and initiating collaboration with Great Rivers and Routes and Pere Marquette State Park
- Work with Extension and Great Rivers and Routes to identify funding opportunities
- Establish a collaboration with local colleges' event/hospitality programs or develop a roster of resident volunteers to help with events and festivals with short-term limits to prevent fatigue and burnout
- Address flood risks by developing and implementing flood planning, response, and recovery plans

- Develop and create a Grafton resident and employee discounts and passes on attractions and dining

### Attractions

- Create family-friendly activities at existing businesses (e.g., collaborating with Pere Marquette to develop "passports" for kids to visit various stations and earn a prize)
- Develop city-led family-friendly events and festivals with cultural or historical themes
- Diversify dining options
- Include more kid menus and "Instagram-worthy" food items. These food items can be themed off the surrounding areas and natural assets such as creating "bluff bites" or "Mississippi Mud fudge"

### Collaboration

- Organize monthly business meetings/gatherings at a neutral location, with the focus being on future development and collaboration. Begin with Extension leading meetings that will eventually transition into a central committee or a city official gaining leadership for the business meetings
- Cultivate a collaborative mindset among businesses (e.g., forget, forgive, and move on)
- Identify ways to expand the partnership with Pere Marquette while keeping capacity in mind
- Work with Extension to find or create digital marketing and grant writing workshops

### Marketing

- Implement online booking and reservation for activities and hotels
- Build a template and system for tracking and reporting visitor information and trends
- Leverage the marketing assets/resources in Great Rivers and Routes and move towards digital and social media marketing
- Develop a marketing guide for businesses to utilize with a unified message that includes how to info
- Create a series of ads within an advertising campaign highlighting all facets of Grafton from the food, family-friendly/cultural/historical attractions, and natural beauty, focusing on the themes in the vision statement

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**Thank you to our participants and our collaborators!**

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