

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 Galena, Grafton, Havana, and Savanna.

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)

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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 officials' knowledge of financial management
- [Strict 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

Savanna

Vision Statement

To elevate Savanna, IL as a premier 'small town for adventure' destination through the provision of outdoor recreation, cultural and historical celebration, local culinary experience, and main street charm.

Strengths

1. Has unique natural resources and scenic views for outdoor recreation
2. Rich culture and history (live music, museums)
3. Residents have a positive and supportive attitude towards the tourism industry
4. Business owners have welcoming minds for possible collaborations/involvements with other businesses
5. Strong destination marketing and digital presence (e.g., Explore Savanna Illinois website, 16k Facebook followers)
6. Fast-growing tourism destination with increasing recognition (named "Best Small Town for Adventure" by USA Today)

Challenges

1. Limited types of businesses with a focus on motorcyclists
2. High seasonality + heavily weather-dependent
3. Some feelings of exclusion as development tends to focus on the downtown area
4. Lack of communication and networking opportunities among stakeholders
5. Outdated infrastructures (e.g., bumpy roads) and downtown streetscape
6. Difficulty in finding staff and committed younger volunteers

Preliminary Recommendations

Planning + Development

- Organize a one-day annual tourism planning event (led by the city government or Chamber of Commerce) to celebrate success and determine annual goals and strategies, ensure a wide range of stakeholders are invited
- Make the collective decision-making process more accessible (both offline and online) to a wider audience and stakeholders
- Create an Event & Festival Committee to coordinate event and festival initiatives
- Work with Illinois Extension and Blackhawk Waterways CVB to identify funding opportunities and initiate grant applications

- Devote resources to main street revitalization and infrastructure development
- City government can consider offering a matching grant (funded by TIF or hotel/motel tax) in which both the city and downtown property/business owners contribute financially for property improvement projects to attract + diversify businesses
- Work with Extension and/or University of Illinois to build a template to report tourism economic impacts and widely share them with the community
- Organize monthly business meetings/gatherings for broader stakeholders to share information, build local connections, and nurture collaboration; Consider having breakout sessions to bring similar businesses together

Attractions

- Create/reinstate more events and festivals such as First Fridays; cultural and historical themed events; restaurant week in winter
- Develop a visitor center as an information hub
- Create package deals that include activities, accommodations, dining, and shopping discounts
- Attract and diversify retail businesses in the main street to offer a "small town" shopping experience
- Community members suggest breweries and distilleries as a viable diversification strategy; a feasibility study is recommended to look into this tourism development idea
- Experimentally offer winter outdoor activities (e.g., snowshoeing, ice fishing, cross country skiing, snowmobiling, snow biking) and monitor market responses

Volunteers + Young People

- Build relationships and establish a collaboration with local colleges and schools to assist events and address staff shortage
- Use [Facebook Job](#) and Indeed.com to post jobs and find help
- Develop a roster of resident volunteers to help with events and festivals with short-term limits to prevent fatigue and burnout

Thank you to our participants and our collaborators!

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