



E·C·G·R·A
ERIE COUNTY GAMING REVENUE AUTHORITY

ECGRA Works
To Connect

**Erie
County**

In the summer of 2022, the ECGRA staff conducted a series of listening sessions across rural Erie County to engage with grant recipients and meet municipal and civic leaders as well as industry and business owners. The sessions were designed to:

- ✔ Provide the respective community with a summary of local share gaming revenue investments.
- ✔ Conduct outreach and advise decisionmakers on the deployment of Building a Better Future (BBF) funding also known as ARPA funds.
- ✔ Solicit hyperlocal feedback from the respective community concerning ongoing projects of priority, shovel ready projects and aspirational projects.

Members of County Council, a liaison to the County Executive's Office, a member of the Planning Department, and the Erie Community Foundation were invited to attend each session.

The encouraging results unveiled a vast civic infrastructure fueled through a collective will to understand and access available ECGRA funding to advance the improvement of rural communities. We experienced passion and energy for main street revitalization, neighborhood investments, broadband deployment, park and trail improvements, sports complexes, historical preservation, and small business development. We explored and learned what works, what's possible, and what's necessary to move the needle on unfinished initiatives.



ECGRA Listening Sessions

North East	6/30/22	North East Community Foundation
Union City	7/18/22	First United Methodist Church
Girard & Lake City	7/19/22	Girard Borough Building
Corry	7/27/22	Corry Higher Ed Council
Millcreek	8/11/22	Millcreek Twp Building
Edinboro & McKean	8/11/22	McKean Community Park
Fairview	8/17/22	Fairview Township Building

North East

The Borough of North East is host to a thriving main street, buttressed by strong borough management, an active business owners group known as Downtown North East (DNE), North East In Bloom, North East Chamber, and the North East Community Foundation. North East is currently in the process of updating their comprehensive plan, however they have a strong strategic plan for the main street, plans to transition their Chamber to a promotional group called Enjoy North East, and a Foundation currently engaged in strategic planning. Here's what we learned.

- Major Need: sewer service expansion throughout the borough and township remains the number one priority in research and surveying.
- Ongoing Strategy: key investments in the main street including facades, beautification, sidewalks/streetscapes, the gateways on Route 89, and the redevelopment of upper floors are ongoing objectives in the DNE strategic plan.
- Key Growth Project: support for the developers of Granite Ridge; a sports complex that attracts elite athletes from across the world to train on the old Mercyhurst NE Campus.
- Aspirational: the borough's first dog park.

Union City

A strong history of planning is undergirding many of the exciting projects planned and underway in Union City. The Historic Preservation Plan (2019), Parks Comprehensive Plan (2021), Active Transportation Plan, French Creek Feasibility Plan, and Union City Pride's Strategic Plan have all led to continuous improvements in both place and recreation. As this community reinvents itself as a bedroom community, players like the Borough, UC Pride, UC Chamber, and the UC Community Foundation are making investments in quality of place.

- Immediate Needs: Renaissance Block program is oversubscribed; need to expand it and add an anchor housing tactic. Cafflish Park improvements are underway and need continuing financial support. Chamber needs support in coaching and marketing main street businesses. The Diner has been removed and now UC Pride owns that strategic property for gateway development.
- Potentially Iconic: the trail development along French Creek has the potential to define UC as a key trail town in the Pittsburgh to Erie bike trail.
- Infrastructure: Willow Street bridge repair requires a 40% local match. Borough building needs expansion and ADA accessibility upgrade to accommodate public meetings.
- Aspirational: Union City Chair and Aims True Temper properties are large square footage industrial properties that are vacant and ripe for redevelopment but require matching funds for brownfield redevelopment.

Girard/Lake City

A new group representing business owners called Downtown Girard is stepping up to collaborate with strong borough management to make main street and its surrounding neighborhoods a priority for redevelopment and curb side appeal. Host to the Rice Avenue Library, main streets with thriving small businesses, and the iconic Dan Rice Days, this area of the West County has placemaking ambitions and real potential.

- Strategic Advantage: Elk Creek Access and Conneaut Creek.
- Infrastructure: water lines, a new water tank, and broadband are central to commerce discussions. Worries about future erosion in Water Works Park and deferred maintenance to the power grid abound.
- Aspirational: creation of an incubator could grow local commerce.

The ambition and energy in Corry is incredible. Local leadership has far more capacity than any other area we encountered. With active players like Impact Corry, the Corry Redevelopment Authority, Corry Higher Education Council, CIBA, CNI, Mead Park Association, and the Corry Community Foundation, the city is poised for success.

