

Community Engagement in Economic Development Priorities

Prepared by Center for Economic Development and Community Resilience, the Voinovich School of
Leadership and Public Service

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Introduction

The research team conducted interviews and focus groups with stakeholders in Adams County to determine the economic development concerns, priorities, and needs for the county. Additionally, the research team held a meeting in October 2019 to share the findings of the SWOT analysis and receive feedback from the community. The meeting was used to identify the priorities for use in developing the overall economic development plan. The community identified utility and infrastructure improvements, increased access to healthcare, and workforce development as the highest priorities.

Additionally, the team supported the creation of the Adams County Economic Development Task Force. With help from the local economic developer, the team identified key business owners and community leaders in Adams County to invite to join the task. The taskforce began meeting in May of 2021. The first meeting provided an opportunity for the team to provide an update on the project and receive feedback on the project. Additionally, the task force supports the local economic development organization's goals in Adams County. The task force adopted the following mission statement:

“The mission of the Adams County Economic Development Task Force is to provide leadership and support in the community to enhance economic opportunity, attract and sustain businesses, and promote business-friendly practice.”

Likewise, the task force identified three goals to focus on:

1. Create classes to help people start business or entrepreneurship in Adams County
2. Focus on improving/preserving the character of main streets in Adams County
3. Increase foot traffic of existing occupants on main streets.

Our research team completed two distinct activities to support task three: Community Engagement in Economic Development Priorities. The first was to conduct interviews with members of the Adams County community to gauge general attitudes about the economic state of the county. The second was to hold a public meeting to present aggregated data from the economic scan and collect attitudes regarding the economic priorities of Adams County moving forward.

While completing the economic development scan of Adams County, members of the Voinovich School's research team conducted semi-structured, in-person and phone interviews with members of the community to support the efforts of the Community Engagement in Economic Development Priorities project. Those interviewed includes high school students, directors of economic development agencies, public service employees, mayors, county commissioners, private-sector representatives, not-for-profit organization representatives, and various other community leaders. A list of stakeholders was developed through research and the input of a local source that was knowledgeable about the individuals present in Adams County who possessed a variety of backgrounds and understandings of the economic development initiatives and challenges facing Adams County. As a result of this, the sample taken from the population of Adams County residents was not random but chosen based on a set of criteria.

Additionally, on Tuesday, October 29, 2019, members of Ohio University's research team, in collaboration with the leadership of Adams County, held an informational meeting to gather the input of residents of Adams County to formulate an economic strategic plan for Adams County. At this public

meeting, the team presented findings from the economic scan to the citizens and leaders of Adams County. Furthermore, the team elicited the priorities of the residents and answered questions raised about the project. The presentation was done to encourage public buy-in to economic development efforts and to encourage public officials to act in the best interest of the growth of Adams County.

Resident Interviews

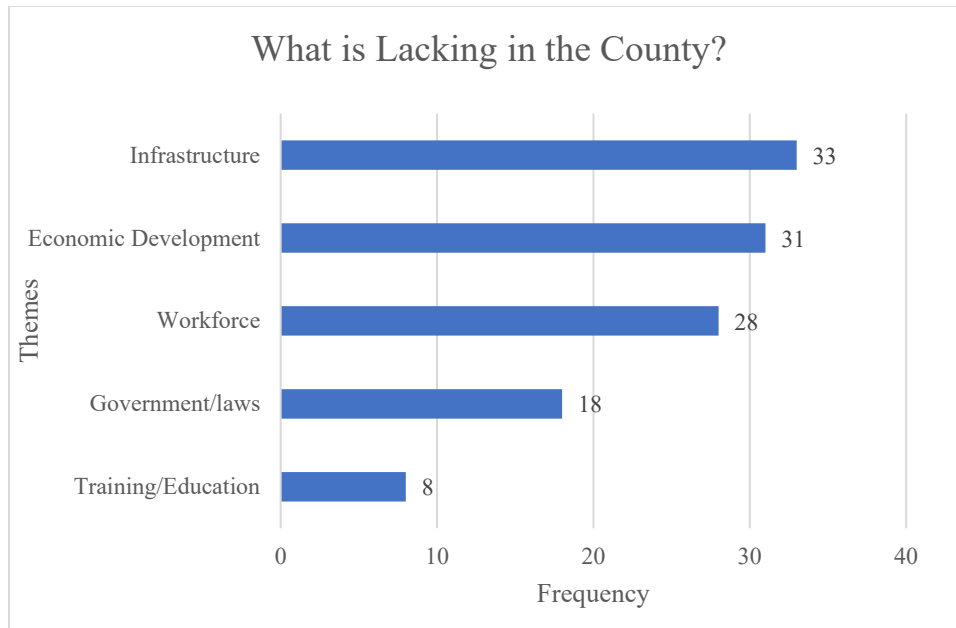
The interview process involved conducting nine in-person or phone interviews with community leaders and stakeholders, which ranged from 30 minutes to one hour in length. The research team conducted interviews with representatives from local economic development agencies, the public sector, the private sector, and not-for-profit sectors to gather general feelings about the current and future economic state of Adams County. The research team also held focus groups with students from the Ohio Valley Career and Technical Center, West Union High School, North Adams High School, and Peebles High School, at a duration of 45 minutes to one hour each.

