



ST. CLAIR COUNTY RURAL AND SMALL TOWNS SUMMIT

Project Overview

Background and Purpose

The Community Foundation of St Clair County (the Community Foundation) received a Leveraging Resources grant from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, recognizing the assets and relationships the Community Foundation has built across the communities it serves. Serving all municipalities of St. Clair County, Michigan, encompassing 33 incorporated municipalities including cities, townships, and villages, the Community Foundation partnered with CPE consulting to design and facilitate a structured community engagement process aimed at identifying shared priorities and assessing collective readiness for collaborative investment.

Through this process, the Community Foundation is strengthening connections for communities to resources, elevating shared best practices, and building stronger cross-community partnerships around identified priority areas.

To that end, the Community Foundation convened community partners to identify and prioritize areas where investment could have the greatest impact and where there was greatest crossover with existing resources.

Rural and Small Town Summit

On May 19, 2026, the Community Foundation hosted the Rural and Small Towns Summit, bringing together nearly 60 community partners, including township supervisors, clerks, and elected officials, representing sixteen (16) municipalities across St. Clair County: Algonac, Burtchville Township, China Charter Township, City of St. Clair, City of Yale, Cottrellville Township, Emmett Township, Kimball Township, Marine City Historical Society – Historic City Hall/Opera House, Marysville, Memphis, Port Huron Charter Township, St. Clair Township, Township of Riley, and Wales.

Also invited to this gathering were funding and resource partners representing state agencies, private foundations, and other organizations providing support to the local municipalities. The event was designed with four goals in mind:

- Develop a clear understanding of community partners' priority focus areas for potential funding collaboration;
- Assess organizational readiness and capacity needs within those areas;
- Strengthen relationship with partners by engaging them early in the exploration process; and
- Provide clarity about future funding opportunities.

Survey Analysis

In advance of the Summit, the Community Foundation and CPE Consulting developed a participant survey to establish a baseline picture of priorities before participants gathered in person. The pre-summit survey was completed by 18 unique respondents representing 16 municipalities across St. Clair County. The survey asked respondents to rank community focus areas by priority and assess their organizations' capacity to engage in funding activities across three of their top-ranked areas.

The survey (attachment provided in the appendix) included three core components:

- **Q3: Ranking of 10 focus areas by importance/need**
 - Outdoor Recreation and Amenities
 - Public Gathering Spaces and Amenities
 - Leadership and Volunteering
 - Entrepreneurship & Economic Development
 - Family Support
 - Transportation
 - Housing
 - Zoning
 - Brownfield Development
 - Environmental Planning
- **Q4/Q8/Q12:** Selection of top three focus areas and capacity self-assessment for each
- **Q5/Q9/Q12:** Capacity rating across seven grant-related activities for each selected area

For this report, information is provided for the highest ranked focus areas. Additional information on the other focus areas can be provided, if needed.

Q3: Focus Area Rankings

Respondents ranked ten (10) focus areas in order of priority. Based on the top three selections across Q4, Q8, and Q12, the **four most frequently identified areas were:**

Unique Respondents (N)= 17 (see notes below)

Focus Area	Ranked # 1	Ranked #2	Ranked #3	Total Top Three Mentions
Outdoor Recreation & Amenities	8	3	3	14 of 17 (82%)
Public Gathering Spaces & Amenities	5	7	3	15 of 17 (88%)
Leadership & Volunteering	1	2	4	7 of 17 (41%)
Entrepreneurship & Economic Development	2	2	2	6 of 17 (35%)

Notes:

- 1) One respondent submitted twice, two different days. One of those submissions was incomplete and the data was deleted from the dataset.
- 2) One respondent did not complete focus area rankings, but did complete the capacity rating section.

Observations: When ranked by first-place votes, Outdoor Recreation ranked #1 (8 first-place votes) and Public Gathering Spaces ranked #2 (7 second-place votes), and Leadership & Volunteering ranked #3 (4 third-place votes).

Public Gathering Spaces and Amenities ranked in the most top three lists overall (15 of 17), making it the highest ranked area by breadth.

