

Internet Solutions for Rural Communities **THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLBOX**

www.ag.uiuc.edu/~lced/toolbox

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The Laboratory for Community and Economic Development (LCED) is using information technologies to open the windows to the university and expand the scope of community development practice. With the support of the Illinois Council on Food and Agricultural Research (C-FAR), a package of online community development tools to enhance local development efforts is presented on the LCED home page.

Traditionally, rural development practitioners have focused on building comparative advantage based on exploiting local resources. In the 21st Century, these strategies have limited success. Today, comparative advantage is not based on the location of resources, capital, or labor, but on the ability of rural people to apply knowledge and technology for creating competitive advantage. The success of rural economies in the 21st Century, then, will depend on the ability of people to exchange information about local, nearby, regional, national and global markets. The Internet and telecommunications technologies provide a new vehicle for long-term economic growth. **The COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLBOX offers an online environment where rural people pursuing community development goals are empowered to make better decisions as they solve problems facing their community now!**

Tools in the COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLBOX include online community surveys to teach the fundamentals of survey design and implementation. The online survey tool includes a databank of questions where users (communities) can build their own survey instrument; it provides guidelines for determining sample size and helps document the results of the survey. The online benchmarking tools can be used to assess organizational strength and social capital in rural communities. It provides users with an immediate score that reflects a degree of community cohesiveness related to community and economic development. The Telecommunications Readiness Inventory provides communities with worksheets as they negotiate the Internet connectivity puzzle. The IKNOW Rural Development provides an interactive forum to explore the "knowledge capital" that exists in the rural development research and practitioner *community of interest* in Illinois. The Illinois Community Network provides an online forum where communities can learn about telecommunications and Internet issues. New programs are continually being developed and added to the toolbox.

All these tools follow the AAAA promise to teach "anyone, anything, at anytime, anywhere". The tools are user (community) driven where the user is interactive with the media; where the user defines the content; and where the user decides how they will work through the online module. These tools allow communities more freedom to pursue development initiatives while operating with the support of the University of Illinois, in a time and place that suits their local needs. In Illinois, the University of Illinois Extension adds value to the following community development practical tools by facilitating the process or by bringing University of Illinois resources closer to the community.

The Objective of the COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLBOX

The tools in the toolbox are designed to build knowledge resources and thereby strengthen community capacity for economic development by creating Internet-based decision-making tools for rural community development initiatives. Rural communities now have the ability to do comprehensive planning and benchmarking without having to wait for technical assistance or incurring the expense of private consultants. Clearly, these tools are important to people pursuing community and economic development initiatives in this new (and different) rural economy.

Who Benefits: For the first time, technical assistance for rural development capacity building is reaching greater audiences. In Illinois, with the help of University of Illinois Extension, the tools in the COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLBOX can be delivered to every community, regardless of population size or financial resources. People accessing these tools can now initiate projects on their timetable receiving just-in-time technical assistance.

The overwhelmingly positive feedback from the many presentations and workshops offered in the state, and nationally suggests that the COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLBOX is on track and provides community leaders with information that allows them to make more knowledgeable decisions related to community and economic development. In addition, hundreds of communities have accessed our online tools in a meaningful way—tracking their activities online, most users benefited from the interactive nature of the tool.

Tools in the COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLBOX are organized into five categories:

- Community Benchmarking
- Community Planning
- Community Surveys
- Illinois Data
- Tourism

Community Benchmarking Tools

Telecommunications Readiness Inventory (TRI):

The Telecommunications Readiness Inventory is an inventory and evaluation diagnostic of the telecommunications infrastructure in a community. There are three components: Part A, the telecommunications Quotient helps communities analyze individual affinity for using telecommunications technology; Part B, the Readiness Inventory, helps the community document local Internet access and evaluate the community presence on the World Wide Web (after completing this survey a benchmark score is calculated for future analysis); and Part C, includes an assessment of telecommunications providers in the community. Attached to the tool are surveys communities can use to measure potential demand for telecommunications locally.

This tool allows communities to understand the complex nature of telecommunications infrastructure and thereby empowers them to better navigate telecommunications community/industry negotiations.

