



FROM PASS-THROUGH TO DESTINATION
Pioneer Trails Regional Planning Commission
and the Saline County Visitor Center

September 2026 // PREPARED BY NADO RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Every day, roughly 36,000 vehicles pass through the interchange of I-70 and U.S. 65 at Marshall Junction in Saline County, Missouri. For decades, nearly all of them kept going. There was no reason to stop. No amenities, no signage, no story. Just farmland, a single gas station, and the blur of a county most travelers never knew they had passed through. Recently, however, the Pioneer Trails Regional Planning Commission (PTRPC) set out to change that script, using every tool that an Economic Development District (EDD) has at its disposal.

This case study follows the arc of that area from a dysfunctional cloverleaf interchange with no water, no sewer, and no development potential, to a site now hosting a \$3.2 million visitor center that opened to the public in August 2026, with Love's Travel Stops committed to expand nearby, new retail and restaurant investment underway, and hotel conversations in progress. It examines how a small, four-person EDD serving west-central Missouri identified the opportunity, assembled the funding package, wrote the grants, managed key partnerships, and guided this project.

Pieces of the Puzzle

Saline County, Missouri is a rural, agricultural community of approximately 23,000 residents located roughly 70 miles east of Kansas City along the Missouri River. Its economy has long been anchored by agriculture and food processing. Cargill and Conagra Brands are among the largest employers, but county leaders have spent years working to diversify. Recent investments in broadband infrastructure and energy capacity have positioned the county for growth, and voters reinforced that commitment in 2018 by approving a half-cent economic development sales tax dedicated through 2038.

The county's location has long been one of its strongest competitive advantages. At Marshall Junction, nearly 28,000 vehicles travel I-70 each day, along with more than 8,000 on U.S. 65. The interchange positions the county at a regional crossroads between Kansas City and Columbia. For decades, however, little at that crossroads gave travelers a reason to stop. Recognizing the site's untapped potential, local leaders saw an



opportunity to transform Marshall Junction into a destination that could support tourism, attract private investment, and strengthen the county's long-term economy. Realizing that vision, however, required sustained planning, coordinated partnerships, and the ability to navigate complex state and federal funding programs.

That is where Pioneer Trails Regional Planning Commission entered the picture. As the designated EDD for Saline, Johnson, Lafayette, and Pettis counties, PTRPC provides planning, transportation, GIS, and grant administration services across the region. Working alongside the [Marshall-Saline Development Corporation](#), Saline County officials, and state and federal partners, PTRPC helped assemble the funding, coordinate stakeholders, and sustain the project.

The I-70/U.S. 65 interchange had all the makings of a development opportunity: traffic volume, regional visibility, and growing local investment interest – but none of the fundamentals that make development possible. Its cloverleaf design was not intuitive for commercial traffic. There was no centralized water or wastewater service. The road configuration made semi-truck access unsafe. And the existing footprint amounted to a Phillips 66 gas station and a fireworks retailer, Pyro City, operating on an independent septic system that barely kept pace during the Fourth of July rush. Chris Hess, Executive Director of Pioneer Trails Regional Planning Commission, puts it plainly: “It didn’t have the water, it didn’t have the sewer, it really didn’t have anything...it was not functional for development.”

Roads and Water

PTRPC’s work at Marshall Junction began not with a grant application, but with a road. As Saline County commissioners worked with the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) to improve safety, traffic flow, and access on the south side of the interchange, PTRPC stepped in as the region’s planning partner and advocate. In Missouri, EDDs (most of which are known as “Regional Planning Commissions” or “Councils of Governments”) have planning agreements with the state and lead MoDOT’s project prioritization process, a role that gives them meaningful leverage to advance local transportation priorities at the state level. As Norman Lucas, the former Executive Director of PTRPC recalls, “PTRPC became involved with the Saline County Commission’s efforts to develop the I-70 and U.S. 65 interchange area when the commissioners began working with MoDOT to improve traffic flow, safety, and access on the south side of the intersection through an outer road construction project using MoDOT’s 50-50 program funding.”

PTRPC supported the county’s cost-share application, advocating for construction of an outer road capable of safely accommodating commercial and semi-truck traffic. Completed in 2022, the [\\$2.4 million](#) project created the transportation access needed to support future commercial development. Without it, the interchange would have remained difficult to reach for the businesses the county hoped to attract.