NOTE: Entrepreneurship & Economic Development trailed slightly behind Leadership & Volunteering in total top three mentions: 2 first place votes, 2 second place vote, and 2 third place votes for a total of 6 mentions (35%) compared to Leadership & Volunteering's 7 mentions (41%).

This fourth top focus area was included for comparison.

Top Four Focus Areas: Capacity Analysis

The top 4 focus areas are analyzed in detail below. Respondents who selected each area rated their organization's capacity on a 1-5 scale (1= No Capacity, 5 = Great Capacity) across seven related activities:

- **Creating a Master Plan**
- **Grant Writing Assistance**
- **Applying for a Grant**
- **Receiving Grant Funds**
- **Grant Oversight**
- **Project implementation**
- **Grant Reporting.**

Scores reported below reflect the average capacity score and the percentage of respondents rating each activity at great capacity or no capacity.

Outdoor Recreation & Amenities

Outdoor Recreation was the most frequently chosen first priority (8 of 17 respondents ranked it #1), and appeared in 14 of 17 top three lists, making it the strongest area of concentrated priority.

This area includes parks, trails, outdoor amenities, and youth sports and recreation.

Of the fourteen (14) respondents who selected this area, the majority (86%) provided complete capacity ratings. The number of responses (N) varies from 12 to 14.

Capacity Ratings for Outdoor Recreation & Amenities

Activity	N	Average Capacity Score (1-5)	% Rating 4 or 5 (Great Capacity)	% Rating 1 or 2 (No Capacity)
Create a Master Plan	14	4.07	86%	7.1%
Grant Writing Assistance	12	3.5	50%	17%
Apply for a Grant	14	3.57	64%	29%
Receive Grant Fund Awards	14	4.0	86%	14%

Help with Grant Oversight	13	3.23	46%	31%
Project Implementation	14	3.64	57%	14%
Grant Reporting	14	3.57	57%	14%

Analysis: Respondents felt most confident in master planning (4.07 average score, 86% rating 4 or 5) and receiving funds (4.0 average score, 86% rating 4 or 5).

Grant Oversight (3.23, n=13) and Grant Writing Assistance (3.5, n=12) are the lowest rated activities by average score.

Notably, Help with Grant Oversight (31% rating 1 or 2) and Applying for a Grant (29% rating 1 or 2) show the largest shares of respondents reporting little or no capacity. These “front-end” and “compliance” gaps suggest that some organizations may be better positioned to implement projects than to compete for or manage grants independently.

Public Gathering Spaces & Amenities

Public Gathering Spaces was the most broadly ranked priority by total mentions, appearing in 15 of 17 top three lists (88%). This area encompasses community hubs, public events, collaboration spaces, and public art, reflecting strong interest in community infrastructure and social connection. Of the 15 who selected it, only 14 provided capacity ratings with a consistent N of 14 across all activities.

Capacity Ratings for Public Gathering Spaces & Amenities

Activity	N	Average Capacity Score (1-5)	% Rating 4 or 5 (Great Capacity)	% Rating 1 or 2 (No Capacity)
Create a Master Plan	14	3.86	71%	14%
Grant Writing Assistance	14	3.64	57%	21%
Apply for a Grant	14	3.86	71%	21%
Receive Grant Funds Award	14	4.0	86%	14%
Help with Grant Oversight	14	3.5	50%	14%
Project Implementation	14	3.79	57%	14%
Grant Reporting	14	3.57	50%	14%

Analysis:

Overall capacity is moderate to strong across all activities for this focus area. Organizations feel most prepared to receive grant funds (4.0, 86% rating 4 or 5), followed closely by Creating a Master plan (3.86, 71%) and Applying for a Grant (3.86, 71%).

Grant reporting (3.57) and Help with Grant Oversight (3.5) are the lowest-rated activities, each with only 50% rating 4 or 5. Grant Writing Assistance (3.64, 21% rating 1 or 2) and Applying for a Grant (21% rating 1 or 2) show the largest percentages of respondents reporting limited capacity, suggesting uneven readiness across the group. Post-award support and Grant Writing Assistance would benefit this group.