Community Leaders and Stakeholders

From the interviews with community leaders and stakeholders, the research team was able to categorize responses into three classifications. The categories were 'what is lacking in the county', 'what the county has to offer', and 'what opportunities the interviewees suggest to explore'.

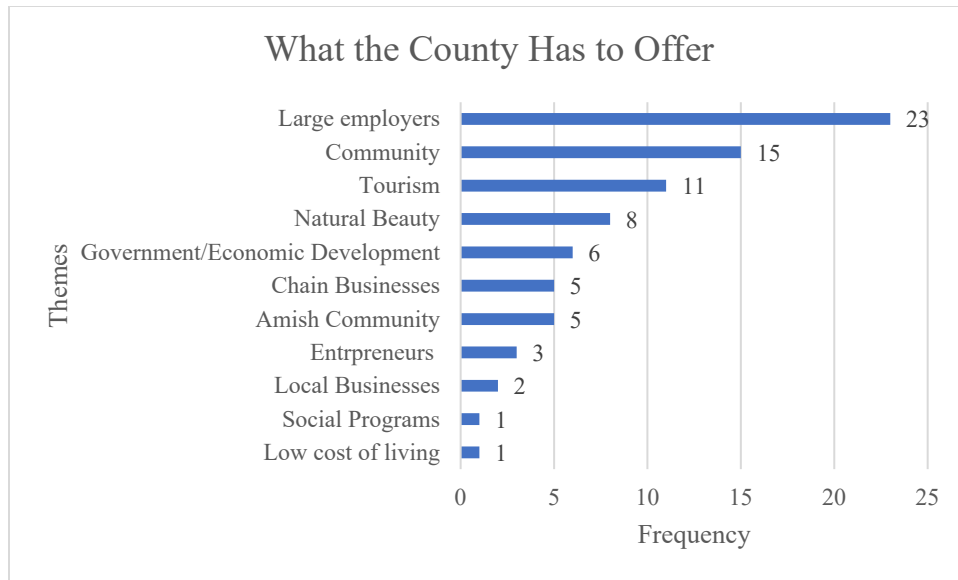
In the first category, interviewees identified infrastructure, economic development, and workforce needs as the most critical problems facing Adams County. Interviewees identified the lack of public transportation, daycare, industrial buildings, broadband internet access, adequate housing, hotels and other amenities for entertainment purposes, certain healthcare services, and new families and new residents as problematic for the county. In terms of economic development needs, interviewees identified a lack of consensus and teamwork on efforts, a lack of funding for projects, the lack of support for current industry/businesses, Adams County's inability to attract and retain new businesses, the lack of adequate social programs, the prevalence of generational poverty and governmental dependence as a problem, the lack of a sense of urgency to economically develop, and the lack of funding and resources for economic development. In the realm of workforce needs in Adams County, interviewees mentioned the need for an increase in the skilled labor force, living-wage employment, more manufacturing jobs, current and potential employers, and remediation following the losses of jobs in the county. Figure 1 shows the frequency with which each theme was mentioned during the interviews.

Figure 1: Community Leader and Stakeholder Interviews: What is lacking in Adams County?



