REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN

FOR THE COUNTIES OF FULTON, HICKMAN,
BALLARD, AND CARLISLE, KENTUCKY;
AND THE CITY OF SOUTH FULTON, TN

JUNE 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Through funding provided by a DRA Strategic Planning Grant, the Fulton County Fiscal Court has partnered with Atlas Community Studios to develop a Regional Economic Development Plan for the counties of Fulton, Hickman, Ballard, and Carlisle, KY, and South Fulton, TN focused on **Public Infrastructure**, **Workforce Development**, **Housing**, and **Business Development**.

The project was implemented in five phases between August 2024 and August 2025.

1. Project Kickoff
2. Public Engagement
3. Community Assessment
4. Strategic Plan
5. Implementation Technical Assistance

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Assess **public infrastructure**—including sewer, water, transportation, and river access—to ensure the region can support residents, attract investment, and maintain essential services.
- Evaluate the local labor market and develop strategies to strengthen **workforce development** in ways that meet the needs of job seekers, employers, and the broader community.
- Expand access to safe, affordable **housing** by supporting new construction, revitalizing existing homes, eliminating blight, and reducing barriers to both renting and owning.
- Support long-term economic growth by strengthening **regional partnerships** and exploring opportunities to attract investment and expand local business opportunities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past ten months, Atlas Community Studios has worked closely with leaders and residents from the four river counties—Ballard, Carlisle, Fulton, and Hickman—to develop a shared economic development strategy.

MORE THAN 530 PEOPLE SHARED INSIGHTS THROUGH:

Six Public Visioning Sessions

An Online Survey

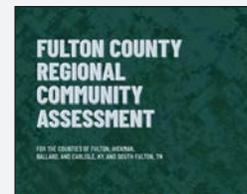**Four Virtual Focus Groups**

Interviews with Residents & Community Leaders

OTHER REPORTS DEVELOPED THAT INFORMED THIS REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN:

The Public Input Report contains key takeaways for all focus areas from the public engagement activities.

The Community Assessment contains data-supported key trends, challenges, and strategic opportunities.

The planning process included public surveys, focus groups, steering committee meetings, and public presentations. Along the way, Atlas produced a Public Input Report, a Community Assessment, and facilitated a Strategy Workshop. Those efforts laid the foundation for this final Regional Economic Development Plan.

The plan focuses on four priority areas: public infrastructure, workforce development, housing, and business development. It outlines a set of projects that can be pursued regionally or by individual counties. Each project is designed to address long-standing challenges while building on local assets already in place.

This document is meant to be useful. Its purpose is to support local decision-making, strengthen funding proposals, and help move important projects from discussion to implementation.

PRIORITY PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

- **Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Plan:** Conduct a regional riverport infrastructure and expansion study to assess facility upgrades, identify funding opportunities, improve rail connectivity, and develop industry recruitment strategies for the Hickman-Fulton County Riverport and the proposed Wickliffe Riverport.

- **Support US 51 Corridor Improvements:** Support ongoing efforts to improve the US 51 corridor by documenting regional needs, aligning local priorities, and coordinating with state partners.

- **Regional Utility Rate Study:** Collaborate on a utility rate study of independent water and wastewater systems across the region to assess revenue gaps, infrastructure needs, and long-term sustainability, with a plan for gradual rate adjustments if needed.

- **Conduct a Regional Wastewater District Feasibility Study:** Conduct a feasibility study to evaluate a regional wastewater district or shared service agreements, assessing cost-sharing opportunities, infrastructure consolidation, funding sources, and long-term sustainability to make water and sewer improvements more affordable and effective across the four river counties.

PARTNERSHIPS

- Hickman-Fulton County Riverport Authority
- Fulton & Hickman Counties Economic Development Partnership
- West Kentucky Alliance for a Vibrant Economy (WAVE)
- Western Kentucky Regional Riverport Authority (WKRRA)
- Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development
- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet
- Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- Kentucky Infrastructure Authority (KIA)
- Kentucky Rural Water Association (KRWA)
- Kentucky Division of Water
- Local governments

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

PRIORITY PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

- **Four-Stage Regional Workforce Initiative**
  - → **Stage 1 – Regional Workforce and Industry Market Study:** Conduct a regional market study to identify high-growth job sectors, workforce training gaps, and industry recruitment opportunities, ensuring alignment between education, training programs, and employers offering livable-wage jobs.
  - → **Stage 2 – Regional Skilled Trades Initiative (Based on Market Study Findings):** Increase access to skilled trades training through industry showcases, employer-led workshops, and a shared apprenticeship program to strengthen workforce pipelines and expand enrollment in technical education and workforce training programs.
  - → **Stage 3 – Regional Higher Education and Workforce Hub:** Partner with Murray State University, WKCTC, and local employers to provide short-term, on-site training in high-demand fields, reducing geographic and scheduling barriers for adult learners and job seekers.
  - → **Stage 4 – Regional Workforce Recruitment and Retention Program:** Build a regional workforce recruitment and retention program that connects employers with job seekers through targeted outreach, employer-led training, and retention incentives to strengthen workforce stability.

- **Recruit and Train Water/Wastewater Techs:** Partner with the Kentucky Rural Water Association (KRWA) and the Kentucky Water and Wastewater Operators Association (KWWOA) to actively recruit, train, and certify unemployed or underemployed young adults (ages 18-25) for careers in water and wastewater operations.

PARTNERSHIPS

- West Kentucky Workforce Board
- West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC)
- Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board (KWIB)
- Murray State University
- Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- West Kentucky Alliance for a Vibrant Economy (WAVE)
- Four Rivers Career Academy
- Kentucky Education and Labor Cabinet
- Local governments and economic development offices
- Area Technology Centers and CTE coordinators
- Kentucky Rural Water Association (KRWA)
- Kentucky Water and Wastewater Operators Association (KWWOA)
- Kentucky Infrastructure Authority (KIA)

PRIORITY PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

- **Partner with Community Ventures on a County-by-County Housing Initiative**
  - → Depending on the county this initiative may require a housing needs assessment and/or an inventory of available land.
  - → Community Ventures housing programs include homebuyer education and homeownership support.
- **Blight Reduction Initiative:** Develop a regional blight reduction initiative to assess properties, secure demolition and rehabilitation funding, and partner with local governments to clear blight and prepare sites for housing and community projects.
- **Four-County Land Bank Feasibility Study:** Conduct a study to assess the viability of establishing a regional land bank, including legal, financial, and administrative requirements, and identify best practices from similar rural regions.

