MOVING THE NEEDLE TOGETHER:

NORTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA RPDC DATA DASHBOARD

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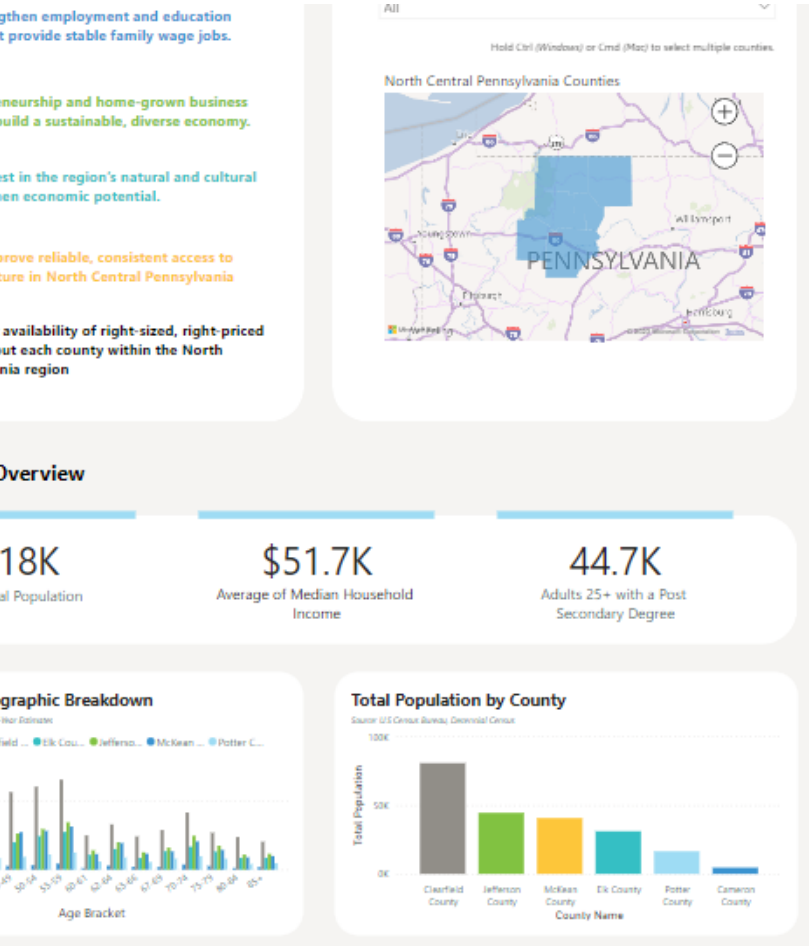