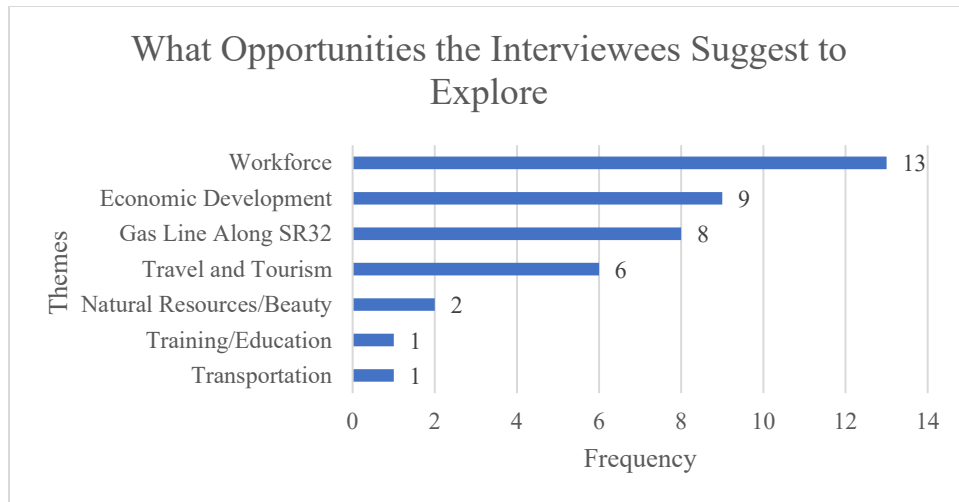
Secondly, the interviewees overwhelmingly identified the presence of large employers, the strength of the community, and the tourism industry present as the primary assets of Adams County. In terms of large employers as a strength in the county, the interviewees referred to the GE Peebles Testing Facility, the Adams County Regional Medical Center, Columbus Industries, 1st State Bank, and the Cantrell Refinery as asset firms. Concerning the strength of the community, the interviewees referred to a variety of activities that highlight the depth of the community. They identified the support for development from the community, the government, local organizations, the hard-working ethics of the members of the community, and the religious community as assets to the county. Lastly, the tourism industry is an essential aspect of the economic vitality of Adams County. The Serpent Mound, the Amish Community, the natural beauty of the county, the Ohio River, and the wood industry—in terms of entertainment and timber usage—were all identified as assets to the tourism attractiveness of the county. Figure 2 shows the frequency with which each theme was mentioned during the interviews.

Figure 2: Community Leader and Stakeholder Interviews: What Adams County has to offer?



Lastly, the interviewees identified the need for exploration into workforce opportunities, economic development, and the inclusion of a gas line along State Route 32 as vital needs for Adams County. In terms of workforce opportunities, the interviewees would like to see investment in training programs, soft skills development, support for small businesses, support for current and potential employers, the need for a new large employer, the need to retrain dislocated workers, an increase in small employers, and the want for a second GE testing site in the region. The interviewees also identified the need to explore opportunities in economic development such as bottom-up development, an increase in small businesses, a regional sewer plant, an industrial park located on State Route 32, an increase in small business grants and loans, and the development of a port on the Ohio River—such as a rehabilitation of the DP&L locations. The need for a natural gas line is vital because for the county to develop manufacturing centers and industrial parks and then attract companies to these developments, natural gas needs to be a possibility. The introduction of the gas line will assist the county in building infrastructure, which will then attract essential companies. Figure 3 shows the frequency with which each theme was mentioned during the interviews.