- **Growth Direction:** a jumpstart model for small business growth is being piloted at the Corry Higher Ed Council building, running three cohorts since 2020. In collaboration with the Corry RDA, the local Chamber is documenting current space capacity to build out manufacturing and support tech businesses.
- **Strategic Advantage:** a rural gig fiber network being built out by Impact Corry has the partnership of surrounding municipalities like Union City. Telecom provider is aboard.
- **Infrastructure:** sewer is reaching its limits, stormwater is deferred, and continuing to separate sewer from stormwater is underway. New flow meters require \$50K investment.
- **Growth Need:** Corry doesn't have enough workers. Corry IDC estimates that the region only has the workforce for 40% of its industry's needs.

Millcreek

The second largest municipality in Erie County, Millcreek is a first ring suburb of the city of Erie and an Erie County economic engine. The township has clear strategic direction guided by its comprehensive plan, Embrace Millcreek.

- **Economic Opportunity:** the 8th street corridor connects the City of Erie to Millcreek. From Pittsburgh Ave to Peninsula Drive, there's a dense small business district, however the building stock is disposable, lacking historical significance, and blight is beginning to creep in. In fact, the corridor is a low/moderate income census tract. From an economic development perspective, it's underutilized. Phase One would look at the Colony Plaza to Peninsula Drive as an important gateway into Millcreek, especially for visitors to Presque Isle State Park. Some type of municipal authority capable of financing the redevelopment of land and buildings is currently being considered.
- **Collaboration Opportunity:** the township and city are discussing branding and signage continuity for the 8th street corridor.
- **Safety Upgrade:** the east side of Peninsula Drive has long been recognized as the bike and footpath to reaching Presque Isle State Park. The area should be widened, and other physical features need to be installed to make pedestrians feel safe.

Edinboro/McKean

ECGRA is invested in the region's municipalities including Edinboro, McKean, and Washington Township and these townships are investing in the region. There are currently collaborations ongoing between Edinboro and Washington townships, and McKean is being introduced to the engine behind that collaboration: the ECED or Edinboro Community & Economic Development. ECED has taken McKean under its wing and offered the township admittance into their 501c3 and grant writing mentorship.

- Collaboration Opportunity: joint parks plan, main street development of route 6N.
- Infrastructure: sewer, water, and broadband.
- Growth Opportunity: Edinboro University is working on co-working and incubation space for digital arts per the school's strategic advantage in the sector.
- Underway with a Shortfall: McKean is developing handicap access to Elk Creek and currently has a 200k shortfall on the project.
- Aspirational: McKean Township and Borough are working with a developer on attaching McKean Community Park to a proposed soccer complex. There's a \$200K shortfall on the project.

Fairview

Main street revitalization is the priority in Fairview Township. After community engagement conducted in recent years, the people of Fairview want to improve their downtown, which is the last vestige of the disinvestment of the old borough. A well-organized group of elected and township officials, Chamber, and the Garden Club have created a funding strategy to tackle blight, neighborhood zoning, and design guidelines.

- Growth Opportunity: traditional main street revitalization of the old Fairview Borough. Priorities include burying utilities, walkability, stormwater and sewer upgrades, parks, lighting, and streetscaping.
- Upgrades: Memorial Park and Central Park.
- Infrastructure: broadband deployment remains the focus for both commercial and residential properties.
- Other Consideration: rural farm relief.

Recommendations

There were common themes that emerged from the listening sessions. Each challenge can be addressed, but strategic investing can rapidly increase the chance of solving some of these pressing challenges in the near term.

Residential and Commercial rural broadband internet speeds were a priority across the board. Investments in both the hardware and last mile infrastructure are holding back deployment by the ISPs. ECGRA has funded a feasibility study that targets the needs of rural broadband deployment in Erie County. Next, leadership is required to establish a grant writing process for federal funding.

The need for grant writing expertise has stymied smaller municipalities from applying for grants at the state and national levels. Considering recent stimulus packages, this lack of capacity puts Erie County's boroughs and townships at a distinct disadvantage. Funding is required so these communities are not left out of the grant writing capacity and expertise required to win federal funding.

Unrestricted working capital for economic development growth opportunities are preventing local coalitions from pursuing bold projects with a potential multiplier effect. These projects have the potential to be transformational as a building block in strategic plans that are currently underway. Identify targeted funding to rapidly propel mid-stride projects toward completion.

CONCLUSION

Erie County's boroughs and townships are home to small businesses, local government services, and recreational opportunities that define civic, cultural, and the economy of small communities. Leadership in these places have formed strong collaborations, driven consensus on projects, and pooled scarce and unpredictable resources to a common end. These rural places continue to be a focus of ECGRA's inclusive economic development strategy covering all geographic areas of Erie County.

