

CITY OF BELPRE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC PLAN

Prepared for:

Belpre Area Chamber of Commerce and the City of
Belpre, Ohio

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Executive Summary

This report, developed by Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs, investigates strategies to enhance economic development for the City of Belpre, Ohio as requested by the Belpre Area Chamber of Commerce. This "Economic Development Strategic Plan" was funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) and the Appalachian New Economy Partnership, a program of the Ohio Department of Higher Education and the State of Ohio.

The City of Belpre, Ohio has seen decades-long population stagnation and an overall decline in working age adults and school enrollment. Over one-third of Belpre's population is 55 or older. The availability of quality housing is limited, which restricts Belpre's ability to address this population decline and boost school enrollment by attracting middle-class families.

Belpre has key decisions to make to stabilize and ultimately reverse this population decline and ancillary challenges. The City has strong links to key industries in the regional economy, as well as a suite of natural assets that could be enhanced. This plan specifically recommends the implementation of economic development efforts around three focus areas: 1) Community Branding & Placemaking; 2) Industry Cluster Growth; and 3) Restaurants & Retail Development. Concentrated strategic investment and support of these themes may help capitalize on emerging business opportunities, infrastructure improvements, and ways to retain and attract families to the area. Belpre should focus on implementing the priorities put forth in this plan by designating responsibility for each task to small groups of community organizations, volunteers, and/or elected officials.

Community Branding & Placemaking

Key Findings:

- The City of Belpre lacks a distinct "brand" to differentiate itself in the Mid-Ohio Valley region.
- Civitan Park and the Ohio River are underutilized assets in Belpre.
- Belpre in Bloom and other beautification efforts are important to the city. However, the lack of a central "hub" or downtown limits the effectiveness of placemaking or creating public spaces in the community.

Recommendations:

- A "Buy Belpre" campaign to encourage community pride and support for local businesses that can generate excitement for placemaking efforts.
- Belpre should actively recruit or support the entrepreneurial development of river-oriented recreational businesses, such as kayaking, boating, etc.

- Belpre should continue Belpre in Bloom and other beautification efforts, but focus specifically on Civitan Park and the surrounding area to create an identity for the community. This includes continuing to pursue the development of the Athens-Belpre Rail Trail.
- Belpre should hold routine festivals with music, food vendors, and entertainment in the park to attract families, especially during the summer months. For example, First Friday, Last Fridays, or Third Thursdays are common events in many communities.
- Belpre should pursue a tourism effort around the Belpre Historical Society / Farmer's Castle Museum by linking to other efforts by Underground Railroad sites.

Industry Cluster Growth

Key Findings:

- The Belpre Medical Campus location for Marietta Memorial Hospital links Belpre to the broader healthcare cluster. Yet, infrastructure challenges (i.e., gas and water) have limited the full development of the campus.
- The Belpre region and Southeastern Ohio show employment and/or firm concentration in the Plastics and Polymers industry cluster.
- Belpre's strategic location on the Ohio River makes it a prime location for firms in the Plastics and Polymer industry cluster requiring river access, yet the lack of infrastructure and suitable industrial sites may limit location of firms in the supply chain.
- The decline and limited participation of working age adults in Belpre may limit the City's efforts to grow and attract industry.

Recommendations:

- Belpre should develop a list of infrastructure priorities and sites with the first focus on securing gas availability and adequate water pressure for the Belpre Medical Campus.
- Belpre should work with the Buckeye Hills Regional Council and the Ohio University's Voinovich School EDA University Center to seek EDA and/or Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) grant funding to support this infrastructure development.
- Belpre should connect with and encourage Plastics and Polymers supply chain and other related firms to locate to the Belpre region due to economies of scale and comparative advantages surrounding this industry.
- Belpre should work with companies to help facilitate retention and expansion efforts for those already located in the city.

Restaurants & Retail Development

Key Findings:

- Belpre's retail market is oversaturated given the amount of purchasing power in a five-mile radius.
- Residents desire more retail and sit-down restaurant options. The lack of shopping and dining options were cited by several interviewees as an economic development issue.
- Belpre's alcohol laws limit the attractiveness of the area to chain restaurants that rely on alcohol sales.

Recommendations:

- Belpre should identify local franchise owners of retail stores and restaurants currently not located in the greater Parkersburg market. Available sites, especially with river view or access, may be appealing to these individuals.
- Belpre should hold public hearings to explore allowing liquor by the drink, especially in designated commercial zones which may be attractive to prospective businesses (e.g., on the Ohio River).

Action Steps

1. Distribute Buy Belpre window clings to local businesses and residents to enhance the community branding effort.
2. Develop Civitan Park with beautification efforts and the promotion of community events. Create a comprehensive website with all programs, events, and opportunities, including local tourist attractions for visitors.
3. Work with elected officials, government agencies, local development districts, and others to pursue grant funding to support infrastructure issues associated with the Belpre Medical Campus location for Marietta Memorial Hospital. Meet with hospital executives to determine specific needs for the hospital campus and how to prioritize efforts.
4. Work with the Buckeye Hills Regional Council and the Southeastern Ohio Port Authority to assess the feasibility of economic development related incentive programs. Appropriate legal counsel to explore the viability of tax increment financing (TIF) and special improvement districts (SID).
5. Characterize and communicate with retail stores and restaurants that would provide goods or services currently underserved in Belpre and begin to facilitate visitation and attraction efforts.