PARTNERSHIPS

- Community Ventures
- The Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC)
- Local planning commissions
- Housing authorities and nonprofit developers
- Local banks and mortgage lenders
- Kentucky Department for Local Government (DLG)
- Local contractors and construction firms
- Code enforcement officers and legal advisors
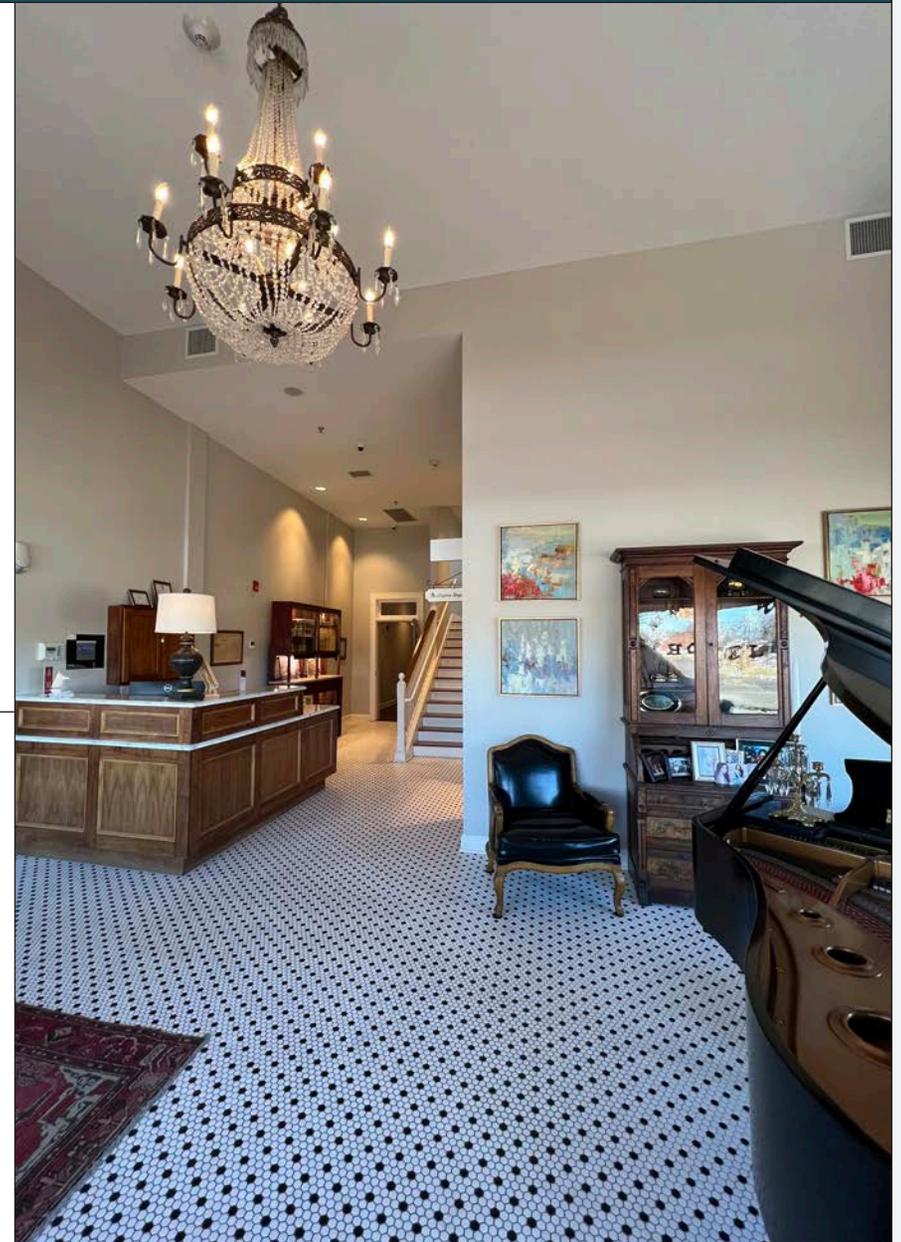
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

PRIORITY PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

- **Processing Facility Feasibility Study:** Conduct a feasibility study to assess the viability of a middle- or end- agricultural processing facility, such as an oilseed crushing plant or grain mill, to expand market opportunities and support agricultural diversification.

- **Kentucky Great River Region Organization Partnership:** Partner with KYGRRO to identify tourism-related infrastructure needs and develop a plan to improve visitor experience through better signage, transportation access, and facility upgrades, while building on the organization's existing regional branding and marketing efforts.

- **WAVE Full-time Executive Director:** Hire a full-time executive director for WAVE to formalize regional economic development efforts, coordinate planning, and secure funding for shared infrastructure, housing, workforce, and business initiatives.

PARTNERSHIPS

- Local farmers and producer cooperatives
- Kentucky Department of Agriculture
- University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service
- USDA Rural Development
- Local economic development organizations
- Agribusiness partners, including companies and local processing firms
- County tourism commissions and chambers of commerce
- Kentucky Department of Tourism
- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet
- Local governments
- Public works departments and infrastructure staff
- Historical societies, museums, and local arts groups
- Trail and scenic byway organizations (e.g., Mississippi River Trail, local trail committees)
- Mississippi River Parkway Commission
- Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- Regional nonprofits and community foundations
- Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

OVERVIEW

The following key trends and challenges related to infrastructure were identified through quantitative and qualitative research gathered during the Community Assessment of the Fulton region:

- **High Cost of Water and Sewer Improvements:** Aging water and sewer systems require significant upgrades, but high costs make improvements difficult for small communities to fund.
- **Fragmented Governance:** Fragmented governance limits resource sharing and efficiency, making it harder for small communities to sustain essential infrastructure.
- **Insufficient Funding for Roads:** Outdated funding formulas leave the region with narrow roads, aging bridges, and a growing backlog of critical repairs.
- **Dependence on External Funding:** Over-reliance on external funding without local investment limits long-term infrastructure sustainability and strategic growth.
- **Rail limitations:** Rail infrastructure supports the region's economy, but aging tracks and limited connections make transportation less efficient for businesses.
- **Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Limits:** The Hickman-Fulton County Riverport provides essential trade infrastructure, but aging facilities and limited rail capacity restrict growth and industry diversification.

In response to these key trends and challenges, the following strategic opportunities were identified for the Fulton region:

- **High Cost of Water and Sewer Improvements:** Develop a regional strategy for water and sewer infrastructure by fostering collaboration among municipalities, consolidating resources where feasible, and establishing shared service agreements to lower costs and improve efficiency.
- **Fragmented Governance:** Strengthen regional collaboration by developing shared utility services, coordinating infrastructure planning, and pursuing joint funding opportunities to improve efficiency and reduce costs.
- **Insufficient Funding for Roads:** Partner with state and federal agencies to modernize funding formulas and identify local revenue sources for road and bridge improvements.
- **Dependence on External Funding:** Reduce reliance on state and federal funding by planning for future infrastructure needs, adjusting utility rates, and collaborating on projects that maximize available resources.
- **Rail limitations:** Improve rail infrastructure by securing funding for track upgrades and expanding connections to better support businesses, agriculture, and industrial growth.
- **Expand and Modernize Riverports:** Strengthen riverport infrastructure by securing funding for upgrades, expanding intermodal connections, and diversifying industries to maximize economic impact.

PROPOSED PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

Based on the findings in the Community Assessment, the following proposed projects were shared with the Steering Committee for consideration and discussion:

- **Conduct a Regional Wastewater District Feasibility Study:** Conduct a feasibility study to evaluate a regional wastewater district or shared service agreements, assessing cost-sharing opportunities, infrastructure consolidation, funding sources, and long-term sustainability to make water and sewer improvements more affordable and effective across the four river counties.
- **Regional Utility Rate Study:** Collaborate on a utility rate study of independent water and wastewater systems across the region to assess revenue gaps, infrastructure needs, and long-term sustainability, with a plan for gradual rate adjustments if needed.
- **Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Plan:** Conduct a regional riverport infrastructure and expansion study to assess facility upgrades, identify funding opportunities, improve rail connectivity, and develop industry recruitment strategies for Hickman-Fulton County Riverport and the proposed Wickliffe Riverport.

During the Strategy Workshop, the Steering Committee agreed that all three proposed infrastructure projects should be prioritized. Their decision was based on the viability of each concept, the availability of potential partners and resources, and the level of community support. As part of a follow-up review process with the Core Team, one additional project was added to the final list:

- **Support US 51 Corridor Improvements:** Support ongoing efforts to improve the US 51 corridor by documenting regional needs, aligning local priorities, and coordinating with state partners. As the primary north-south route through the region, US 51 supports commuting, school transportation, commercial hauling, and tourism. It also provides redundancy to the I-69 and US 45 corridors and serves as a critical backup to I-24 for crossing the Ohio River.

FINAL PRIORITIZATION

Following the Strategy Workshop and Core Team review, the list of infrastructure projects was prioritized as follows:

1. Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Plan
2. Support US 51 Corridor Improvements
3. Utility Rate Study (to be implemented at the county level)
4. Wastewater District Feasibility Study (to be implemented at the county level)

These projects reflect shared needs across the four river counties and are intended to support long-term infrastructure sustainability, economic growth, and regional collaboration. Each project is described in more detail on the following pages.

RIVERPORT INFRASTRUCTURE AND EXPANSION PLAN

Conduct a regional riverport infrastructure and expansion study to assess facility upgrades, identify funding opportunities, improve rail connectivity, and develop industry recruitment strategies for the Hickman-Fulton County Riverport and the proposed Wickliffe Riverport.