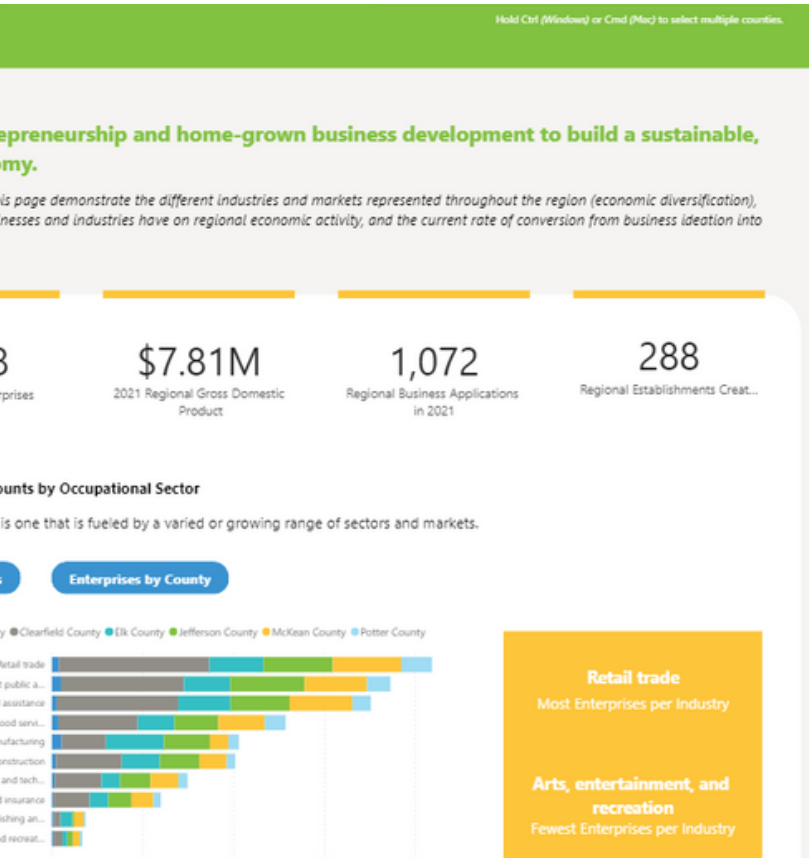

September 2023

MOVING THE NEEDLE: NORTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA RPDC **DATA DASHBOARD**

Developing and implementing a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) requires busy community leaders to commit both time and ingenuity to collaborate thoughtfully toward shared strategic outcomes. When representatives from the six counties served by the North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission (North Central) undertook their most recent 5-year CEDS update, they modernized their approach to maximize their time and efforts.

After discussing their observations, concerns, and ideas about the regional economy, they worked with a consultant to create the North Central Data Dashboard, an online Dashboard that everyone in the region, including the public, can use to track efforts to further regional economic development progress.

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Background: Seeing the Forest through the Trees

Visitors from across the country and the world are drawn to central Pennsylvania's legendary forests and rivers as a vacation destination. From the Allegheny National Forest, to the site of the original Groundhog Day celebration, to state forests and wildlife areas, more than 2 million history buffs, outdoor enthusiasts, and sightseers spend time exploring the North Central region's history, rivers, and wilderness every year.

For economic development stakeholders in the region, the challenge is to encourage growth in the outdoor recreation and tourism economy and at the same time diversify employment opportunities for the permanent population. For example, although incomes are rising overall, high-paying employment opportunities are scarce and the working-age population in the region was dwindling even before the COVID pandemic. While the trajectory is improving, unemployment has risen, along with outmigration of young working-age people.

The North Central CEDS Committee looked deeply at these and other challenges, and their implications for the region's ability to absorb and recover from future shocks. At the same time, they stepped back and saw the whole picture, including many avenues to turn current trends around. Through in-depth surveys, focus groups, and discussions, the CEDS Committee saw four strategic priorities emerge as a foundation for a renewed action plan: infrastructure, workforce and entrepreneurship, natural resources and tourism, and quality of life.

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Context: Tracking Signs of Progress

The North Central Community Development team discussed adding a new element to the CEDS process as they prepared for the CEDS update. They wanted to do more than set new goals for a new 5-year plan, only to see trends remain on the same track, or even worsen. They needed a system in place to help stakeholders in the region work together to actually move the needle: define factors driving challenging trends, set goals for changing those factors, and capture progress in real time, however incremental.

"We think it's important to always challenge yourself to find new ways to make things better," said Amy Kessler, North Central's Community Development Director. "We ask ourselves, what are we doing to push the envelope, to challenge people to look at things differently?"

The CEDS committee realized quickly that taking a data-driven approach to this update would empower everyone to discover, diagnose, and report problem trends in their respective communities together from one source of information. They would also be able to use that information to prepare grant funding requests and progress reports, and advocate for program and project funding from local, state, and federal elected officials.

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Regional Solution: Setting Up a Data Dashboard

Using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds as a match for an EDA planning grant, North Central hired a part-time consultant and began working with their CEDS Resilience Subcommittee to decide which metrics to measure and to determine appropriate rates of change to gauge incremental progress.

"Once we showed the committee the possibilities, everyone got excited and it just kept expanding," said Katie Lenze, North Central Community Development Coordinator.

Relatively new to the Community Development team, Lenze took over the CEDS update already in process as a first task in her new role. She's excited, and relieved, to see stakeholders engaging with the data on their own to find insights and gauge progress. "The tracking aspect really brings everyone together and makes everyone [feel] responsible," she said. "It's not just me coming up with ideas."

The Dashboard shows how the entire region and each county is performing in nearly 50 metrics, organized on five different pages, one for each of the region's CEDS Strategic priorities. For example, on the Employment and Education page, metrics include People Living in Poverty, Employment by Industry and Hourly Wages by Job Type. The final page on the Dashboard presents actual "needles" for each strategic goal, indicating progress toward incremental success as defined by the CEDS Committee.

KATIE LENZE

North Central Community Development Coordinator

NORTH CENTRAL

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North Central CEDS Committee member Kate Kennedy, executive director for the Kane Area Development Center in McKean County, appreciates being able to explain rural dynamics and share her community's challenges in measurable terms, she said. For example, it has been useful to explain that her community's average income is less than the overall county's, even though the town has more restaurants overall than elsewhere. The disparity in incomes illustrates one of the negative effects of a growing service industry, a factor that needs to be addressed while focusing on tourism economy growth as an otherwise positive trend.

