

STRONG ECONOMIES, RESILIENT COUNTIES

The Role of Counties in Economic Development



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OTTAWA COUNTY, MICHIGAN

Growing the Agricultural Base through Technology



Ottawa County is a mid-sized county on the outskirts of the Grand Rapids metropolitan area. The county's 2013 population of over 272,000 residents represents the third fastest growing county in Michigan between 2000 and 2010. As a major agricultural center, Ottawa County leads all other Michigan counties in the production of turkeys, ornamental nursery crops, blueberries and perennials. Ottawa County produced \$391 million in total farm receipts in 2007, a close second in the state of Michigan for highest agricultural production. However, since the economic downturn in 2008, county residents consistently requested greater county involvement in economic development, naming economic development as the top issue concerning respondents of a county survey. The county took advantage of the existing industry and local expertise of the agricultural sector to develop resources for emerging businesses and entrepreneurs within the county.

Economic development in Ottawa County effectively draws on local human and natural resources to support economic prosperity. Entrepreneurs and innovators in the agriculture industry reported a demand for resources for small businesses. Following a 2008 assessment of current economic development activities in the county conducted by the county's Planning and Performance Improvement Department (PPID), the county government restructured the department in 2010. The county refocused some of the department's personnel from land use planning to economic development.

Agricultural Technology Business Incubator

In 2013, the PPID began the process of implementing an Agricultural Technology Business Incubator. The implementation of the incubator follows four well defined phases, each with specific goals and benchmarks that must be met before proceeding to the next. The first phase, consisting of a needs assessment and incubator study was conducted in 2013 to determine whether the level of interest would justify the expenses of the program. Funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture with a 25 percent match by the county, the PPID contracted a third party to conduct the survey. Over 95 percent of respondents expressed

- Population, 2013: 272,701
- County Board size: 11
- County Administrator

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A participant in the Agricultural Technology Business Incubator, Grass Roots Energy's (GRE) ethanol production equipment that utilizes refrigeration coils to produce ethanol.

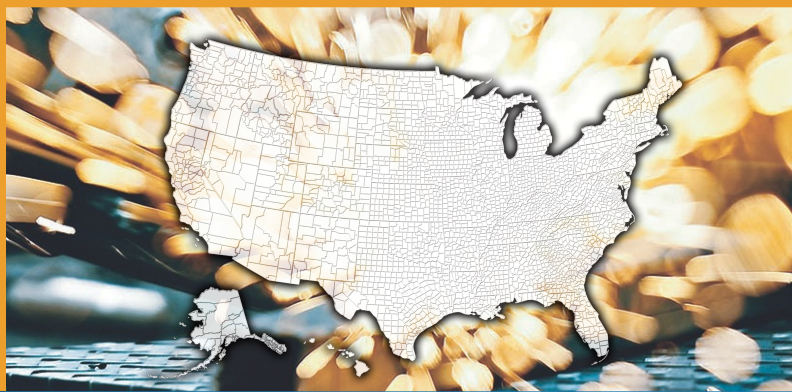
support for an Agricultural Technology incubator in Ottawa County.

The market and needs assessment and feasibility study established that farmers in Ottawa County are especially innovative in areas of agricultural waste management and alternative energy; however, they often lack the means to commercialize those ideas. The study found that very few business incubators nationally or internationally focused on agricultural technology and those that did were focused on ethanol or energy production. Additionally, the PPID recognized that the ever-growing national and global demand for food created an economic opportunity for the county to capitalize on the need for innovative ways to grow and harvest crops.

The second phase of the incubator project, conducted in 2014, is a pilot program involving three local companies. These three companies are directly involved in agricultural technology, such as innovative ethanol production technology, and will be given customized assistance in the form of planning, financial and legal support services in addition to access to program partners with local service providers and individual mentors. The pilot program has already been highly praised by Grass Roots Energy, one of the companies participating in the pilot program, for its useful financial, market development and legal assistance as well as professionalism.

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The Ottawa County Michigan Works! facility hosts local employers and provides resources to help them attract applicants.

The program has been assessed and is moving from the pilot program phase to the third phase, which will expand the number of staff and resources dedicated to the incubator. The fourth and concluding phase envisions a separate physical space, such as a warehouse, from which the incubator can offer emerging businesses an area to manufacture and grow their business. Finally, if the program is successful and economically viable, it may be reorganized with non-profit status in order to operate autonomously.

Ottawa County Michigan Works!

Since the 1970s, Ottawa County has actively participated in the statewide Michigan Works! system to develop the skilled workforce needed to support local business and industry. Ottawa County Michigan Works! (OCMW) is a

government nonprofit agency and is one of 25 Michigan Works! Organizations, which comprise the state's U.S. Department of Labor funded workforce development system. The county's Ready Now! Program hosts week-long employability events, bringing together local employers from a specific industry and jobseekers interested in getting into that industry. This collaborative effort, organized by Ottawa County Michigan Works! and participating local businesses offers intensive workshops and job fairs connecting underemployed and unemployed residents with local companies that are hiring. Since the program's inception in 2012, OCMW has hosted more than five of these events, resulting in up to 50 percent of the participants obtaining employment. A key component of the week-long event is the willingness of employers to guarantee live interviews for Ready Now! participants at the end of the event.

Ottawa County offers a case study of an economic development program that leverages agricultural assets and human capital to produce economic growth and improve the county resiliency. Key takeaways from this case study include clearly defining the project based on core competencies, including feedback from the target group and having concrete goals for specific phases of the project. Involving the community of entrepreneurs and existing business infrastructure ensures the opportunity to foster economic development in the county.