IDEAL LEADS   FULTON & HICKMAN COUNTIES ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP
HICKMAN-FULTON COUNTY RIVERPORT AUTHORITY

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- West Kentucky Alliance for a Vibrant Economy (WAVE)
- Western Kentucky Regional Riverport Authority (WKRRA)
- Local governments

- Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development
- Rail providers (e.g., CN or regional short-line operators)
- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet

GOALS

- Assess infrastructure and operational needs at the Hickman-Fulton County Riverport.
- Assess the feasibility and infrastructure needs of the proposed Wickliffe Riverport.
- Improve rail and intermodal access serving the riverport(s) to support business growth and logistics efficiency.
- Identify industry sectors most likely to benefit from expanded riverport capacity.
- Develop an investment strategy and phased implementation plan.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1   **Secure Funding for a Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Study**
The cost of a comprehensive port infrastructure and expansion study is estimated to be between $75,000 and $125,000. Potential funding sources are outlined on page 20.

STEP 2   **Issue a Request for Proposals (RFP)**
Once funding is secured, the Hickman-Fulton County Riverport Authority should issue an RFP to engage qualified consultants to conduct a comprehensive riverport infrastructure and expansion study. The RFP should request proposals that:

- Analyze existing infrastructure and operational capacity at the Hickman-Fulton County Riverport.
- Assess feasibility and design options for the proposed Wickliffe Riverport.
- Evaluate current and potential rail and intermodal connections.
- Review rural port models with similar scale and context to identify proven strategies that could be adapted for use in the Fulton region.
- Identify target industries for recruitment and develop a coordinated marketing strategy to attract them.
- Provide a phased implementation plan with cost estimates.

STEP 3   **Convene a Regional Working Group**
Establish a working group to support the riverport study process. Members should include:

- Port authority staff and board members.
- Local government representatives.
- Economic development partners (e.g., Fulton & Hickman Counties Economic Development Partnership, WKRRA, KY Cabinet for Economic Development).
- Transportation and rail representatives.
- Local businesses and freight users.
- KYTC staff or representatives involved in the Multimodal Freight Plan.

The working group should meet regularly throughout the riverport study to provide input, share local knowledge, and ensure the project remains aligned with regional priorities and stakeholder needs.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 4   **Conduct the Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Study**
The selected consultant will be responsible for:

- Conducting site assessments and interviews with riverport users.
- Analyzing freight patterns, customer needs, and capacity constraints.
- Identifying infrastructure gaps and investment priorities.
- Recommending design concepts and site layouts for potential expansion.
- Detailing funding sources, timelines, and responsibilities for implementation.
- Identifying and engaging potential private sector investors, operators, or partners to assess interest and inform business model recommendations.

STEP 5   **Review and Finalize the Plan**
Once the draft study is complete, the regional working group should:

- Host review sessions with community stakeholders and partners.
- Revise the plan based on feedback and confirm alignment with regional strategies.
- Approve the final study and develop a communications strategy to share results with potential funders and industry prospects.

STEP 6   **Pursue Funding and Begin Implementation**
With a finalized plan in hand, the Hickman-Fulton County Riverport Authority should:

- Identify and prioritize projects for early-stage implementation.
- Apply for grants and seek matching funds.
- Coordinate with state and federal agencies on permitting, regulatory reviews, and funding.
- Work with local officials to assess zoning, utility access, and transportation infrastructure at potential sites to avoid late-stage barriers.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

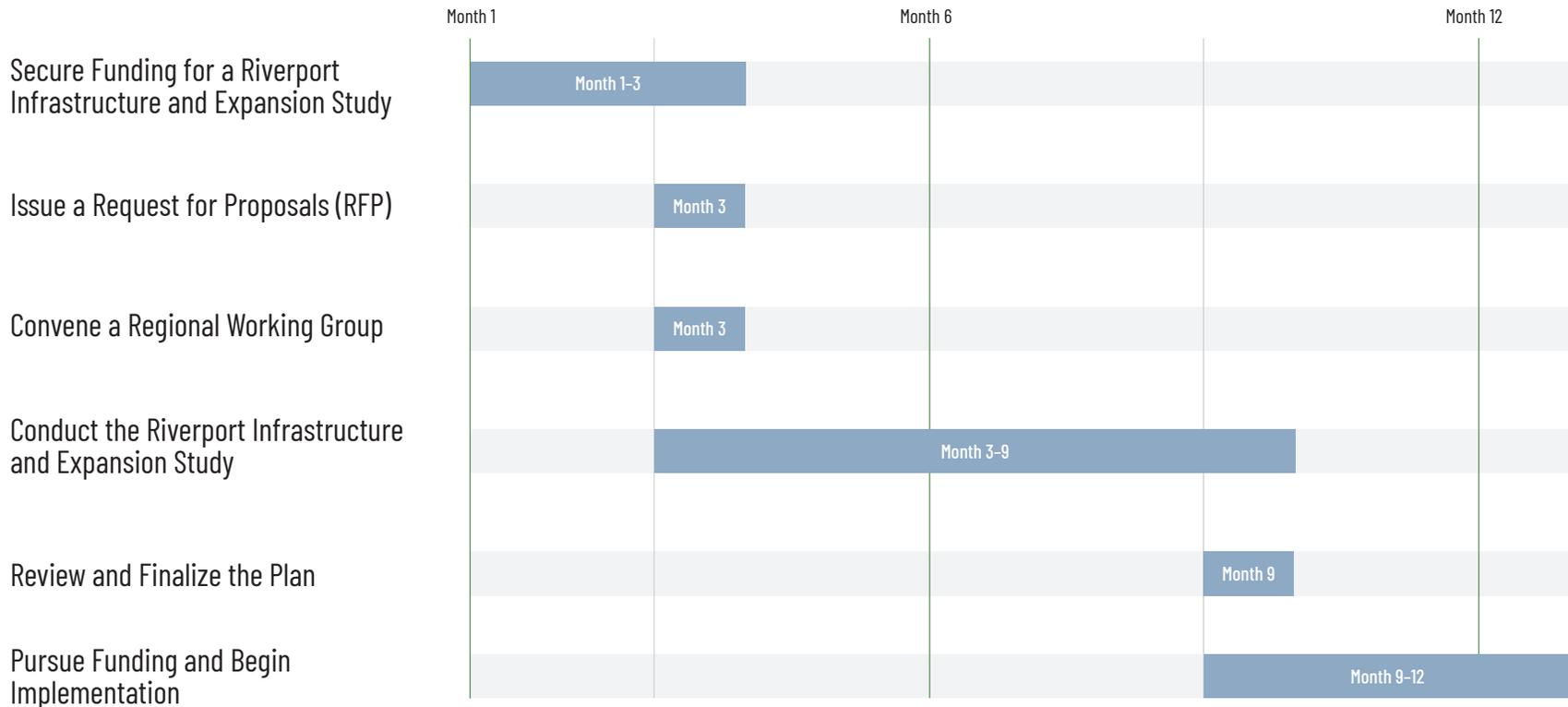- Ensure coordination between riverport planning and related projects (e.g., US 51 corridor improvements).
- Address environmental permitting and regulatory considerations early in the planning process.
- Consider dual-purpose uses for infrastructure upgrades to broaden impact.
- The feasibility study should account for commodity price fluctuations, supply chain dynamics, and long-term market viability.

POTENTIAL FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) Strategic Planning Program	Aug. 1, 2025	$150,000	N/A	Reimbursable
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG)	Typically Feb. 28	$500,000	Not required, but applicants are more competitive with a match	Reimbursable
U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) – Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Program	Rolling	$30,000,000	20-50%	Reimbursable
Rural and Tribal Assistance Pilot Program	TBD	N/A	N/A	Reimbursable
Maritime Administration (MARAD) – Port Infrastructure Development Program	April 2026	$125,000,000	20%	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF)	Rolling	$2,000,000	None	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) States' Economic Development Assistance Program (SEDAP)	TBD	$500,000	Varies	Reimbursable
Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) Riverport Construction & Maintenance	Distributed during state Fiscal Year	$750,000	None	Direct

TIMELINE

	Month 1		Month 6		Month 12
Secure Funding for a Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Study	Month 1–3				
Issue a Request for Proposals (RFP)		Month 3			
Convene a Regional Working Group		Month 3			
Conduct the Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Study		Month 3–9			
Review and Finalize the Plan				Month 9	
Pursue Funding and Begin Implementation				Month 9–12	

SUPPORT US 51 CORRIDOR IMPROVEMENTS

Support ongoing efforts to improve the US 51 corridor by documenting regional needs, aligning local priorities, and coordinating with state partners. As the primary north-south route through the region, US 51 supports commuting, school transportation, commercial hauling, and tourism. It also provides redundancy to the I-69 and US 45 corridors and serves as a critical backup to I-24 for crossing the Ohio River. Improvements should focus on strengthening connections between communities from Wickliffe to Fulton.