Leadership & Volunteering

Leadership and Volunteering appeared in 7 of 17 top three lists (41%), primarily as a third priority (5 of 7 appearances). Of the 7 who selected it in their top 3, 5 provided capacity ratings; 2 respondents left the capacity questions blank. Given the small sample size, these figures should be explored further.

Capacity Ratings for Leadership & Volunteering

Activity	N	Avg. Capacity Score (1-5)	% Rating 4 or 5 (Great Capacity)	% Rating 1 or 2 (No Capacity)
Create a Master Plan	5	3.6	60%	20%
Grant Writing Assistance	5	3.2	40%	40%
Apply for a Grant	5	3.2	40%	40%
Receive Grant Funds Award	5	3.6	60%	20%
Help with Grant Oversight	5	3.2	40%	40%
Project Implementation	5	3.6	40%	40%
Grant Reporting	5	3.2	40%	40%

Analysis:

Scores fell into two tiers: Create a Master Plan, and Receive Grant Funds averaged 3.60 (60% rating 4 or 5); reflecting moderately strong confidence in planning and fund management.

Grant Writing, Applying for a Grant, Oversight, Reporting, and Project Implementation all averaged 3.2 (40% rating 4 or 5, 40% rating 1 or 2), indicating a significant split – nearly equal shares of respondents feel either capable or underprepared in these areas.

Some organizations seem reasonably equipped, but a meaningful share lack the infrastructure to sustain funded work in this area. Given the small sample size, a more targeted assessment of interested organizations may be worthwhile.

Entrepreneurship & Economic Development

Entrepreneurship & Economic Development ranked fourth overall by top three mentions (6 of 17, 35%) and received 2 first place votes – more than Leadership & Volunteers 1 first-place vote across all vote positions. Capacity ratings are available from all 6 respondents who selected it, though N varies from 5 to 6 as some respondents left specific questions blank. Given the small sample, organizations should be engaged to explore capacity further.

Capacity Ratings for Entrepreneurship & Economic Development

Activity	N	Avg. Capacity Score (1-5)	% Rating 4 or 5 (Great Capacity)	% Rating 1 or 2 (No Capacity)
Create a Master Plan	6	3.1	50%	50%
Grant Writing Assistance	5	4.4	80%	20%
Apply for a Grant	6	4.3	83%	17%

Receive Grant Funds Award	5	4.2	80%	20%
Help with Grant Oversight	6	4.2	83%	17%
Project Implementation	6	3.8	67%	33%
Grant Reporting	6	4	67%	17%

Analysis:

The capacity pattern for Entrepreneurship & Economic Development is notably different from the other three focus areas. Rather than Master Planning leading and Grant Oversight trailing (pattern seen elsewhere), this group shows strong confidence in grant-related activities: Applying For A Grant (4.33, 83% rating 4 or 5), Grant Writing Assistance (4.4, 80%), Receiving Grant Funds (4.2, 80%), and grant oversight (4.17, 83%) all score above the averages seen in other focus areas.

Create a Master Plan scores lowest (3.10), with 50% rating their capacity at 1 or 2, the highest low-capacity share in this table. This suggests organizations interested in Entrepreneurship & Economic Development may have experience pursuing and managing funded work but lack the planning infrastructure that larger economic development projects may require.

In-person Engagement

The Summit was organized around a World Café Model, a facilitated, multi-round table discussion model. This methodology is simple and flexible for hosting large group dialogue. The process includes three or more rounds of conversations with each person moving to a different table for each round. Participants selected the table they wanted to join, based on the focus area topic. The same three questions were used to engage participants in each round.

These conversations were further grounded in the framework “*How Communities Turn Shared Priorities Into Funded Action*”. This framing, developed by Jackie Hanton, Vice President of the Community Foundation, recognizes that turning community needs into funded action is rarely a straight line and communities may be working across multiple phases at once, with each phase requiring time and staff capacity, and that work begins before funding arrives.