"I really feel like every opportunity I'm given, I want to talk with people in the region and state about our community and explain the nuances of what it means to be a rural community," Kennedy said. "There are so many misconceptions about rural. I love anecdotal [stories], but I think it's always really important to have that hard data to go along with it."

Having worked in economic development at North Central for nearly two decades, Amy Kessler has seen several iterations of CEDS development. She said she's encouraged to see how stories told through data and defined, measurable goals for improvement have renewed the CEDS Committee members' energy to address local and regional challenges.

"What's nice about the Dashboard is that you can look at it from any perspective and see where you're moving the needle," Kessler said. "It's a public dashboard; it doesn't have to just be the CEDS committee doing things. People involved in different groups can drive their piece of the pie and see how it affects everything else. If they can tell their story to their committees, funding agencies, collaborating partners – the 20-person CEDS committee is suddenly 100 people."

With the information all available in easy-to-read tables and charts, stakeholders can easily consider the different metrics and their implications for the economy, and how change scenarios driven by CEDS implementation might improve outcomes.

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The Community Development team is excited to work with community leaders to maximize the Dashboard for project development and funding requests. They fully expect the Dashboard to evolve over time, and Lenze and the North Central IT team will be trained to keep data current, add metrics, and change goals as needed.

The team looks forward to watching the living web site grow and evolve, and expect it to become more valuable and user-friendly over time. Like the progress it tracks, the creation of the database itself was an incremental step, moving the needle toward more effective development and implementation of the region's CEDS.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

**** Celebrate the small stuff.*** The North Central team recognized that their CEDS Committee was experiencing planning fatigue without defined goals or the ability to measure and celebrate incremental success. Identifying specific metrics and factors impacting the way those metrics can change over time gave the CEDS Committee a clear discussion point when considering and deciding on strategies and goals. The Dashboard is now a shared space where everyone can see together how each metric is changing, and when to celebrate success and discuss taking new action.

**** Use data to understand and promote your story.*** The Community Development Department considers the Data Dashboard to be a tool for improving the CEDS development process, implementation, and outcomes. Staff worked with a consultant and their stakeholders to identify metrics, goals, and timelines that told the story of their region and made sense to local stakeholders for their circumstances. Many sources of data and tools for analysis are available to help with regional economic development decision making. All of them are most powerful in the hands of engaged local stakeholders with a vision and commitment to local action.

**** Plan and budget for ongoing database management.*** The idea of a data Dashboard is to track change over time, which means updating metrics routinely – and paying for someone to do that for the foreseeable future. North Central received matching funds from the Appalachian Regional Commission to fund training for their Community Development Coordinator and IT Staff to be trained in PowerBI. Using PowerBI saved resources because it is the data visualization platform included in the Microsoft suite they already use for office administration.

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KEY STATISTICS: NORTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA PDC

Region Characteristics: Manufacturing Region, Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Region
Counties: 6
Population (2020): 217,419
Population change (2000 – 2020): -7.3%

Resources: Data-Driven CEDS

NADO Data Deep Dive Webinar Series Recordings features organizations and their data tools and maps that can be easily accessed to collect, interpret, and share data to better prepare your CEDS and other regional plans. Each webinar includes a live demonstration of the tools and Q&A.

EDA CEDS Evaluation Framework - The evaluation framework serves as a mechanism to gauge progress on the successful implementation of the overall CEDS while providing information for the CEDS Annual Performance Report (see section on Preparation), as required by EDA. These regular updates keep the strategic direction and action plan outlined in the CEDS current and the plan more relevant.

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development Regional Data - This website provides resources related to regional development data analysis as well as census data, economic indicators, health, housing, income, labor force, population, poverty, rural broadband and transportation. Links are organized into National, Regional and State resources.

Argonne National Laboratory National Economic Resilience Data Explorer (NERDE) consolidates information and data on economic distress criteria, COVID-19 impacts to local economies, and the existence and emergence of industry clusters.

Argonne National Laboratory Economic Development Capacity Index (EDCI) - For communities, EDDs, and other local or regional stakeholders, EDCI provides a data-driven estimation of capacity, including relative strengths and potential areas for growth or maturation across five capacity areas composed of 53 unique indicators. A NADO Research Foundation webinar recording that demonstrates both the NERDE and EDCI tools can be viewed here.

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