IDEAL LEADS   LOCAL GOVERNMENTS *with coordination from the* Kentucky Transportation Cabinet *(KYTC)*

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC)
- Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- West Kentucky Alliance for a Vibrant Economy (WAVE)

- Local elected officials and planning staff
- Regional economic development organizations
- Freight and logistics companies

GOALS

- Improve road conditions and safety along the corridor.
- Increase capacity and connectivity for freight and personal travel.
- Strengthen economic linkages between river counties and regional hubs.
- Align local and regional priorities to support long-term infrastructure investment.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1   **Document Corridor Conditions and Priorities**
Work with county and municipal governments along US 51 to:

- Compile an inventory of existing and planned KYTC projects across Ballard, Carlisle, Hickman, and Fulton counties.
- Include relevant data from the KYTC Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) and the Six-Year Highway Plan.
- Identify additional infrastructure needs or gaps not addressed by current projects, especially those related to access, safety, connectivity, or economic development.
- Highlight intersections or segments that are underperforming or overcapacity.

STEP 2   **Engage Stakeholders and Build Consensus**
- Convene a regional workgroup composed of transportation officials, local leaders, economic development professionals, and industry representatives to identify shared priorities.
- Hold public engagement sessions to gather community input and incorporate local knowledge into project planning.
- Coordinate outreach to state legislators, submit public comments during KYTC planning cycles, and build public awareness of the corridor's economic importance through advocacy led by the regional workgroup.

STEP 3   **Coordinate with KYTC and Align with Planning Cycles**
- Present corridor conditions, infrastructure needs, and community priorities—identified through Steps #1 and #2—to KYTC District 1 and regional planning partners.
- Emphasize areas where additional funding or scope adjustments may be needed to maximize the regional benefit of already scheduled improvements.
- Work to ensure that local and regional needs are reflected in KYTC's Six-Year Highway Plan, the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), and any upcoming calls for projects.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 4

Prepare and Submit Funding Applications

- Work with KYTC, PADD, and other partners to prepare grant applications for state and federal programs that support corridor upgrades.
- Potential funding sources are outlined on page 25.

STEP 5

Implement Targeted Improvements

- Once funding is secured, begin work on phased improvements to priority segments.
- Improvements may include repaving, intersection upgrades, lane expansions, signage enhancements, and bridge rehabilitation.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- This project must be coordinated with other regional infrastructure improvements, including riverport and utility upgrades.
- Advocacy and alignment with state and federal priorities will be essential for securing funding.
- Sustained advocacy—including regional coalition-building, legislative engagement, and public education—will help maintain momentum and position the corridor for long-term investment.
- Local governments should identify potential matching funds early in the process.
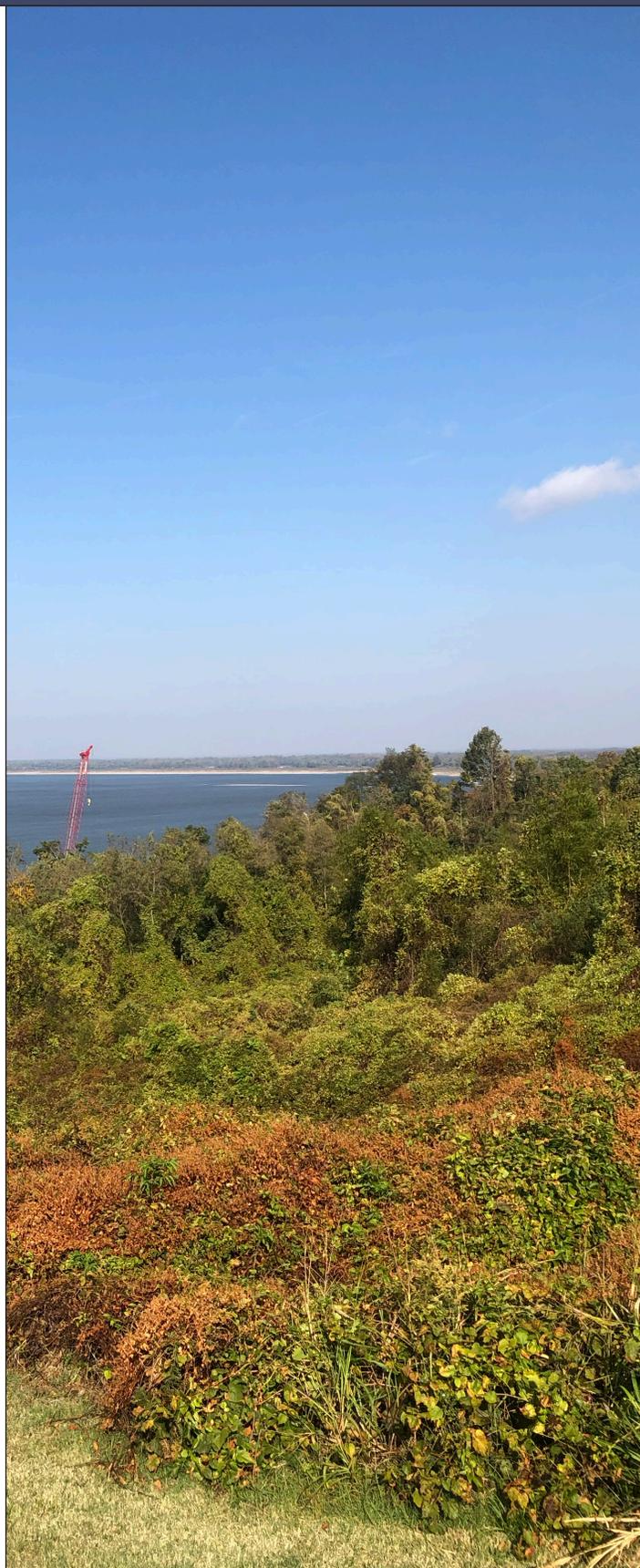
POTENTIAL FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) – BUILD Grants	TBD	$25,000,000	20%	Reimbursable
U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) – INFRA Grants	Typically May	$25,000,000	20-40%	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF)	Rolling	$2,000,000	None	Reimbursable
Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) – Transportation Alternatives Program	TBD	N/A	20%	Reimbursable

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Document Corridor Conditions and Priorities — Month 1–12

