



Mercer County: Better Together Community-Based Planning for Economic Development



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
EXTENSION

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Spring 2017

Cover: New Windsor, Mercer County, Illinois. Photo by Francesca Sallinger.

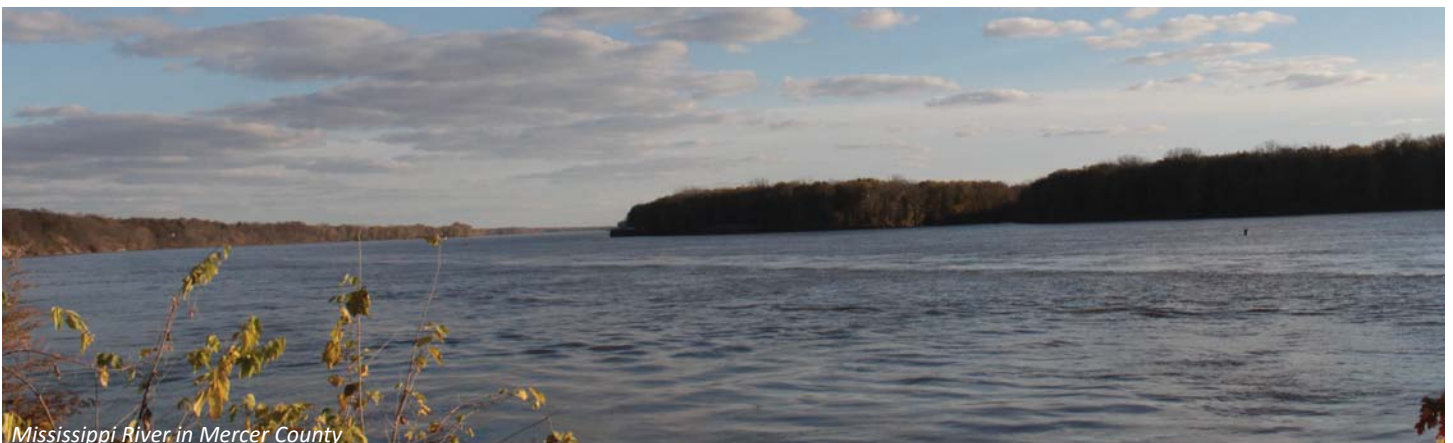
Executive Summary

Mercer County is home to approximately 16,000 residents in rural, northwestern Illinois. It is located within the Davenport-Moline-Rock Island Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Largely a bedroom community for the Quad Cities just 30 miles north, 35.4% of residents commute to jobs in this metropolitan region. There are twelve towns and villages in the county in which the majority of the population lives, as well as fifteen unincorporated communities across the county's 569 square miles. Aledo is the county seat and largest town, with 3,590 residents.

The county is currently in the midst of a community-driven planning process with the goal of establishing a countywide economic development organization. Countywide unity and inclusive engagement are major drivers of this process. Mercer County has had a history of working toward economic development initiatives that failed to see sustained commitment and simply did not succeed. Local leaders realize that two crucial components were missing: widespread public support and continuous and dedicated funding. The Mercer County: Better Together (MCBT) planning process is designed to avoid past mistakes while strengthening the local economy and improving quality of life.

This report begins with an in-depth look at Mercer County, through a brief introduction to its communities and a discussion of its demographics, economy, and overall economic development context and background. This document presents the MCBT planning process—how it originated, its current progress, and what lies ahead. The report concludes with general recommendations for the structure and function of the future MCBT Economic Development Organization.

This project was completed for University of Illinois Extension and in partnership with MCBT. It is intended to serve as a resource for the residents of Mercer County and local leaders there as they continue their important efforts to bring in new opportunities and improve the lives of residents across the county.