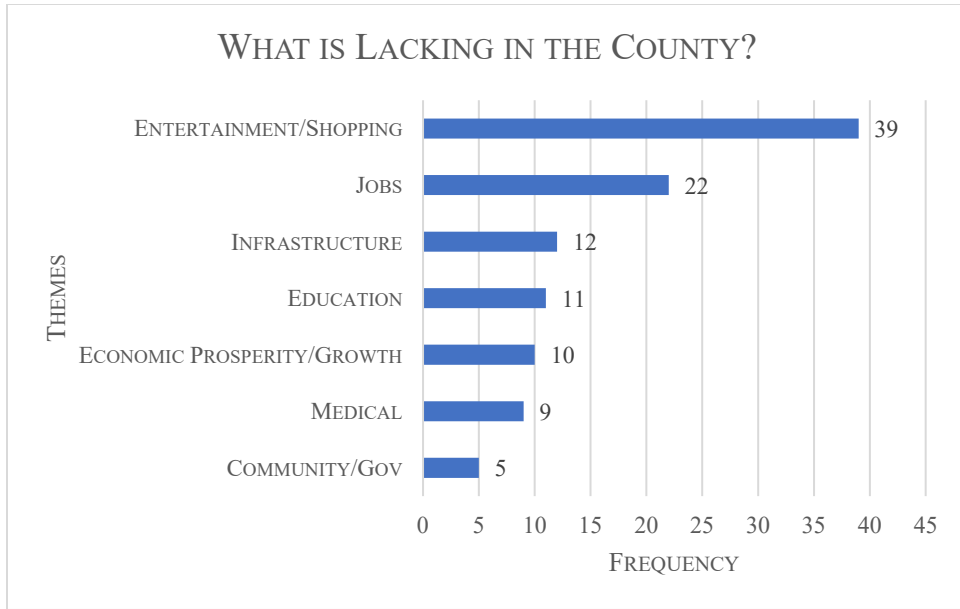
Figure 3: Community Leader and Stakeholder Interviews: What opportunities should be explored?



Adams County Youth

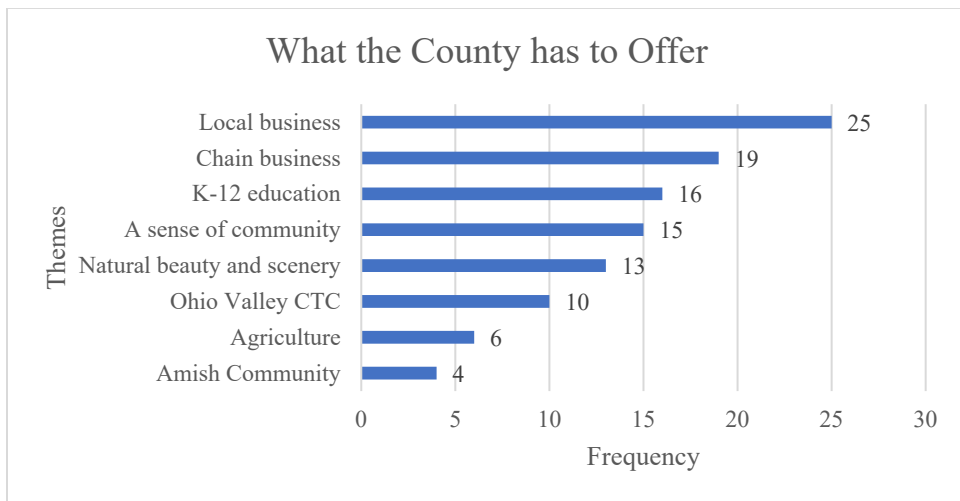
The high school students that the research team interviewed identified a multitude of underpinning problems, county offerings, and existing opportunities for Adams County. The students primarily identified the lack of sufficient entertainment and shopping opportunities, the lack of employment options, and the lack of adequate infrastructure as serious problems facing the economic stability of Adams County. In terms of infrastructure, the students identified the deteriorated state of the roadways in the county, the lack of access to broadband internet services, the lack of access to public transportation, and the lack of sufficient cellular reception as problems with infrastructure present in Adams County. Students expressed the desire for investment in the entertainment industry, as well. This investment includes attracting restaurants to the area, which is hindered by current alcohol laws, which discourage sit-down style restaurants from moving into the region. Likewise, students would like to see movie theaters, YMCAs, bowling alleys, and other entertainment offerings in the county. Furthermore, students expressed an interest in local grocery stores and clothing stores. Figure 4 shows the frequency with which each theme was mentioned during the interviews.

Figure 4: Student Focus Groups: What is lacking in Adams County?