Engage Stakeholders and Build Consensus — Month 10–15

Coordinate with KYTC and Align with Planning Cycles — Month 13–18

Prepare and Submit Funding Applications — Month 16–27

Implement Targeted Improvements — Month 22-45
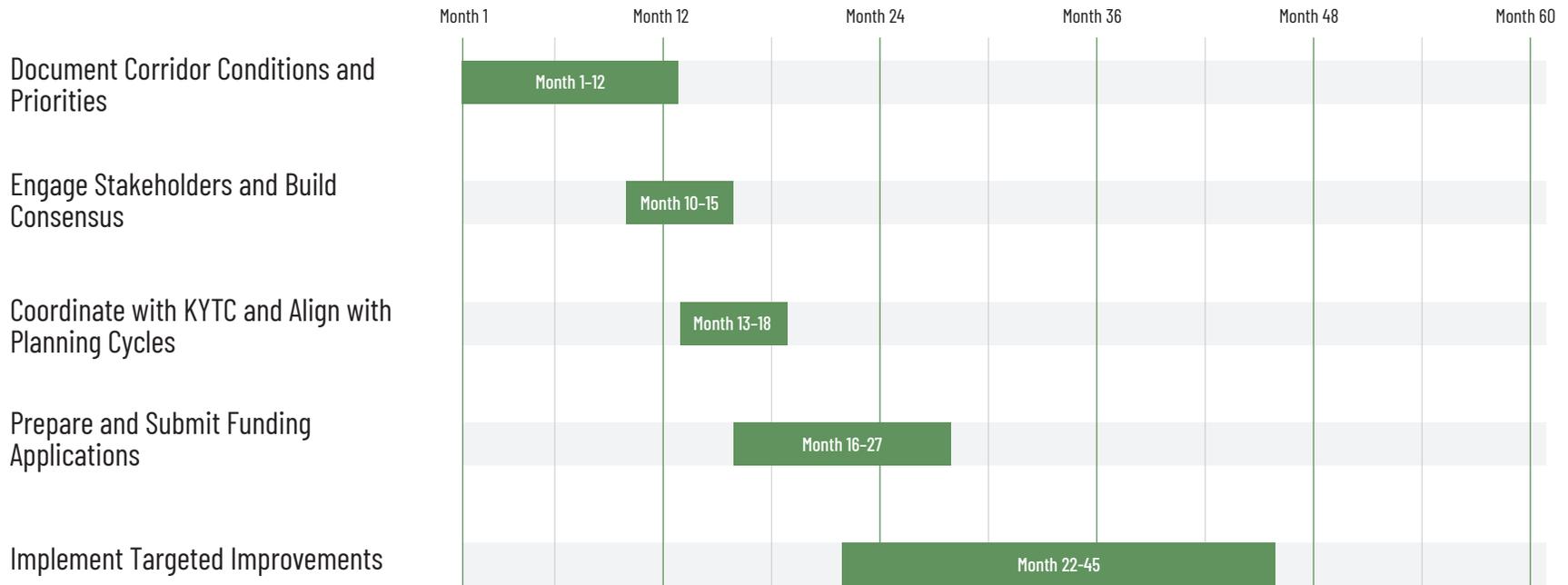
MEDIUM-TERM PROJECT

UTILITY RATE STUDY

Collaborate on a utility rate study of independent water and wastewater systems within each county to assess revenue gaps, infrastructure needs, and long-term sustainability, with a plan for gradual rate adjustments if needed.

There are at least 12 public water systems and 11 wastewater systems spread across the four river counties, highlighting the complexity of managing infrastructure and setting sustainable rates.

IDEAL LEAD COUNTY GOVERNMENTS (BALLARD, CARLISLE, HICKMAN, AND FULTON)

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Municipal utility boards and water districts
  - → For details on community water systems visit the Water System Status Dashboard
  - → For details on community wastewater systems visit the Sewer System Status Dashboard

- Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- Kentucky Infrastructure Authority (KIA)
- Kentucky Rural Water Association (KRWA)
- Kentucky Division of Water
- Local economic development agencies

GOALS

- Assess the financial health of each local water and wastewater system.
- Identify where rate structures are not aligned with long-term needs.
- Provide recommendations to gradually adjust rates and improve sustainability.
- Ensure equity and affordability for ratepayers while funding future improvements.
- Position communities to compete for infrastructure grants and loans.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1 **Convene County-Level Planning Discussions**
Invite county and municipal utility leaders to a joint planning session to define the scope of the utility rate study. Discuss:

- Regional coordination opportunities.
- Common system challenges.
- Potential benefits of working together on a shared consultant or methodology.

STEP 2 **Secure Funding for County-Level Studies**
Each county should identify funding sources to support its utility rate study. The estimated cost for a county-level study is between $25,000 and $50,000, depending on the number of systems involved and the complexity of the analysis. Potential funding sources are outlined on page 30.

STEP 3 **Issue a Request For Proposals (RFP) for Rate Consultants**
If a county chooses to proceed, work with local utility leaders to develop and release an RFP to select qualified utility rate consultants. The RFP should seek proposals that:

- Analyze existing rate structures, operating costs, and capital needs.
- Compare local water and wastewater utilities to best practices and systems in similar communities.
- Provide public communication tools to explain recommended adjustments.
- Recommend phased strategies to close funding gaps and support long-term system sustainability.

STEP 4 **Conduct the Utility Rate Studies and Engage Stakeholders**
Selected consultants will:

- Work with utility boards and system operators to review financial records and operating conditions.
- Identify key cost drivers and revenue shortfalls.
- Meet with local officials and residents to explain findings and answer questions.
- Provide clear, data-informed recommendations for gradual and fair rate adjustments.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 5   **Adopt Recommendations and Track Outcomes**
Each county and its utility providers should:

- Review the consultant's recommendations and adopt an approach that aligns with local conditions and priorities.
- Establish an annual or biennial review process to track progress, adjust as needed, and ensure long-term financial sustainability.

STEP 6   **Build Political Will and Public Understanding**
Local resistance to rate increases is one of the most common barriers to implementing sustainable utility rates. To overcome this challenge, utility leaders and consultants should work closely with mayors, city councils, and fiscal courts to:

- Clearly explain the financial risks of inaction in simple, accessible terms.
- Share success stories from similar communities that adopted updated rate structures.
- Highlight how phased adjustments can protect low-income residents and help secure outside funding.
- Provide talking points, visual aids, and support for public meetings to help local officials communicate rate decisions with confidence.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Public messaging and community education will be essential for buy-in.
- Equity concerns must be addressed so that rate changes do not overburden low-income households.
- Each study should also explore how more sustainable rates could improve eligibility for state and federal funding.

POTENTIAL FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
Kentucky Rural Water Association	Ongoing	N/A	N/A	Technical Assistance
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Water & Waste Disposal Predevelopment Planning Grants	Rolling	$60,000	25%	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) Strategic Planning Program	Aug. 1, 2025	$150,000	N/A	Reimbursable

TIMELINE
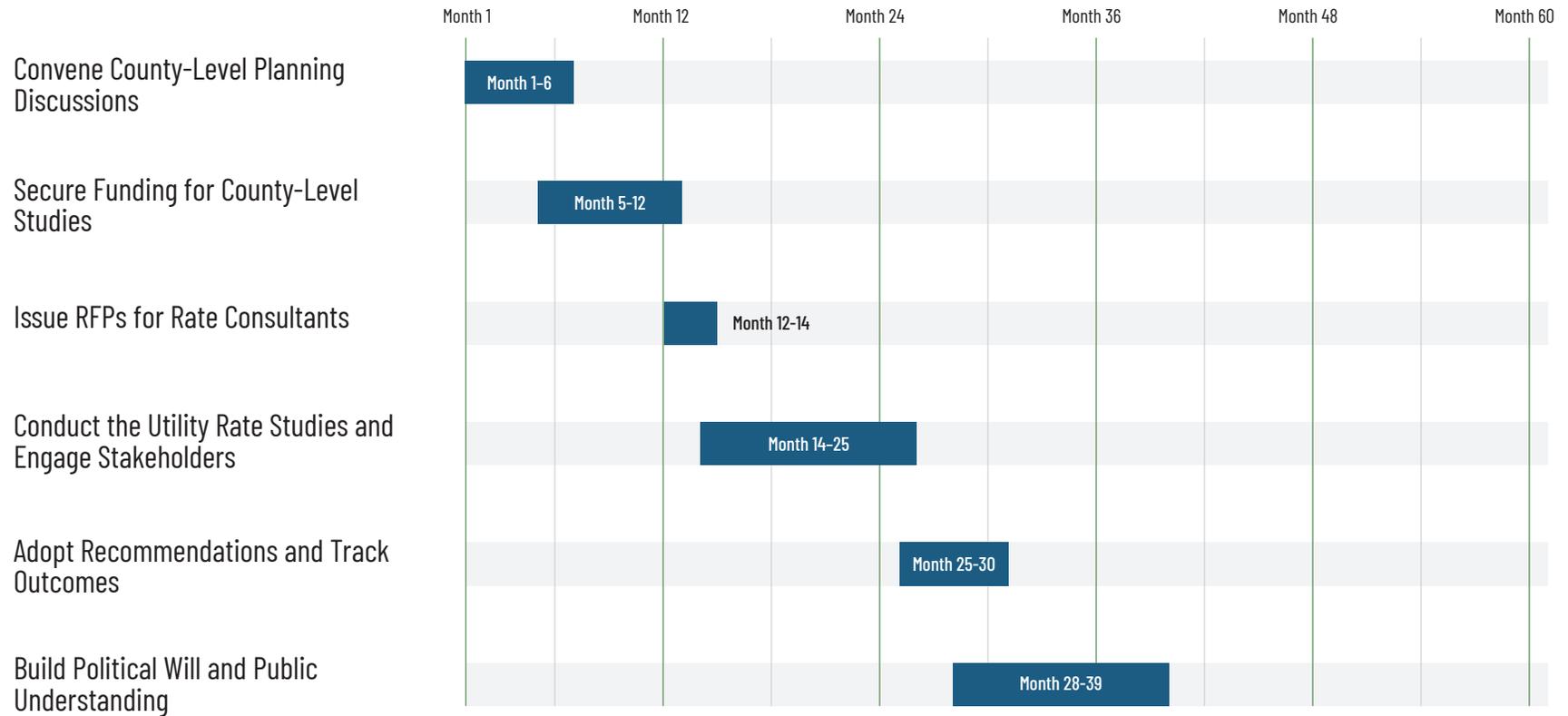
	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Convene County-Level Planning Discussions — Month 1-6

