



STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS, CAPACITY, AND COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

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Efforts to revitalize rural communities are vital undertakings that require vision, energy, enthusiasm, resources, and persistence to actualize. Often these endeavors can span years, bridging political terms and budget cycles. Identifying individuals and organizations willing to participate in and sustain these efforts to produce the results desired by residents and stakeholders is a significant challenge identified by communities in rural northern California.

Stakeholders regularly stated that most communities in northern California rely on volunteers, overextended city staff, small nonprofits, or chambers of commerce for leadership on many issues. Often these organizations are working with extremely limited resources and possess limited authority to effect change. There is often no single entity with jurisdiction over downtown buildings and real estate that also has the capacity to acquire, remediate, rehabilitate, and repurpose property. Respondents identified stalled or incomplete tools, like the Business Improvement District in Garberville, as examples of ongoing challenges resulting from fragmented leadership. Taken together, these create issues for coordinating property owners, businesses, city officials, support programming, and marketing. The result is revitalization efforts that are episodic rather than structural.

Why It Matters

Fragmented leadership and limited capacity are one of the root structural barriers to downtown revitalization efforts. Even good ideas fail without someone empowered to execute them. Without the structure in place to nurture these efforts, change is unlikely to happen.

Step by Step Actions

Items identified below are for the host or participant community to consider.

- 1. Assess the Network of Partners** – Take note of the organizations and individuals currently participating in any revitalization efforts. Document their participation, what qualities and resources they bring, what limitations they exhibit, and what each party seeks to gain from their participation (their value proposition – what’s in it for them?). With this information in hand, ask ‘who’s missing?’ A partner mapping exercise is recommended as one approach to building an effective cohort of partners. More information on this is available in the full report and [a tool for assessing partners can be found at this link](#).
- 2. Assess the Status of Current or Past Efforts** – Revitalization efforts can be daunting, often leading to sporadic phases of effort. Building a record of what has been

attempted, completed, accomplished, and/or abandoned will help stakeholders understand where to start or pick up activities. Documentation is critical; this will help address perceptions about past efforts and adjust expectations for future approaches.

- 3. Examine Alignment with Current Needs and Goals** – Conditions within communities evolve over time, and the focus of redevelopment activities should be adjusted accordingly. Following the assessment of partners and efforts, adjustments can be made to ensure that current or future activities closely align with identified conditions.
- 4. Initiate or Re-Initiate Efforts Based on Learnings** – With the information and experience gained from assessing partners, efforts, and alignment, meaningful progress toward updated revitalization efforts can begin. There are many options at this point: two possibilities include proceeding with local partners and resources if deemed sufficient; if not, communities could work together in a more regional effort making use of shared resources and joint endeavors.

Additional steps identified below are intended for situations where a community may be too small to sustain an individual revitalization effort but could effectively contribute to and be part of a regional approach. One possibility is a “hub and spoke” model with local coordinators and shared regional support through local and/or regional economic development organizations. Additional details are provided in the full report.

- 5. Identify the Host/Lead Organization of the Hub** – This organization would provide overall administrative and coordination support, including some combination of grant writing, real estate strategy, legal support, financing tools, and data support – essentially backbone support. Potential hosts could include a regional development organization or a regional non-profit organization. The hub organization could have staff dedicated to this effort based on funding availability.
- 6. Identify Larger Anchors as Regional Leaders** – Identified regional anchors could pilot stronger program tools (property acquisition programs, revolving loan funds, development partnerships), provide “proof of concept” models, and mentor smaller communities. Communities like Eureka and Oroville may be appropriate as regional anchors.
- 7. Identify Mid-size Communities as Operational Hubs** – Mid-size operational hubs could maintain their own active downtown programs, leading business recruitment and retention, piloting vacant property registries and small incentive programs, while serving as connectors between rural and anchor communities. Corning and Live Oak might be appropriate as mid-sized operational hubs.



8. Identify Small Communities as Tactical Strategy Hubs – Smaller communities (Wheatland, Weaverville, Alturas, and Garberville) could focus on a few simple but high impact activities. This could include identifying a small number of priority buildings in the downtown focus area for additional study, as well as short term activation (popups, food events, art), ownership guidance programming, and strategic reuse training. The smallest communities are likely to benefit from managing only the most visible properties.

According to Cheryal Hills, Executive Director of Region Five Development Commission, “consider the foundation of good downtown revitalization FIRST... get your social and political capital established. Start convening people... ask for partners to take on new roles like hosting quarterly property owner, business owners AND elected officials togetheryou’d be surprised how well this works.”

For these eight communities and other small, rural communities in California, the solution is not to build eight separate systems; it’s to build:

A shared regional backbone + simple local leadership + focused property action.

That combination is what turns fragmentation into coordination, limited capacity into shared strength, and episodic wins into sustained revitalization.

Who to Involve

As described above, the cast of participants is likely to evolve as assessment efforts progress. A general initial configuration is offered here.