Community Development Capacity Index (CDCI):

Growth and development cannot always be measured by traditional economic indicators. This online survey can be used by communities to measure change in their organizational capacity for community and economic development projects. This instrument is used to create a baseline measure of a community's capacity and to measure how far your community or region has advanced toward meeting local goals over time.

Communities are now empowered to better assess their community development projects via non-traditional indicators. This tool helps to document local community organizational capital. In this capacity, the CDCI presents a valuable process for communities as they apply for competitive grants.

IKNOW Rural Development: Inquiring Knowledge Networks on the Web (IKNOW) is a tool to build a knowledge network linking resources, expertise and interests. The software allows users to conceptually map social and knowledge networks within a *community of interest*. The implication for policy is overwhelming. The IKNOW RURAL DEVELOPMENT can also be used successfully by a project team to evaluate and document internal knowledge networks and linkages to external resources. The software has many potential applications. Used by a project team, an outside evaluation entity can use this tool

to analyze and measure the less tangible outcomes related to community actualization – the building of valuable synergy toward a goal. Is the project team working cohesively? Are new individuals or groups brought into the project thereby enhancing the social and knowledge network of the project team as a whole? Is the project team building new ties to external resources?

The IKNOW RURAL DEVELOPMENT could be used to build a knowledge or skills bank which rural communities, community development foundations or funding agencies could access as they work toward community development goals. The skills bank would inventory the available technical assistance by identifying both individuals with certain knowledge or skill sets and the links of how to connect to those individuals. Providing this type of networked organizational form, one that is not structured vertically (as in past bureaucracies, where individuals had to follow a rigid hierarchy to receive technical assistance) will allow the creation of linkages between people and knowledge to pursue community development goals.

More than 150 rural community development researchers and practitioners logged into the network to help define rural community development issues relevant to rural Illinois and other rural places.

Community Planning Tools

Strategic Planning: Online strategic planning provides community organizations with learning resources related to strategic planning. Local leaders will learn how to organize a committee of diverse stakeholders; create a mission statement for their organization; review the results of previous needs assessments; organize a report of their community's strengths, weaknesses opportunities and threats; and complete worksheets to manage and sort their goals, objectives and strategies. The output of this interactive process is a draft strategic plan that incorporates all of the input the community organization entered during the interactive process.

The Illinois Community Network: A tool to provide telecommunications and Internet information resources to rural communities as they pursue telecommunication related development initiatives. Although still under development, this online tool will document how communities are representing themselves online via their community web sites.

Thumbs Up: Evaluating Community Websites:

Thumbs Up is an evaluation tool designed to help community members find what works and doesn't work in the design and planning stages of their websites. By choosing random community websites the user of this tool gets to view other community's attempts at putting their presence on the Internet. Following the look at the site an evaluation form is presented in a modified "Siskel and Ebert" thumbs up or down format. This fun and straightforward scoring puts some quantitative value on impressions of the website.

Communities have played this game and have learned that to have an effective community web presence, community development principles must be in place.

Community Survey Tools

Conducting a Survey in your Community:

Community surveys allow people to gather information about local attitudes and opinions regarding precisely defined issues, problems or opportunities. This interactive tool can be helpful as citizens set priorities for a community survey, determine sample size, evaluate surveying techniques, and identify questions. This online survey design and implementation instrument has substantially cut down on the average time it takes to implement a community survey. Through University of Illinois Extension, staff can facilitate community meetings as they work through the survey process. Additionally, Extension staff can assist communities in designing the survey instrument, provide advice about sampling, and help in interpreting the results. The Laboratory for Community and Economic Development will facilitate data entry.

Since the development of the online survey tool, more than 200 communities and organizations have used the materials online—more than just hits to the site, this number reflects actual logins. Approximately 35% are from Illinois.

Illinois Data

Illinois Retail Sales Data: Available for every community and county in Illinois from 1990 to 1999. The retail sales data are provided by the Illinois Department of Revenue and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs. The data come from sales tax receipts which are then multiplied by the local tax rate to yield retail sales volumes. The report is categorized by Kind of