Participants selected from 8 focus area tables: Outdoor Recreation & Amenities; Public Gathering Spaces; Leadership and Volunteerism; Entrepreneurship & Economic Development; Family Support; Transportation; Zoning, and Brownfield Development and completed three rounds of discussion, each time choosing a topic they wanted to explore. Housing was included in the original list but did not draw participants in any round.

At each table, participants were asked to reflect on why the focus area is a priority in their community, what assets and strengths exist to demonstrate readiness, and what gaps would need to be addressed.

Following the three rounds, a gallery wall was created so participants could move through the full set of notes and themes from all tables. Participant feedback on the gallery wall largely aligned with the survey results, reinforcing the priority areas that had emerged prior to the in-person convening. Strong interest emerged around linking the identified focus areas to available funding opportunities and resources.

One participant noted in the final discussion that the selection of focus areas may have been driven by a recognition of topics that local communities have control and autonomy over. The current context of limited access to federal funds was a significant part of this observation.

Table Discussion Summaries

The following summaries were developed by reviewing the headline material developed for the gallery wall, i.e., notes on the flip chart sheets, as well as the 32 pages of detailed notes compiled by table captains.

OUTDOOR RECREATION AND AMENITIES (ranked #1)

WHY: Outdoor recreation emerged as one of the highest-energy focus areas throughout the Summit. Communities identified parks, trails, waterfront access, and gathering spaces as foundations to quality of life, mental health, community pride, resident attraction, and retention.

ASSETS: Existing assets noted across communities included dedicated park commissions, established trail systems such as the Bridge to Bay Trail, community events, and strong volunteer networks, including youth organizations and service clubs. Shared amenities and coordinated programming across communities were identified as practical strategies for maximizing limited resources, with interest in pooling assets for shared equipment and regional programming.

GAPS: Gaps centered on limited staff capacity, inconsistent community engagement, and the challenge of funding not just project development but ongoing maintenance. Communities noted that master plans are often developed without sufficient community input, and several expressed a desire to visit and learn from neighboring communities' parks processes. Two recurring concerns included 1) the shift in resident expectations as new populations move into the area, creating pressure for amenities that smaller tax bases cannot easily sustain; and 2) gaps in recreational programming.

PUBLIC GATHERING SPACES (ranked #2)

WHY: Public gathering spaces were consistently described as essential to building community identity, fostering togetherness, and creating opportunities for residents across all backgrounds to connect.

ASSETS: Existing assets included multiuse parks, waterfront access, the Bridge to Bay Trail, amphitheaters, libraries, museums, and recreations centers. Several communities noted strong relationships with community service groups as a key strength, and youth voice was noted as an asset in shaping what public spaces should look like.

GAPS: Primary gaps included funding for both creation and ongoing maintenance, outdated or misaligned master plans, leadership and administrative turnover resulting in lost institutional knowledge, and limited winter programming options. Communities expressed a desire for stronger partnerships with county commissioners and community organizations and noted that competing priorities sometimes make it difficult to keep public spaces at the forefront.

LEADERSHIP AND VOLUNTEERISM (ranked #3)

WHY: Across all three rounds, communities described a shared challenge: the need for more volunteers and emerging leaders at a time when existing leadership is aging, staff capacity is stretched, and civic participation is declining.

ASSETS: Communities identified schools, youth organizations such as scouts and National Honor Society, service clubs, and church groups as existing assets for pipeline development. Several communities noted that people are willing to help but often do not know how, which they attributed to a gap in clear communication about opportunities.

GAPS: Key gaps included lack of training for newly elected officials, difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers (particularly younger residents) and limited resources for community outreach. Communities voiced the challenge of navigating social media effectively, including managing public responses. Liability concerns were noted as a deterrent to volunteerism. A consistent theme was the importance of leadership in setting the tone – without organized, visible leaders, volunteer efforts do not gain momentum.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

WHY: Entrepreneurship and economic development are critical to attracting businesses, building workforce capacity, supporting new and emerging businesses, and giving residents, especially younger generations, a reason to stay.