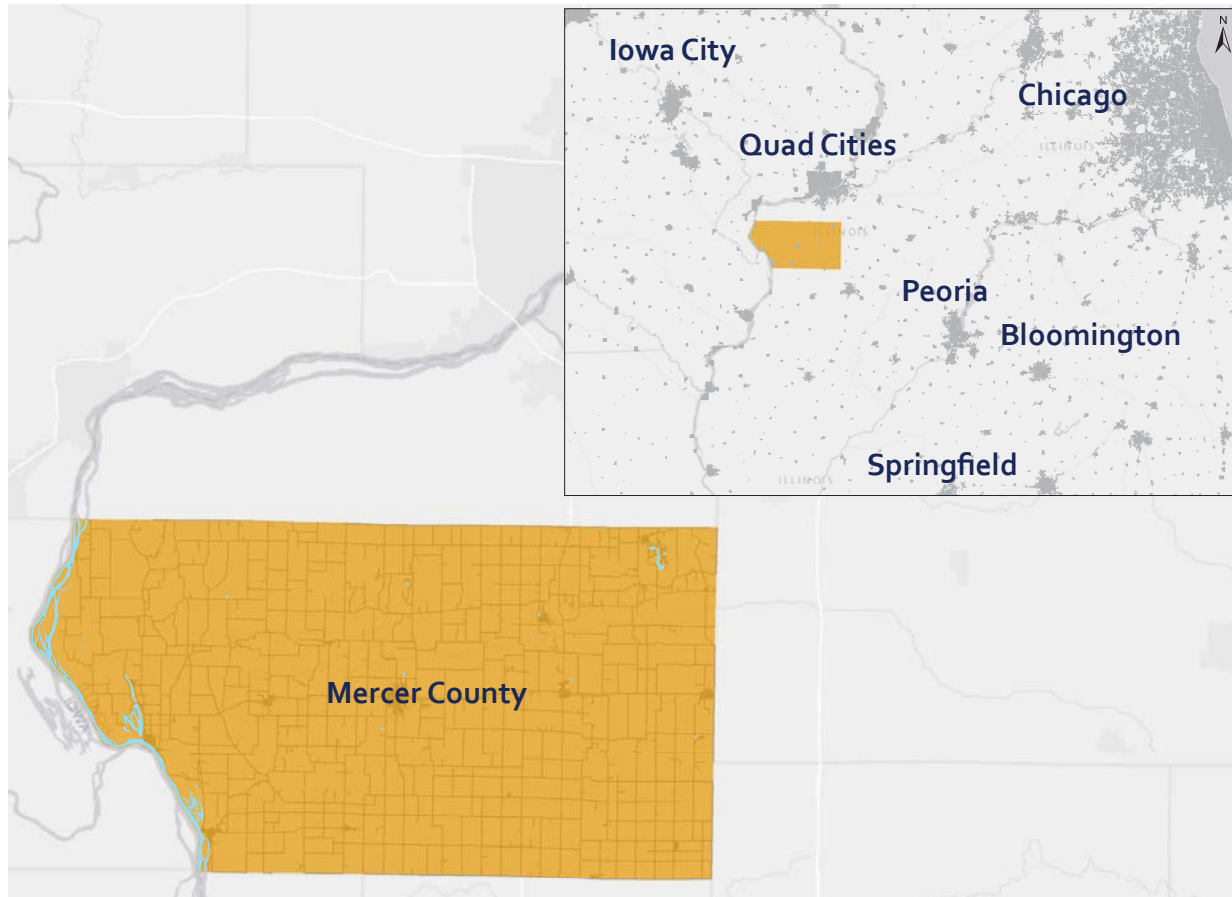


Mississippi River in Mercer County

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Introduction



Many communities take on the challenge of economic development, but few are fortunate enough to have a dedicated, non-governmental funding source to support those efforts. Thanks to a generous donation from longtime residents, Mercer County, Illinois has a \$6 million endowment funding its future economic development efforts. A portion of this money has been put to use, as county leaders selected a community-based planning framework. These two unique components—a sustainable funding source and an inclusive, strategic planning process—make the story behind Mercer County: Better Together (MCBT) worth sharing.

The MCBT story begins in October 2015, when a team working with the Looser-Flake Charitable Foundation sought out University of Illinois Extension and Mercer Foundation for Health to determine what to do with the trust. This group

then convened representatives from the County Board, county communities, local businesses, civic organizations, and nonprofit organizations. It was determined that these important decisions would not be made by a small group. Rather, Mercer County would embark on an 18-month, research-driven, community-based planning process with the goal of engaging voices from across the county to learn from residents' ideas and collectively determine a vision for the future.

This report describes the steps leading to the formation of MCBT, the progress made thus far in this planning initiative, and ideas for Mercer County residents and MCBT leaders as they develop a successful economic development organization that will strengthen and unify the county.

Mercer County History & Communities

Mercer County is located in northwestern Illinois, with the Mississippi River forming its western border with the state of Iowa. The land surrounding the river is part of the Yellowbanks Territory, named by the Sauk and Fox Native Americans who once inhabited the land. The county is named after the Revolutionary War General Hugh Mercer, and was part of the "Military Tract" of land set aside by Congress after the War of 1812 for volunteer soldiers. The county was formally established in 1825.