At the same time, Saline County was making parallel investments in utility infrastructure using local sales tax funds. In 2019, officials acquired land for water and sewer expansion. By 2020, the county had awarded a \$5.7 million construction contract to install approximately eight miles of waterline, a pump station, and multiple highway bores beneath I-70 and U.S. 65. The county also completed a 250,000-gallon water tower near the interchange, establishing reliable water supply at the site for the first time. For this phase, PTRPC's role was primarily technical support and advocacy rather than direct administration, but the organization remained engaged throughout. According to Lucas, "PTRPC staff studied the area and referred to a previous regional inventory of wastewater facilities to determine needs in supporting economic development at the location. Staff met with county commissioners to discuss water connection needs and the nearby facilities of the Public Water Supply District." By the time the road and water improvements were complete, Marshall Junction had the basic foundation for future development but still had to overcome a major obstacle: a lack of wastewater treatment services.

Finding the Funding: A Creative Stack

PTRPC initially explored Community Development Block Grant funding to complete the basic infrastructure, but it quickly became clear the program was not the right fit for a project of this scale or complexity. The search continued until a narrow opportunity emerged: a COVID-era EDA program focused on tourism recovery. While unconventional for a rural interchange redevelopment, the funding aligned in an unexpected way with the long-term vision for Marshall Junction. PTRPC's then-Executive Director, Norman Lucas, recognized the connection immediately.

Lucas had been thinking about the interchange's potential for years. When the EDA tourism program materialized, he did not wait for a formal process to take shape locally. He pitched the concept directly to EDA staff at a national conference and to Saline County commissioners simultaneously. The strategy was deliberate: use a visitor center funded through EDA tourism dollars as the catalyst that would justify the wastewater infrastructure the entire interchange needed to grow.



Chris Hess, who took over as Executive Director in 2024 and carried the project through its implementation phases, describes the logic that drove it: “It was all about the quirkiness of stacking the funding...finding that exact fit for that exact kind of rare funding that occurred. We had to start somewhere and we had to be creative. Knowing that we wanted development at that junction, we knew it was going to need a wastewater treatment plant. That was going to be the key to getting the rest of the investment to the region.”

At the same time, PTRPC worked a parallel strategy to secure infrastructure funding. Working with Saline County and Missouri’s congressional delegation, the organization helped position the wastewater component for direct federal support. That effort paid off: U.S. Senator Roy Blunt secured \$2 million in American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funding via the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) specifically for the wastewater treatment system. The project was further facilitated when EPA incorporated EDA’s National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) determination into its own environmental review and reporting requirements for the wastewater project.

Combining EDA and EPA funding on a single project is rare and technically demanding, requiring precise cost allocation, compliance tracking, and interagency coordination. In the end, the combined funding strategy allowed the visitor center and wastewater treatment facility to move forward at the same time, giving Marshall Junction both a public-facing destination and the core infrastructure needed for future development.

PTRPC was responsible for assembling and managing nearly every component of this funding structure. From grant writing and amendment requests to compliance documentation, engineering scope review, and contract oversight, the organization was, as Hess describes it, the engine room of the entire grant process. “We did everything but hit the submit button. We wrote the grant, all the request letters for time extensions, dealt with the engineering service, and reviewed contracts before they went to EDA and EPA.”



Managing the layered federal structure added ongoing complexity. Because EDA and EPA funding were interwoven across the same infrastructure components, every reimbursement required direct coordination with both agencies. Hess was candid about how demanding the process had been: “For almost every reimbursement, it requires a phone call with a liaison at EDA and EPA to make sure they are aware of who is getting what bill.”

Additionally, Lucas noted how “PTRPC helped the Saline County commissioners reach agreement with a local landowner to provide acreage for the tourism center. The same landowner extended the offer by agreeing to convert his surrounding land to prairie restoration area for wildlife habitat and walking trails.” PTRPC also coordinated and staffed the federally required public meetings throughout the project, ensuring at least two staff members were present at each one to answer technical questions and catch procedural details, a missing signature, an incomplete meeting record, or anything else before they could trigger delays.