ASSETS: Assets include vacant buildings, available land with existing utilities, flexible zoning, and established economic development authorities.

GAPS: Gaps included limited startup funding, the high cost of rehabilitating older buildings (especially historic properties), lack of capacity, loss of local news outlets as a communication channel, and insufficient infrastructure. Retaining youth and young families was identified as a key ingredient for long-term economic vitality.

FAMILY SUPPORT

WHY: Family support was identified as a priority rooted in community well-being, encompassing the need for stable employment, accessible childcare, afterschool programs, health resources, education, and caregiver support. Participants noted strong families are the foundation of strong communities, and when families struggle, community engagement and civic life suffer as well.

ASSETS: Existing assets included schools, churches, youth and civic organizations, parks and community events, established business and nonprofit partnerships, and programs serving older adults. Communities noted that relationships are valuable assets that often go unrecognized.

GAPS: Gaps were centered around transportation barriers, limited afterschool programming, a shortage of volunteers for family-serving programs, insufficient wages to retain skilled workers locally, and limited awareness about available services. The need for marketing and advertising of existing programs was raised.

ZONING

WHY: Zoning discussions centered on the importance of local control in preserving the rural character of communities while creating the flexibility needed to support economic development and responsible growth. An emerging issue was also raised around data centers, including resource demands and physical scale.

ASSETS: Several communities are actively updating master plans, and strong planning documents were cited as key assets.

GAPS: Gaps included vacancies and experience deficits on planning commissions, difficulty enforcing ordinances, limited public understanding of how zoning works, and the challenge of engaging residents in public hearings. Workforce development and changing business compositions were noted as longer-term factors that will shape zoning needs over time.

BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT

WHY: Brownfield redevelopment was discussed in the third round only, and primarily as a tool that many communities are not yet fully utilizing due to limited understanding. Participants noted that updated federal definitions now allow Brownfield funding to be applied to blighted and dilapidated residential properties, but many community leaders are unaware of this.

ASSETS: Available land and existing inter-community relationships were identified as assets, with several communities exploring the possibility of a shared or joint Brownfield authority to pool resources for greater impact.

GAPS: The primary barrier identified was the lack of active county-level support. The county Brownfield authority has not accepted applications for two years and has declined tax abatement that smaller communities have sought for development projects. Communities expressed frustration that county inaction is impeding local progress.

Themes

Desire for inter-Community Collaboration. Communities across every focus area expressed a strong interest in working together rather than in isolation, for example sharing equipment, pooling resources, and learning from one another's successes. The Summit itself was noted as a valuable opportunity for this kind of cross-community exchange.

Volunteer and Leadership Pipeline. The challenge of recruiting, developing, and retaining volunteers and local leaders surfaced in nearly every table discussion. Communities are navigating an aging leadership base, limited staff capacity, and difficulty engaging younger residents.

Funding and Maintenance Gap. While communities identified numerous project ideas and priorities, a consistent concern was the ability to sustain progress beyond initial investment. Grant funding was described as a starting point, with ongoing maintenance costs and limited operating budgets posing a significant challenge.

Role of Service Organizations (supported primarily from Leadership and Outdoor Rec tables). Participants noted Lions Clubs, Rotary Clubs, scout troops, church groups, and similar organizations as the backbone of their communities, the groups that show up and get things done and keep residents connected across generations.

Need for Technical Assistance and Resources. Across focus areas, communities expressed a need and desire for practical support: help with grant writing, planning processes, master plan development, social media management, and navigation of funding opportunities.

Final Thoughts

The Community Foundation has significant relationships among the small towns and rural communities in St. Clair County. These relationships were the essential ingredient for successful conversations at the Summit. Participants recognized and appreciated the genuine interest that the Community Foundation demonstrated by asking questions and listening deeply to the voices of local leaders. The Summit was hugely successful at expanding this goodwill and creating conditions for future success in partnerships. The design of the session is powerful and will likely be replicated by other communities. The Community Foundation demonstrated partnership (again) by inviting other community foundations to attend as observers.