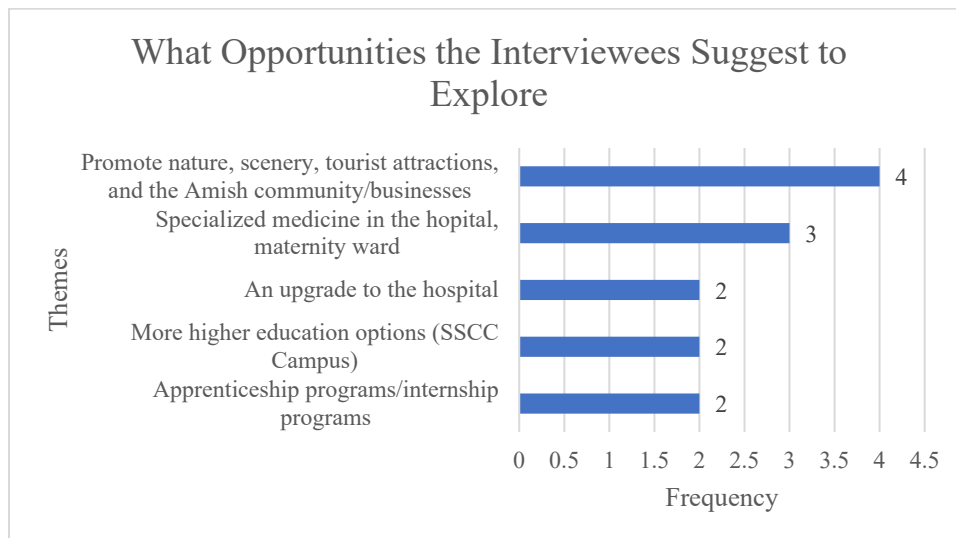
However, the students also identified the presence of local businesses, chain businesses, and the strength of the relationship of the community as legitimate offerings that Adams County possesses. In times of crisis, the community is fast to react and assist its members, and community members take great pride in supporting a reciprocal relationship with local businesses. Additionally, students recognized their school systems with access to college courses and the certificate programs at the career and technical center as assets. Figure 5 shows the frequency with which each theme was mentioned during the interviews.

Figure 5: Student Focus groups: What Adams County has to offer?



Lastly, the youth of Adams County believe that local leaders should explore the implementation of a variety of beneficial programming. The introduction of apprenticeship and internship programs for high school students would allow the youth of the county to explore career options earlier, which would ultimately lead to a variety of desirable outcomes on the labor market of Adams County. High school students in Adams County also expressed the desire to see the inclusion of a Southern State Community College branch campus located in West Union to increase higher education access in the county. Additionally, the students identified upgrades to the Adams County Regional Medical Center, such as a maternity ward and increased offering of medical specialists, and improvements to the tourist attractions and natural beauty of Adams County as viable economic improvement opportunities for the county. Figure 6 shows the frequency with which each theme was mentioned during the interviews.

Figure 6: Student Focus Groups: What opportunities should be explored?



Public Meeting

In addition to the interviews conducted with the residents of Adams County, our research team held a public meeting on October 29, 2019, with all those that responded to the meeting invitation through direct invitations to community leaders, chamber businesses, local religious institutions, and other stakeholders identified with help from the Adams County Economic and Community Development office, and through local radio advertisements. Over 25 individuals attended the public meeting, all of which originate from diverse backgrounds, signifying a robust public-private partnership for economic development in the county.

Individuals from governmental organizations such as the Adams County Engineer’s Office, the Adams County Board of DD, Manchester Local Schools, the Adams County Commissioner’s Office, the City of Hillsboro, Scott Township, Ohio Means Jobs-Adams and Brown Counties, and the Adams County Regional Water District attended the meeting. Additionally, individuals from nonprofit organizations such as Adams County Economic Development, The People’s Defender, ACRMC Hospital, and Adams Brown Community Action (ABCAP) were in attendance. Lastly, individuals from the private sector such as Ward Construction, Frontier Fiber, Freestyle Consulting, Levi Hollow Tools LLC, Showboat

Majestic/Precinct/KAMT, Ohio Country Properties Real Estate, and retired pharmacists and RNs. These specialized citizens were able to provide personalized and informal input as to the preferred intended direction of Adams County’s development. The meeting itself, provided the leadership and citizens of Adams County with objective information about the area’s economy and to give feedback about the community’s economic development priorities.