Secure Funding for County-Level Studies — Month 5-12

Issue RFPs for Rate Consultants — Month 12-14

Conduct the Utility Rate Studies and Engage Stakeholders — Month 14-25

Adopt Recommendations and Track Outcomes — Month 25-30

Build Political Will and Public Understanding — Month 28-39

WASTEWATER DISTRICT FEASIBILITY STUDY

Conduct a feasibility study to evaluate a wastewater district or shared service agreements, assessing cost-sharing opportunities, infrastructure consolidation, funding sources, and long-term sustainability to make water and sewer improvements more affordable and effective across the four river counties.

The presence of at least 12 public water systems and 11 wastewater systems across the region underscores the potential benefits of regional coordination and the challenges of maintaining fragmented infrastructure.

IDEAL LEAD   COUNTY GOVERNMENTS (BALLARD, CARLISLE, HICKMAN, AND FULTON)

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Local utilities and municipal governments
- Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- Kentucky Infrastructure Authority (KIA)
- Kentucky Rural Water Association (KRWA)
- Kentucky Division of Water
- Engineering and planning consultants

GOALS

- Evaluate options for consolidating wastewater systems or forming new countywide or regional districts.
- Identify opportunities to share staff, equipment, billing systems, and other operational resources.
- Assess legal and governance models that support shared service delivery.
- Estimate potential cost savings and infrastructure investment needs under different coordination scenarios.
- Strengthen eligibility for federal and state funding by demonstrating collaboration and long-term sustainability.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1 **Engage Local Utility Stakeholders in Each County**
Bring together municipal leaders, utility managers, and county officials to discuss existing system challenges and explore the potential for shared wastewater service delivery. Use these sessions to identify specific challenges, current areas of overlap, and perceived barriers to collaboration.

STEP 2 **Define Scope, Objectives, and Scenarios for Each County**
Each county should define the scope of its feasibility study to reflect local conditions, needs, and constraints. This includes outlining specific objectives and identifying the types of coordination or shared service models to explore. Potential areas of focus may include:

- Evaluating full system consolidation versus interlocal agreements.
- Exploring joint purchasing, staffing, or emergency response partnerships.
- Assessing shared billing platforms and customer service systems.
- Identifying infrastructure interconnections or future tie-in opportunities.
- Considering legal, regulatory, and organizational implications for each option.

STEP 3 **Develop and Issue a Request for Proposals (RFP)**
Work with regional partners to develop an RFP that aligns with each county's defined scope and objectives for the feasibility study. The RFP should ask consultants to:

- Evaluate current wastewater system conditions and infrastructure.
- Model coordination scenarios, such as shared services or district formation.
- Facilitate stakeholder engagement and information gathering.
- Analyze financial, operational, and governance options.
- Provide tailored recommendations and implementation strategies.

Counties may choose to issue individual RFPs or collaborate on a joint procurement process if pursuing a regional approach.

STEP 4 **Secure Funding and Hire a Consultant**
Counties should seek funding from state or federal programs to support the feasibility studies. The estimated cost for a county-level wastewater district feasibility study is typically $50,000 to $100,000, depending on the scope of analysis, number of systems involved, and level of stakeholder engagement required. Potential funding sources are outlined on page 35.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 5 **Conduct Feasibility Studies and Review Findings**
Consultants should:

- Analyze technical, financial, and operational data from participating utilities.
- Interview stakeholders to assess service delivery needs and governance considerations.
- Compare service models and cost structures across multiple coordination scenarios.
- Provide clear, data-informed recommendations tailored to each county's context.
- Outline potential implementation pathways, governance options, and funding strategies.

STEP 6 **Share Results and Consider Implementation Options**
Present findings to county governments and utility boards. If opportunities for consolidation or shared services are identified, outline next steps for interlocal agreements, district formation, or additional engineering and legal planning as appropriate. Examples of potential implementation models include:

- **Joint Operations Agreement:** Two or more utilities maintain separate ownership but agree to jointly operate treatment facilities, share maintenance responsibilities, and coordinate staffing to reduce costs.
- **Countywide Wastewater District:** A new public utility district formed at the county level assumes responsibility for wastewater services previously managed by individual municipalities, enabling streamlined governance, unified rate structures, and expanded funding eligibility.
- **Contracted Management Services:** Smaller utilities retain ownership of infrastructure but contract with a larger system or third-party provider for administrative, billing, or technical services.
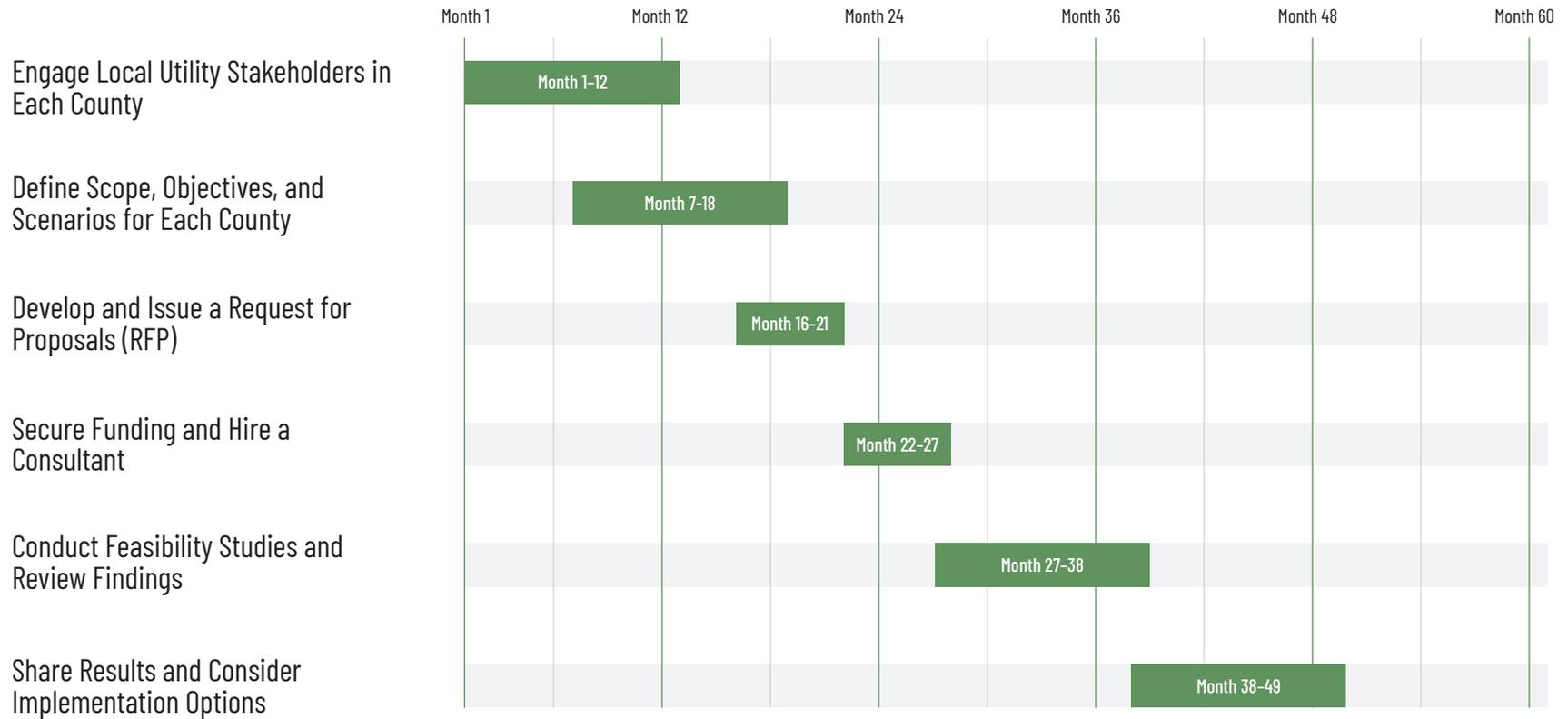
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Public trust and local control concerns should be addressed early through clear communication.
- Legal counsel may be needed to guide interlocal agreements or district formation.
- Projects that improve coordination among systems often score better in competitive grant programs.

