

2018 TOP RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES AWARD WINNERS



Advance Shullsburg

Advance Shullsburg, Inc. and its partner organizations are deserving candidates for recognition as a 2017 Top Rural Development Initiative. With a population of 1200 residents, the rural community has developed a strategic, effective and sustainable approach to community revitalization. These efforts have been led by a cross section of community leaders and funded by individuals and businesses with a common goal of a healthy community.



Since 2015, Advance Shullsburg, Inc. has moved from a community wide planning effort to a driver of implementation initiatives. It has been at the forefront of a series of initiatives that have stimulated and facilitated community based economic growth, reinvigorated the Historic Water Street Business District, increased destination tourism, and encouraged new residential development and rehabilitation of existing residential properties.

Through a collaborative process with local, regional and State organizations including the City of Shullsburg, the Shullsburg Community Development Corporation, Wisconsin Main Street Program, Wisconsin Department of Tourism, Southwest Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, and others, Advance Shullsburg, Inc. has proven to be an effective agent for change and growth in Shullsburg.

The steps taken and the results seen provide a replicable model for small communities across the State of Wisconsin; but will require the same high levels of community engagement, personal commitment, leadership, cooperation, collaboration, and private sector investment demonstrated in Shullsburg. It is important each community engages a diverse base of residents, businesses and community leaders to thoughtfully evaluate community challenges and opportunities, prioritize objectives, leverage appropriate partners and resources in implementation efforts, and establish a sustainable organizational infrastructure to have long-term impacts.



Florence County PSC State Broadband Expansion Grant

Florence County is one of the smallest counties geographically in Wisconsin, yet its eight outlying townships are of the most sparsely populated in all of Wisconsin. The county covers nearly 500 square miles; nearly one-third of the county is comprised of National Forest. Florence County is also unique, in that the county is only one of two that is served by one countywide school district. Three of Florence County's underserved outlying townships, Fern, Fence and Long Lake will now have reliable, high-speed broadband service. This new service will positively impact more than 1,000 households, nearly 60 school aged children, numerous family-owned businesses and benefit emergency responders that otherwise did not have reliable, high-speed broadband service.



Utilizing two existing towers, and one new tower, broadband service will now bring coverage to nearly one-third of Florence County that was previously underserved, specifically better servicing the areas of south-central and western Florence County. Soon, our school buses may have wireless, broadband capability for our students. With more than one-half our nearly 400 students traveling 600 miles daily via 8 bus routes, high-speed broadband capability will provide students with the opportunity to work on their studies during their travels to and from school, in addition to having service at home that they otherwise do not have.

The PSC Broadband Grant application required a 50/50 match of the total project expenses. Serving these three remote areas of Florence County equated to a \$133,462 project, therefore requiring in excess of \$65,000 in match funds. Like many rural areas, resources and partners within Florence County could only contribute so much - specifically in that Florence County is one of the poorest counties in all of Wisconsin based upon household incomes. The grant committee, led by Florence County Economic Development Director, Wendy Gehlhoff, corresponded and reached out to nearly every agency within Florence County, even reaching beyond the borders of Florence County for support.

Together with Florence County agencies and partners, and external partners that support education and business services to Florence County, 18 different entities contributed \$66,750 via a combination of cash and in-kind match to make submission of the grant application a reality, and ultimately the awarding of the desired grant funds to Florence County. Four of the contributors came from two neighboring counties (Marinette and Dickinson County, MI), in addition to Northeast Wisconsin Technical College and Northwood's Connect.

The Florence County PSC Broadband Grant effort exemplifies for other rural communities that via committed leadership and a network of shareholders, what seems to be an insurmountable challenge can be overcome. Our collective goals and a vision to make rural Wisconsin a better place to live, work and recreate can be achieved. Rural partners and supporters, even beyond defined boundaries, do support and appreciate our endeavors in the interest of growing rural commerce. Additionally, efforts such as broadband expansion will better provide for our youth and their future opportunities – future opportunities that can take place right in their own backyard, in this case, via reliable, high-speed broadband.



Southwest Partners

Southwest Partners, Inc. is a citizen driven community building organization started in 2011. The mission of SWP is: to create a healthy forward-thinking culture for attracting, retaining and nurturing people and their dreams for our region.

The first initiative of SWP was the Career Education Cooperative (CEC) which brought together five public school districts, one private school, the University of Wisconsin-Richland, Southwest Technical College along with 25 business partners and many committed community members.



The emphasis is to place high school juniors and seniors in youth apprenticeships with local businesses so a relationship can be fostered between the student and the business. This tends to create relational attraction that encourages young people to return to work in their home communities. The students also can take 7-9 college credits during the one year program at UW-Richland or Southwest Tech, without cost, that will give them a head start on post secondary education. The first year had 11 students participate. The second year 23 students were in the program and the third year there are 40 students signed up. The CEC was awarded the rural education innovation award by the DPI. The effort continues to grow.

Website: careereducationcoop.com

The second initiative of SWP was the Pine River Corridor development, known as Pine River Trails and Silent Sports. The community partnered with the City of Richland Center, private businesses, and passionate individuals to create an exceptional recreational opportunity for canoeing and kayaking on the Pine River by purchasing and installing handicap accessible ports along the river, clearing the river, creating walking and biking trails, mountain biking trails, snowshoe and skiing trails and campsites. This community effort increased tourism significantly and created opportunities for local families and individuals to enjoy the spectacular local recreational opportunities. See Facebook Pine River Trails.

SWP also created the Community Prosperity Alliance organization which is a public/private partnership for economic development. Partners include the City of Richland Center, Richland County Government, City Utilities, Richland Electric Cooperative, Prosperity Southwest, Southwest Regional Planning Commission, The Richland Hospital, and many other businesses and individuals. This non-traditional economic development entity that is regional in scope and includes extensive citizen involvement is creating an atmosphere of optimism and opportunity in an area that was floundering and dying. The result is new business and entrepreneurs and expansion of existing businesses.

See: communityprosperityalliance.com or Facebook

SWP has created a bike friendly community that was a partnership with the City of Richland Center. Also SWP partnered with Schmitt Woodland Hills to create the "cycling without aging" trishaw for the elderly community.

SWP is presently creating the "safe routes" initiative that will provide walking and bike trails to schools that are outside the city limits of Richland Center. This effort will eventual extend to businesses so people can walk or bike instead of driving.

SWP partnered with the Park and Rec. department of Richland Center, the Richland Center City Council and many businesses to create a new aquatic center. This \$5 mil. project has SWP raising \$2 mil. in the community with the City contributing the other \$3 mil. that will be needed to replace the aged and non-functional city swimming pool with a state of the art aquatic center.

SWP has enlisted the assistance and partnership of over 300 local people along with collaboration with City, County, Regional and statewide legislators to assist with the initiatives listed above and several that are in the works. SWP is a rural community citizen driven effort based on building broad and deep relationships with community members that creates trust and cooperation in many local communities. The scope of SWP is primarily Richland County but include "collar communities that are in Grant, Vernon, Sauk, Crawford, and Iowa Counties. The model can be reproduced in any community that has passionate people willing to volunteer their time and efforts to make their communities something special.