- City/town manager or planner
- Regional development organization (RPA, COG, EDD, etc.)
- Local banker/lender
- Property owners
- Business owners/operators
- Contractor or developer
- Nonprofit representative
- Chamber of Commerce
- Main Street organization
- Community/family foundations
- Interested stakeholders and residents



Potential Timeline

Phase 1 - Complete the assessment of partner network and assessment of current/past revitalization efforts. Examine the alignment of efforts against the goals and expectations of the community and the various stakeholders. Communicate with new partners that will be initiated into the effort and educate all parties on the objectives, goals, partners, and resources engaged in the revitalization effort.

Phase 2 - Following the re-establishment of the partner network and enjoining new organizations and resources, begin incremental programming as determined. This is likely to include contacting all impacted property owners, beginning short-term pop-up events including window activations, as well as open space tours and other informational activities. If feasible, launch small incentive and support programs like mini-grants, permitting improvements, and other items under local control.

Phase 3 - In the scenario where a regional model is appropriate, this may be the earliest point at which it could be initiated. This would provide ample opportunity for individual communities to assess their status and gauge participation. At this point, the roles and responsibilities could be defined and distributed/assigned appropriately.

If continuing the individual community approach, at this phase funding programs could be deployed, and key properties could be advanced for additional study or acquisition.

Costs

Building the organizational capacity needed to advance downtown revitalization requires more than a single funding source. Communities should pursue a capital stack that combines local government contributions, public grants, private and philanthropic investment, and, over time, earned revenue streams to create a sustainable funding model for staffing, technical assistance, project development, and regional coordination. By layering these resources, communities can reduce reliance on any one source, leverage additional investment, and establish the long-term capacity needed to move projects from planning to implementation. In a regional hub model, this approach allows participating communities to share costs while benefiting from dedicated expertise, stronger grant competitiveness, and a coordinated strategy that can attract larger public and private investments over time.



In the scenario where an individual community is supporting a solo effort not tied to a larger regional hub, the costs are minimal. Most of the work identified can be undertaken by municipal staff, volunteers, or representatives from regional organizations. In some instances, it has proven useful to contract with an outside facilitator to guide the historical fact-finding and debriefing of past efforts (regardless of success or status).

In the regional hub scenario, total costs could be higher, with smaller amounts required from participating communities. While these costs are likely to be higher, the overall level of involvement and service will be correspondingly higher.

To fund a Regional Support Hub, here are some ideas:

A. Core Funding (Base Operations)

Core funding would include 1-2 staff positions regionally.

- Local government contributions - Each city contributes small annual amount, scaled by population (e.g., \$5k-\$25k/year)
- EDD/COG funding - Reallocate or expand economic development funds
- Membership model - Chambers, nonprofits contribute small dues

B. Public Grants (Primary Growth Funding)

These fund programs + expansion. Focus on:

- CA Department of Housing & Community Development (HCD)
- CA Economic Development / Community Revitalization programs
- Federal:
 - » EDA (Economic Development Administration)
 - » USDA Rural Development
 - » CDBG (Community Development Block Grants)

Use hub as grant aggregator: One application --> multiple towns benefit

C. Private & Philanthropic Funding

Especially important in Northern California are regional foundations, community foundations, Bank CRA (Community Reinvestment Act) funding, and corporate sponsors (utilities, agriculture, timber, healthcare).

Private and philanthropic investment plays a critical role in advancing downtown initiatives by supplementing limited public resources and helping catalyze projects



that strengthen the downtown's vitality. These partnerships not only expand the resources available to implement community-driven improvements but also demonstrate confidence in downtown's future and help bring transformative ideas to life

D. Earned Revenue (Longer-Term)

Once established, the hub can generate income through grant administration fees, development consulting, loan fund interest, and property transactions where applicable.

Case Study: Wallowa County

The Wallowa County Rural Regional Main Street (WCRRMS) program is a collaborative effort that supports multiple small rural towns. Rather than requiring each town to maintain a traditional Main Street program, WCRRMS allows for shared administration, coordination, technical support, training and resources through the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce as the hub. Each community has a local Main Street committee responsible for projects outlined in its strategic plan and an annual work plan.

Benefits to rural communities include access to regional staff to support local projects and help address shared needs across the region; opportunities for collaboration with neighboring towns on shared programming, resources, and common interests (regional calendar, regional marketing/promotion, etc.), grant writing support and grant management assistance; sharing of best practices, resources and support with neighboring communities; access to Main Street specific resources grants, learning opportunities and publications; support with measuring progress and sharing outcomes; and development of a strategic action plan and shared vision for downtown.



Case Study: Eastern Kentucky

In Hazard, Kentucky, there is a strong city-county partnership that has aligned local leaders around a shared vision for downtown revitalization. Their collaboration has included shared resources, such as a downtown coordinator, and joint redevelopment efforts that have helped transform Main Street. From 2018 to 2024, the area welcomed 73 new businesses, supported by two major adaptive-reuse projects: the former Grand Hotel site, now an outdoor community gathering space, and the old bus station, which has been converted into ArtStation.

In Manchester, the organization “1 Clay County” has brought together leaders from multiple sectors to advance community development beyond the scope of local government. The group has pursued a strategy that combines downtown improvements with river access, outdoor recreation, and tourism development, helping connect the town to statewide attractions such as the Kentucky Bourbon Trail and Kentucky Coffee Trail. Both communities emphasized that a strong civic identity, cross-sector collaboration, and active public participation are essential for changing perceptions and driving long-term revitalization.