POTENTIAL FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Water & Waste Disposal Predevelopment Planning Grants	Rolling	$60,000	25%	Reimbursable
Kentucky Infrastructure Authority – Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (Loan)	N/A	N/A	N/A	Loan
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA) Technical Assistance	N/A	None	20-51%	Loan

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60
Engage Local Utility Stakeholders in Each County	Month 1-12					
Define Scope, Objectives, and Scenarios for Each County		Month 7-18				
Develop and Issue a Request for Proposals (RFP)			Month 16–21			
Secure Funding and Hire a Consultant			Month 22–27			
Conduct Feasibility Studies and Review Findings				Month 27–38		
Share Results and Consider Implementation Options					Month 38–49	

Riverport Infrastructure and Expansion Plan

- RFP for Port Authority Feasibility Study for St. Charles, Missouri County Government
- RFP – Port of Royal Slope Multimodal Inland Port: Economic Feasibility Study
- Economic Impact Analysis of Public Port Authority Operations in Owensboro, KY
- Salisbury Port Feasibility Study

Utility Rate Study

- RFP for Wastewater Cost of Service Rate Study – Hardin County Water District No. 1
- RFP for Water, Sewer, Stormwater Utility Rate Study – City Of Derby, Kansas
- Knoxville Utilities Board (KUB) Water and Wastewater Cost of Service Study
- City of Fayetteville Water and Wastewater Comprehensive Rate Study

Wastewater District Feasibility Study

- RFP for Suffolk County, NY – Countywide Wastewater Management District Feasibility Study
- Johnston County, North Carolina – Regionalization Feasibility Report
- Broome County Wastewater Systems Financial Feasibility Study – Broome County, New York

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

OVERVIEW

The following key trends and challenges related to workforce development were identified through quantitative and qualitative research gathered during the Community Assessment of the Fulton region:

- **Skilled Trades Enrollment Decline:** Strong workforce programs exist, but low enrollment in skilled trades threatens sustainability, requiring continued investment and industry support.
- **Adult Education Access Gaps:** WKEC provides industry-aligned adult education, but limited employer engagement and geographic barriers hinder participation, requiring stronger industry partnerships and accessible training sites.
- **Hiring and Retention Challenges:** Unemployment is low, but a shrinking labor force and workforce barriers make hiring and retention difficult for businesses.
- **Limited Local Higher Education:** Post-secondary attainment is rising, but limited local access to higher education forces students to leave the region, making talent retention a challenge.
- **Low Wages and Job Options:** Low entry-level wages and limited job options make it difficult to attract and retain workers, driving talent out of the region.
- **Career Pathway Expansion:** Workforce programs are creating career pathways, but higher wages and industry growth are needed to retain local talent.
- **Declining Workforce Participation:** Low workforce participation and mid-career worker declines highlight the need for targeted retention and recruitment strategies.

In response to these key trends and challenges, the following strategic opportunities were identified for the Fulton region:

- **Strengthen Skilled Trades Partnerships:** Strengthen industry partnerships and career awareness programs to boost enrollment in skilled trades and sustain workforce pipelines.
- **Expand Adult Training Access:** Expand employer partnerships, outreach efforts, and training accessibility to increase adult participation in industry-aligned programs.
- **Workforce Recruitment and Retention:** Develop targeted workforce recruitment and retention programs to help businesses attract and sustain a stable labor force.
- **Improve Higher Education Access:** Expand local access to post-secondary and workforce training programs to retain skilled workers in the region.
- **Attract Competitive-Wage Industries:** Attract industries that offer competitive wages and expand career pathways to retain young workers.
- **Expand High-Wage Career Paths:** Expand workforce training programs and industry partnerships to create higher-paying job opportunities.
- **Retain Mid-Career Workers:** Develop targeted retention strategies to attract mid-career professionals and strengthen workforce participation.

PROPOSED PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

Based on the findings in the Community Assessment, the following proposed projects were shared with the Steering Committee for consideration and discussion:

- **Four Stage Regional Workforce Initiative**
  - → **Stage 1 – Regional Workforce and Industry Market Study:** Conduct a regional market study to identify high-growth job sectors, workforce training gaps, and industry recruitment opportunities, ensuring alignment between education, training programs, and employers offering livable-wage jobs.
  - → **Stage 2 – Regional Skilled Trades Initiative** (Based on Market Study Findings): Increase access to skilled trades training through industry showcases, employer-led workshops, and a shared apprenticeship program to strengthen workforce pipelines and expand enrollment in technical education and workforce training programs.
  - → **Stage 3 – Regional Higher Education and Workforce Hub:** Partner with Murray State University, WKCTC, and local employers to provide short-term, on-site training in high-demand fields, reducing geographic and scheduling barriers for adult learners and job seekers.
  - → **Stage 4 – Regional Workforce Recruitment and Retention Program:** Build a regional workforce recruitment and retention program that connects employers with job seekers through targeted outreach, employer-led training, and retention incentives to strengthen workforce stability.
- **Recruit and Train Water/Wastewater Techs:** Partner with the Kentucky Rural Water Association (KRWA) and the Kentucky Water and Wastewater Operators Association (KWWOA) to actively recruit, train, and certify unemployed or underemployed young adults (ages 18-25) for careers in water and wastewater operations.

During the Strategy Workshop, the Steering Committee agreed to prioritize both proposed workforce projects. Their decision was based on the viability of each concept, the availability of potential partners and resources, and the level of community support.

FINAL PRIORITIZATION

Following the Strategy Workshop and Core Team review, the list of workforce development projects was prioritized as follows:

1. Four Stage Regional Workforce Initiative
2. Recruit and Train Water/Wastewater Techs

These projects reflect shared workforce needs across the four river counties and are intended to strengthen local training pipelines, align education with employer demand, and expand access to quality employment opportunities. Each project is described in more detail on the following pages.

STAGE 1: REGIONAL WORKFORCE & INDUSTRY MARKET STUDY

Conduct a regional market study to identify high-growth job sectors, workforce training gaps, and industry recruitment opportunities, ensuring alignment between education, training programs, and employers offering livable-wage jobs.

IDEAL LEAD   WEST KENTUCKY WORKFORCE BOARD

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC)
- Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board (KWIB)
- Murray State University
- Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- Local workforce boards
- Local governments and economic development offices
- Chambers of commerce and employer networks
- West Kentucky Alliance for a Vibrant Economy (WAVE)
- Four Rivers Career Academy

GOALS

- Identify high-demand occupations and industry trends in the four river counties.
- Map education and training offerings to regional employment opportunities.
- Assess workforce barriers such as access, geography, skills mismatch, or demographics.
- Recommend priority sectors and programs for investment and alignment.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1 **Secure Funding and Project Support**
- Identify funding sources, including federal or state workforce development grants.
- Seek local contributions from governments and philanthropic partners.
- Engage local officials and workforce stakeholders early to build buy-in and ensure the study results will be used.