Today, with a population of 16,107 and land area of 569 square miles, Mercer County is largely rural. It is ethnically homogenous, as 97.4% of its population is White with 2% identifying as Hispanic or Latino. Mercer County is composed of 15 townships and 11 communities, the largest of which is Aledo, the county seat, population 3,590. The county is just west of Interstate 74 and intersected by U.S. Highway 67 and Illinois Routes 17 and 94.

Mercer County is a part of the Quad Cities region, as one of the four counties that comprises the Davenport-Moline-Rock Island, Iowa-Illinois Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Before situating the county into its larger regional context, it is important to understand each of its unique communities.

Aledo

Aledo, Illinois is the Mercer County seat and has the largest population. The downtown business district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, featuring the impressive County Courthouse, a former County Jail converted into a bed and breakfast, a historic opera house restored as a movie theater, a museum, and a variety of restaurants and specialty shops. Aledo's largest industry is the education, health care, and social assistance sector, likely due to high employment at the Genesis Health Group. Manufacturing and construction are other leading sectors. The median household annual income in Aledo is \$46,216, a 38% increase from the 2000 median income of \$33,449. Aledo hosts annual





events including the Rhubarb Festival, Antique Days, and the Mercer County Fair.

Eliza

Though it is technically a township, Mercer County residents view Eliza, population 488, as its own community. The annual median household income is \$60,375. Eliza's largest employment sectors are manufacturing (42.9%) and agriculture (32%).



Joy

Joy is one of the smallest communities in the county, less than a half square mile in size; population 378; median age of 41. The annual median income is \$51,250 and the main industry sectors are construction (16.9%), education, healthcare, and social assistance (16.4%), and manufacturing (14.2%). Mercer County Junior High School is located in Joy, and every summer the town attracts crowds for Joy Fest held in Joy Park.



Keithsburg

The City of Keithsburg is one of Mercer County's riverfront communities, and as such fishing, boating, and camping are popular activities for residents and visitors. The Big River State Forest—technically in Henderson County—is just four miles south of Keithsburg. The largest employment sectors for the city's 609 residents are manufacturing (20.8%), education, healthcare, and social assistance (13%), and transportation and warehousing (12.5%). Each year, Keithsburg hosts the Fish Fest, the Fall Fest, and the Boat-In Breakfast.



Matherville

Matherville, population 960, is located 20 miles south of Rock Island in the Quad Cities. The Village has a median annual household income of \$44,233 and most residents work in manufacturing (18.4%), education and healthcare (16.2%), and retail trade (15%). It is known for Lake Matherville and for its annual Fourth of July fireworks show.



New Boston

Located at the confluence of the Mississippi and Iowa Rivers, New Boston is Mercer County's other riverfront community. The Village has a median household income of \$40,952 and its largest employment sectors are manufacturing (27%), retail trade (19.4%), and education and healthcare (11.5%). New Boston Elementary School educates 200 students and the New Boston Museum features the town's history.

New Windsor

New Windsor, located on the Mercer-Henry County border, is home to the "Biggest Little Rodeo in the Midwest." With 988 residents, the Village has grown since its 2000 population of 720. Its largest industry sectors are education and healthcare (21.6%), manufacturing (13.5%), and construction (13.3%), and the median household income is \$54,583. New Windsor features live music and concessions on Thursday nights in the summertime with the "Twilight & Music" program at Depot Park.

North Henderson

Just 0.23 square miles in size, North Henderson is the smallest village in Mercer County. It is located in the southeastern corner of the county. The largest industries are manufacturing (23.4%), retail trade (21.3%), and education and healthcare (21.3%). There are 184 residents and the median household income is \$40,938.

Seaton

With only 236 residents, the Village of Seaton is a tight-knit community. Recently, residents came together to construct a new park and playground in the heart of town. The Village has a median household income of \$41,250 and most residents work in education and healthcare (23.6%), agriculture (14.2%), and manufacturing (13.2%).

Sherrard

Sherrard, in the northeastern corner of Mercer County, has a population of 759. It is home to the Sherrard Public Library and the Frye Lake Golf Club and residential subdivision. Major employment sectors are education and healthcare (19.5%), manufacturing (17.1%), and arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food (11.8%). The median household income is \$55,833.

Viola

The Village of Viola, population 897, is located between New Windsor and Aledo along Illinois Route 17. Median household income is \$58,088. The largest industries are manufacturing (21.3%), construction (10.6%), and education and healthcare (10%). Viola residents enjoy use of a pavilion, baseball facility, and playground at Miles Memorial Park. More than 320 students attend Winola Elementary School.

