

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

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Fulton County Collaboration Yields \$8 Million in Grants

Rural communities throughout Illinois and across the nation struggle to maintain population, jobs, and schools. The COVID-19 pandemic created even more challenges; however, a collaborative group of community leaders in Fulton County was already at work addressing the challenges, positioning their communities for growth through the challenges. That advance work helped obtain state and federal funding support, that yielded four grants worth more than \$8 million.

A well-documented plan is a valuable tool that can be leveraged for growth and development in a community or region, says [Kathie Brown](#), Extension educator [serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties](#). The collaboration used proven methods to help leaders gather information, analyze data, assess options, and develop action plans. In the end, Fulton County communities, with Extension's guidance, garnered more than \$8 million in grants to support local projects.

Securing such a sizable investment for local growth and development required hard work and a network of partners. Over six months, local leaders worked with USDA's [Rural Economic Development Innovation \(REDI\) Initiative](#) and Extension teams to create a strategic, comprehensive plan for bringing resources into the local economy. This multifaceted effort was supported by a rich data gathering process, a network of committed local and state partners, and a two-day planning process made possible by REDI.

"The REDI initiative provided intensive technical assistance, data support, and facilitation," says Brown. "Working with Extension connects communities to a nationwide network of land grant university expertise, in this case state extension specialists from Purdue University, University of Kentucky, in addition to University of Illinois. The work also linked Illinois communities with USDA Rural Development's national network of expertise."

Broadband connectivity: A \$3.1 million [Connect Illinois](#) grant, awarded to Century Enterprises, Inc., will expand broadband accessibility to 581 households, businesses, farms and anchor institutions in Fulton, Peoria, and Knox Counties.

Safety net for small businesses: The [Spoon River Partnership for Economic Development](#) received a \$90,000 grant from USDA Rural Business Development to establish a revolving loan fund to support businesses in the Canton area.

Workforce training programs: [Spoon River College](#) secured a \$4 million U.S. Economic Development Administration grant to enhance career and technical programs for local workforce development.

Educational facilities: The [U.S. Commerce Department](#) also awarded Spoon River College a \$1.5 million grant through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The funds will support investment in modern training equipment and a renovation of the college's Vocational & Technical Education Center. The CARES grant is expected to create 275 jobs, retain 125 jobs, and generate \$500,000 in private investment.

Extension's work engaging a wide range of partners in planning helps community leaders focus on success. But the leaders and residents in the communities do the heavy lifting.

"Locally grown strategies will guide county economic development and improve outcomes and overall quality of life," Brown says. "These Fulton County projects show how, working together, stakeholders can create the environment needed to achieve local and regional economic prosperity."



Photo by Anita Wilkinson | Illinois Extension

Local leaders throughout Fulton County worked together to secure the USDA's Rural Economic Development Innovation (REDI) Initiative, which in turn generated well-documented plans that put the community in perfect position to secure additional grants.