Expanding the Vision: From County Project to Regional Story

As the EDA tourism application took shape, PTRPC leadership engaged tourism stakeholders across the region, asking what they wanted visitors to experience, what the region’s strengths were, and how a single point along I-70 could connect travelers to a much wider network of destinations. More than twenty stakeholders ultimately participated in those conversations. Lucas described how that outreach grew into something larger than anyone initially anticipated: “As interest arose in making use of the new EDA program supporting tourism, PTRPC staff contacted the regional tourism stakeholders to learn how they might become involved in marketing their regional tourist attractions through a tourism center along I-70 in Saline County. As the list of supportive tourism stakeholders grew, so did support in Saline County for a prospective tourism welcoming center.”

The visitor center that emerged from those conversations would not merely give travelers a place to use the restroom and check a map. It would serve as the front door for the entire region, connecting visitors to Arrow Rock, a National Historic Landmark and living museum of the Santa Fe Trail era; Pennytown, founded



by formerly enslaved Joe Penny in 1871; the Nicholas-Beazley Aviation Museum; Sweet Springs Motorsports Complex; Jim the Wonder Dog's storied gravesite; the Missouri 340 canoe race; and more cultural, historical, and natural attractions. This visitor center not only would serve as a destination for Marshall Junction but as a beacon for the entire county and region.

Keeping it Alive: Administration, Advocacy, and Staying at the Table

Securing the funding was only the beginning. Over the years it took to move the project from concept to construction, PTRPC had to manage something harder than any single grant application: continuity. The project spanned multiple changes in county commission leadership. Each new commissioner came in with different priorities and varying levels of familiarity with a complex, multi-year federal project already in progress. At each transition, there was a genuine risk that institutional knowledge could be lost and momentum could stall. PTRPC made it a priority to bring every new commissioner up to speed.

As Hess explained, "Keeping that drive, that motivation for it, has been a big role of the RPC, understanding that this is a rare opportunity, not something you want to just let slip through your fingers. The commissioners at first are a different set of commissioners than started the project to begin with. So when they had a changeover, we had to play the role of getting them up to speed, making sure they understood the project and why it was important and really needed to continue."



At the federal level, personnel changes at both EDA and EPA required PTRPC to continually rebuild relationships and re-establish project alignment with new agency staff. Throughout these transitions, PTRPC remained the consistent point of contact, maintaining communication and ensuring continuity across agencies, funding streams, and project phases. The organization also provided continuity through its own internal leadership

At the federal level, personnel transitioned from Norman Lucas to Chris Hess. During that period, Hess assumed responsibility for the most complex administrative functions, dual-source reimbursement management, contract compliance, and federal reporting, while building on the relationships and funding structures already in place.

A Junction Coming to Life

Designed as both a functional rest stop and a regional gateway, the completed visitor center includes modern traveler amenities, a staffed welcome desk, rotating exhibits featuring local history and culture, and an art wall showcasing regional identity. Outside, walking trails wind through native prairie grass, reinforcing the site's transformation from overlooked interchange to intentional destination.



But the visitor center is just the most visible piece of what is happening at Marshall Junction. All of the infrastructure PTRPC helped fund and coordinate has already unlocked private investment and development interest across the site:

- Love's Travel Stops is planning a full-service travel center, including fuel, showers, food service, and a dog park. A Transportation Development District has been approved to support infrastructure financing.
- Phillips 66 is investing in station upgrades and expanded diesel capacity in anticipation of increased traffic.
- Pyro City is expanding its retail footprint to include additional food and convenience offerings, helping address long-standing gaps in nearby services.
- Hotel development discussions are underway, and industrial recruitment efforts are actively targeting the site.
- Originally designed to serve only the southeast quadrant of the interchange, the wastewater system was later extended to the northwest quadrant, allowing the project to reach further than initially planned without additional federal appropriations.

"The project is slowly coming to fruition," says Hess. "The idea of using a visitor center to leverage funding for a wastewater treatment system, to get a collection system put in so it can all work – it is starting to actually show up." Together, these investments are steadily reshaping Marshall Junction from a pass-through corridor into a regional hub for travel, commerce, and tourism.