Following the formal presentation of the economic scan data (e.g., age, educational attainment, household income, employment by industry, school enrollments, commuter patterns, etc.), the research team asked members of the meeting three questions: “What opportunities or businesses would you like to see in Adams County?”, “What changes need to occur in Adams County to capitalize on business and job opportunities?”, and “What would you like to maintain or preserve in Adams County?”. The responses to these questions were discussed at the meeting and used to develop a list of potential priorities for Adams County’s economic development efforts. After this list was developed, the team wrote the responses on a series of posters, then gave each attendee four green and one red sticky dot to place next to each of the categories that they felt should or should not be focused. The team explained that the green dots signified something that the attendee thought should be given priority in Adams County. Likewise, the red dots were explained to mean something that the attendee did not think needed to be a priority for Adams County. The detailed results of this exercise are displayed below in Table 1.

Table 1: What priorities should be focused on in Adams County?

Subject/Theme	Number of Green	Number of Red
Natural Gas	9	0
Broadband Access	9	0
Development of the Ohio River/A Floodwall	9	0
Access to Healthcare	8	0
Workforce Development/New Adult Trade School	7	0
Tourism/Marketing/Nature Tourism	6	0
Repurposing the DP&L Plants	6	5
Small Businesses/Entrepreneurs	5	0
Ties to Cincinnati MSA	5	1
Support Current Employers	4	0
Apprenticeship/Internship Programs	4	0
Airport	4	0
Attract New Employers	4	0
Agriculture/Soil Preservation	2	0
The Wood Industry	1	2

In general, the interviewees and members of the meeting are hopeful for the future of Adams County and are confident in its current assets. According to the findings of the meeting, the residents of Adams County would like to see the introduction of a natural gas line along State Route 32 to support the

establishment of a new industrial park and other new construction. A gas line is vital to the county in that large and small companies prefer to use natural gas as it is a cheap energy alternative. The residents of Adams County would also like to see a substantial investment in the increase of broadband internet and cellular reception access within the county. An increase in access to modern technology will allow county residents and businesses to perform on par with other areas and will make the county more attractive to potential companies. Lastly, members of the meeting identified the desire to develop the Ohio River and to build a floodwall as an essential task to the development of Adams County—in terms of business usage, tourist usage, and recreational usage, which could all positively impact the economy of the county. Per the table above, the majority of themes from the meeting involved the need for improvements to the infrastructure of Adams County and the need to attend to employment needs, tourism needs, and economic development needs.

Summary

The Economic Development task force of Adams County identified three goals to prioritize: create classes to help people start businesses or entrepreneurship, focus on improving and preserving the character of main streets, and increase foot traffic of existing occupants on main streets. Once these goals were identified, two major activities were conducted: interviews with members of the Adams County community and a public meeting to present data and collect attitudes regarding the economic scan. Interviewing numerous diverse groups and individuals regarding different aspects of economic development in Adams County was successful.

Community leaders, stakeholders, and students from local schools identified issues within Adams County and then offered numerous solutions. Community leaders and stakeholders primarily saw infrastructure, economic development and workforce lacking in Adams County. However, they also noticed that Adams County has large employers, community, and tourism to offer. Regarding opportunities to explore, community leaders and stakeholders identified workforce, economic development, and the implementation of a gas line along State Route 32.

Students from schools across Adams County identified entertainment and shopping, jobs, and infrastructure as lacking in the county. However, they agreed that local businesses, chain businesses and K-12 education are something that Adams County has to offer. For potential opportunities for Adams County, students identified promoting nature, scenery, tourist attractions, and the Amish community and businesses, implementing specialized medicine, specifically a maternity ward in hospitals, and upgrading hospitals as economic development opportunities in Adams County.

Finally, at the public meeting, the specialized citizens' top three priorities included focusing on natural gas, broadband access, and the development of the Ohio River and a flood wall in Adams County. The wood industry was the only category where more people thought that it should not be prioritized than vice versa. Task three: Community Engagement in Economic Development Priorities was successful in working with diverse groups in the community to understand what they think is lacking, what is offered, and what economic opportunities should be explored in Adams County. Community members have not given up on Adams County and provided quality thoughts and ideas to take steps toward economically developing.