Regional Context

The Quad Cities Metropolitan Area, technically the Davenport-Moline-Rock Island MSA, consists of four counties: Scott County in Iowa and Henry, Mercer, and Rock Island Counties in Illinois. The urban core of this MSA is known as the “Quad Cities,” a region of five neighboring cities with a combined population of 383,145 in northwestern Illinois and southeastern Iowa. The area’s five main cities are Davenport, IA; Bettendorf, IA; Rock Island, IL; Moline, IL; and East Moline, IL. Aside from its reputation as an agricultural capital—known for being home to the John Deere World Headquarters—the area is described as having “all the excitement of a big city with all the hospitality of a small town.”¹ Collectively, these five cities are home to museums and cultural centers, riverfront development, nightlife, and outdoor activities that draw tourists who spend \$800 million annually and support 8,000 local jobs.²

Mercer County residents contribute to the Quad Cities’ employment base, as many commute from Mercer County to jobs in Davenport, Bettendorf, Rock Island, and Moline. Only 25.2% of Mercer County residents both live and work in the county; 24.5% commute to Rock Island County; and 10.9% commute to Scott County. Therefore, a combined 35.4% of Mercer County residents commute to jobs in the other Quad Cities counties. The largest industries in the Quad Cities MSA are government (11.9%), health care and social assistance (11.6%), retail trade (11.6%), and manufacturing (10.5%).

To understand Mercer County’s regional position, it is useful to examine county level data alongside data from the MSA (Table 1).¹ Mercer County has a less diverse population than the MSA, as it is over 97% White, and by some measures its residents are slightly better off financially than residents throughout the region. The county has a higher median income and lower poverty rate, however, per capita income and earnings per job are lower, coupled with a higher unemployment rate. Only 17% of owner occupied households and 30% of renter occupied households in Mercer County pay more than 30% of their income on housing, compared to 22% and 42% of households, respectively, across the region. Perhaps the most notable contrast is that while the MSA has seen a 2.1% increase in population since 2000, Mercer County has lost 6.4% of its residents. The county lost 8% of its jobs since 2000. Since job loss outpaced population loss between 2000 and 2015, this led to a 1% increase in unemployment.

1 The “Quad Cities MSA” refers to combined data for Scott County in Iowa and Henry, Mercer, and Rock Island Counties in Illinois.



Table 1: Mercer County and Quad Cities MSA Compared

	Mercer County, IL	Quad Cities MSA
Population Growth (% change, 2000-2015*)	-6.4%	2.1%
Median Age (2015*)	44.3	41.0
Percent Population White Alone (2015*)	97.4%	86.1%
Percent Population Hispanic or Latino (2015*)	2.1%	8.2%
Percent of Population 'Baby Boomers' (2015*)	28.0%	25.8%
Median Household Income (2015*)	\$54,757	\$53,042
Per Capita Income (2015*)	\$40,487	\$44,418
Employment (percent change, 2000-2015)	-8.1%	-0.5%
Average Earnings per Job	\$30,963	\$52,887
Unemployment Rate (2015)	6.2%	5.6%
Unemployment Rate (change 2000-2015)	+1.0%	+1.7%
Percent Individuals Below Poverty (2015*)	9.4%	12.9%
Percent Families Below Poverty (2015*)	8.2%	9.4%
Percent of Households with Public Assistance Income (2015*)	13.1%	18.8%
Percent Population 25 Years or Older without High School Degree (2015*)	8.3%	9.6%
Percent Population 25 Years or Older with Bachelor's Degree or Higher (2015*)	15.7%	26.0%
Owner-Occupied Homes where Greater than 30% of Household Income Spent on Mortgage (2015*)	17.0%	22.3%

Demographics

The following section will provide a current snapshot of Mercer County, as well as certain historical data and projections for future trends.²

By 2021, Mercer County is forecasted to lose population and to see its median age increase slightly (see Table 2). This follows historical trends, as the population shrank 8% between 1970 and 2015. Meanwhile, the Quad Cities region grew during this time and growth is expected to continue. Mercer County is expected to lose 2% of its population (see Table 2), but when considering a region centered around Mercer County but extending outward to a 50-mile radius (see Figure 1), the population is expected to grow by 3% by 2021.

² Unless cited otherwise, much of the data in this section come from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). It is worth noting that in the ACS, less populous geographies (like Mercer County) tend to have wider margins of error.

Table 2: Mercer County in 2016 Compared with 2021

2016 Summary		2021 Summary	
Population	16,666	Population	16,637
Households	6,848	Households	6,845
Families	4,758	Families	4,732
Average Household Size	2.41	Average Household Size	2.40
Owner Occupied Housing Units	5,404	Owner Occupied Housing Units	5,396