Conclusion: A Reason to Stop

The Saline County Visitor Center is, at first glance, a modest project, a welcoming building at a rural highway interchange in Missouri. But look closer, and it reflects something far

more instructive: a community that recognized the value of its geography, invested deliberately in foundational infrastructure, and used a well-placed public anchor to catalyze broader private development. For rural communities watching thousands of vehicles pass through every day without stopping, the instinct is often to wait for a major employer, a large retailer, or some outside force to change the equation. Saline County took a different approach. It built the conditions for investment first, created a visible signal of readiness, and the private sector followed. Love's, Phillips 66, and others did not come to Marshall Junction by coincidence. They came because the infrastructure was there, and because a public investment had already made a credible bet on the place.

Throughout that process, PTRPC served as the connective tissue, holding the project together across funding streams, leadership changes, and years of administration. Its role ensured continuity in both vision and execution as the project moved from concept to reality.

As Marshall Junction continues to evolve, it offers a replicable lesson for other regions: tourism, infrastructure, and economic development are not separate tracks, but interdependent systems. A community's greatest asset is often not a single large investment, but the strategic capacity to assemble the conditions that make investment possible, and the willingness to give travelers a reason to slow down, stop, and stay awhile.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1. Build Trust Through Physical Presence.** PTRPC's leadership built the relationships behind this project through consistent in-person engagement. Rather than relying on email or voicemail, former Executive Director Norman Lucas prioritized being physically present at conferences, in legislative offices, and in rooms where funding and policy decisions were being made. That approach created familiarity and trust that written correspondence cannot replicate. A recognizable face, a handshake, and repeated engagement made it possible to communicate complex project needs in a way that a few paragraphs on a page never could.
- 2. Maintain Open, Continuous Communication with Funding Partners.** Large, multi-agency projects require constant coordination. PTRPC emphasized direct, ongoing communication with state and federal partners rather than relying on formal correspondence alone, which meant picking up the phone, having real-time conversations, and staying closely aligned with agency staff who could respond quickly when project conditions shifted. This ensured continuing through changes in county leadership, shifts in federal agency personnel, and diversions from the original project. The Marshall Junction project changed multiple times over its lifespan. That ongoing dialogue ensured adjustments could be made without losing momentum.
- 3. Sequence Infrastructure Strategically.** Marshall Junction's success depended on the order of investment. Land acquisition, water, road access, and wastewater infrastructure were developed in a deliberate sequence that made future private investment possible. The visitor center served as the visible anchor, but its deeper purpose was to justify and catalyze the infrastructure behind it. PTRPC's role was not simply to assemble projects, but to ensure each component enabled the next. That sequencing made the overall strategy coherent and defensible to funders and partners.
- 4. Public investments encourage growth.** By building infrastructure and advancing the visitor center, Saline County signaled to the private sector that Marshall Junction was serious about development and ready for investment. Love's committed to the site, followed by upgrades at Phillips 66, expansion at Pyro City, and new hotel discussions. Credible public investment can reduce risk for private developers and create momentum that attracts additional businesses.
- 5. Pass-through traffic is an underused economic asset.** Thousands of vehicles travel I-70 and U.S. 65 through Saline County each day, and for years most kept going. Even small increases in stopover rates can translate into local spending, business growth, and return visits. Capturing a fraction of existing traffic can generate meaningful economic activity without requiring entirely new demand.
- 6. Tourism is an economic development strategy, not a consolation prize.** Too often, tourism is treated as secondary to "real" economic development. Saline County's approach challenges that assumption. Thoughtfully placed tourism infrastructure can support broader economic momentum by telling a community's story, organizing its assets, and giving travelers a reason to stop. The visitor center gives Saline County a front door and a way to present itself on its own terms.

This case study was written by NADO Research Foundation Graduate Fellow Ethan Simon. Special appreciation is extended to Chris Hess and Norman Lucas for their time, expertise, and valuable perspectives that informed this work.

Photos in the case study are courtesy of Chris Hess, Pioneer Trails Regional Commission (cover photo and construction photos) and Sarah Gray, Marshall Democrats-News (visitor center grand opening photos).



This resource is offered through the Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP), managed by the NADO Research Foundation to build the capacity of the national network of EDDs. To learn more, visit: www.nado.org/EDDCoP. The EDD CoP is made possible through an award from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (ED22HDQ3070106). The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this resource are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.