STEP 2 **Convene Skilled Trades Employer Working Group and Develop Scope**
Form a working group of local trades employers, training providers, and educators—facilitated by the lead entity and supported by local economic development offices—to:

- Help define project goals and areas of focus related to skilled trades.
- Identify in-demand occupations and training challenges from the outset.
- Inform the project scope to ensure relevance to real-world workforce needs.

Use the working group's input to define a clear project scope that includes:

- Labor market analysis (current demand and projections).
- Employer and stakeholder engagement.
- Workforce pipeline analysis (from K–12 through postsecondary).
- Training capacity assessment.

Once the scope is finalized, issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) to qualified workforce research firms or university partners to carry out the study.

STEP 3 **Conduct the Market Study**
The selected consultant will:

- Analyze labor market data from state and federal sources.
- Interview employers and conduct focus groups with workers and students.
- Identify training program gaps and opportunities for expansion.
- Summarize findings in a comprehensive report with charts, maps, and narratives.
- Complete the final report within 6–9 months, including an executive summary for decision-makers.

STEP 4   **Review Findings and Lay Groundwork for Stage 2**
Reconvene the Skilled Trades Employer Working Group to:

- Interpret study findings related to the skilled trades.
- Validate in-demand occupations and training gaps identified in the research.
- Develop shared goals, program ideas, and a calendar of recruitment and awareness activities.
- Lay the groundwork for Stage 2 implementation efforts.

STEP 5   **Share Findings and Translate into Action**
Hold a regional workforce summit to present the findings to community stakeholders. Use the report to:

- Inform strategic planning for school districts, colleges, and economic developers.
- Guide future program development and funding proposals.
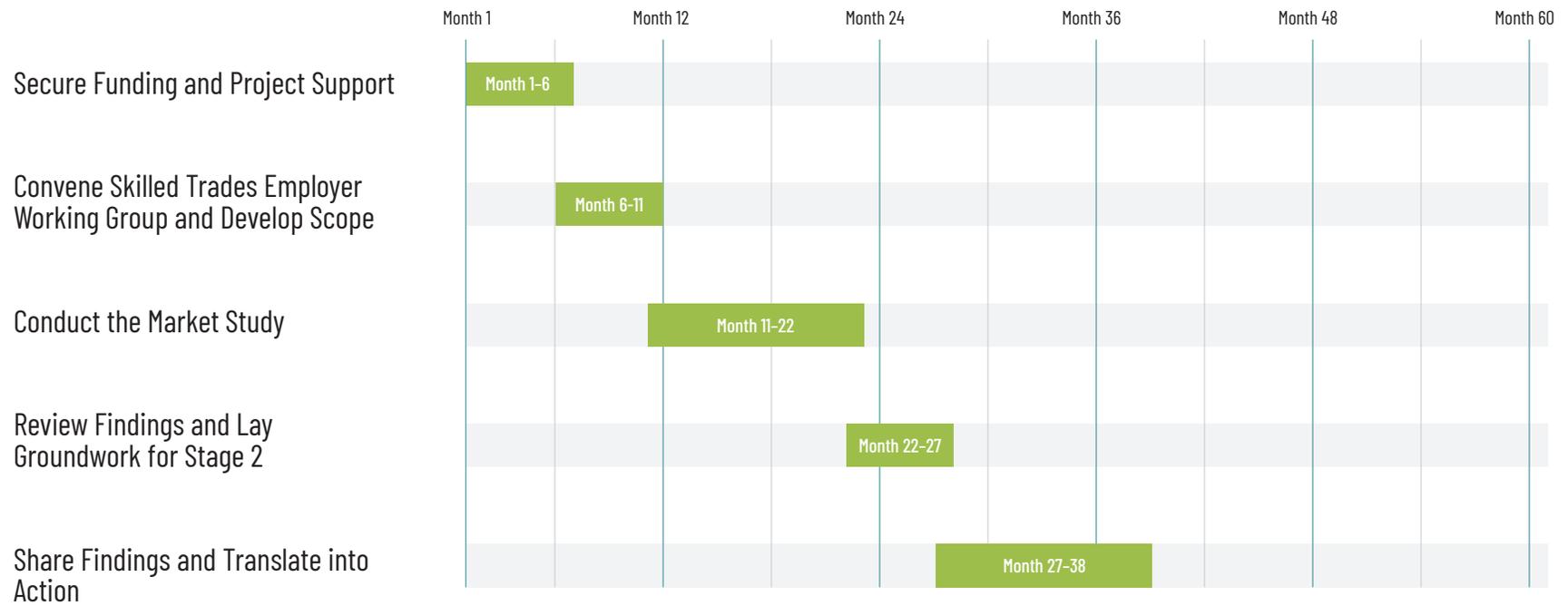- Build consensus around shared workforce priorities and opportunities.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure that findings are disaggregated by county to reflect local variation.
- Include community engagement and employer validation throughout the process.
- Provide actionable, fundable recommendations—not just data.
- Emphasize implementation and coordination across counties to support region-wide workforce development goals.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG)	Typically Feb. 28	$500,000	Not required, but applicants are more competitive with a match	Reimbursable
U.S. Department of Labor – Workforce Opportunities for Rural Communities (WORC)	TBD	$1,500,000	None	Reimbursable
U.S. Economic Development Administration – FY 2021-2023 Planning and Local Technical Assistance Program	Rolling	Typically TA awards are $100,000	20–50% depending on economic distress criteria	Reimbursable

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60
Secure Funding and Project Support	Month 1-6					
Convene Skilled Trades Employer Working Group and Develop Scope		Month 6-11				
Conduct the Market Study			Month 11-22			
Review Findings and Lay Groundwork for Stage 2				Month 22-27		
Share Findings and Translate into Action				Month 27-38		

STAGE 2: **REGIONAL SKILLED TRADES INITIATIVE**

Increase access to skilled trades training through industry showcases, employer-led workshops, and a shared apprenticeship program to strengthen workforce pipelines and expand enrollment in technical education and workforce training programs.

This initiative builds on findings from the Stage 1 Market Study, which identified priority skilled trades sectors, existing training gaps, and local employer needs.

IDEAL LEAD   WEST KENTUCKY COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE (WKCTC)
with support from the West Kentucky Workforce Board and local employers

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- West Kentucky Workforce Board
- Four Rivers Career Academy
- Local school districts
- Murray State University
- West Kentucky Alliance for a Vibrant Economy (WAVE)
- Local employers and trade associations
- Kentucky Education and Labor Cabinet
- Area Technology Centers and CTE coordinators
- Chambers of commerce

GOALS

- Raise awareness of skilled trades careers among youth and adults.
- Strengthen the connection between employers and training institutions.
- Create hands-on learning opportunities through employer-led events and apprenticeships.
- Increase enrollment in skilled trades training programs.
- Build a more sustainable pipeline for critical occupations (e.g., construction, electrical, HVAC, plumbing, welding).

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1 **Design and Launch Awareness Campaign**
Work with partners to create and promote outreach efforts informed by the results of the Stage 1 Market Study. Focus on:

- Employer-led classroom presentations in middle and high schools.
- Career days and industry showcases with hands-on demonstrations.
- Multimedia outreach (videos, flyers, social media) targeted to youth and adult learners.

STEP 2 **Strengthen School-to-Work Pathways**
Support local schools in connecting students to trades careers by:

- Aligning CTE course offerings with regional employer needs.
- Offering job shadowing and mentorship programs.
- Expanding dual-credit and work-based learning opportunities with nearby training centers.

STEP 3 **Develop Shared Apprenticeship Model**
Work with employers, WKCTC, and other providers to establish a regionally coordinated apprenticeship framework. Focus on:

- Pooling employer demand for training in key trades.
- Standardizing requirements and certifications, where possible.
- Leveraging state apprenticeship funding and technical assistance.

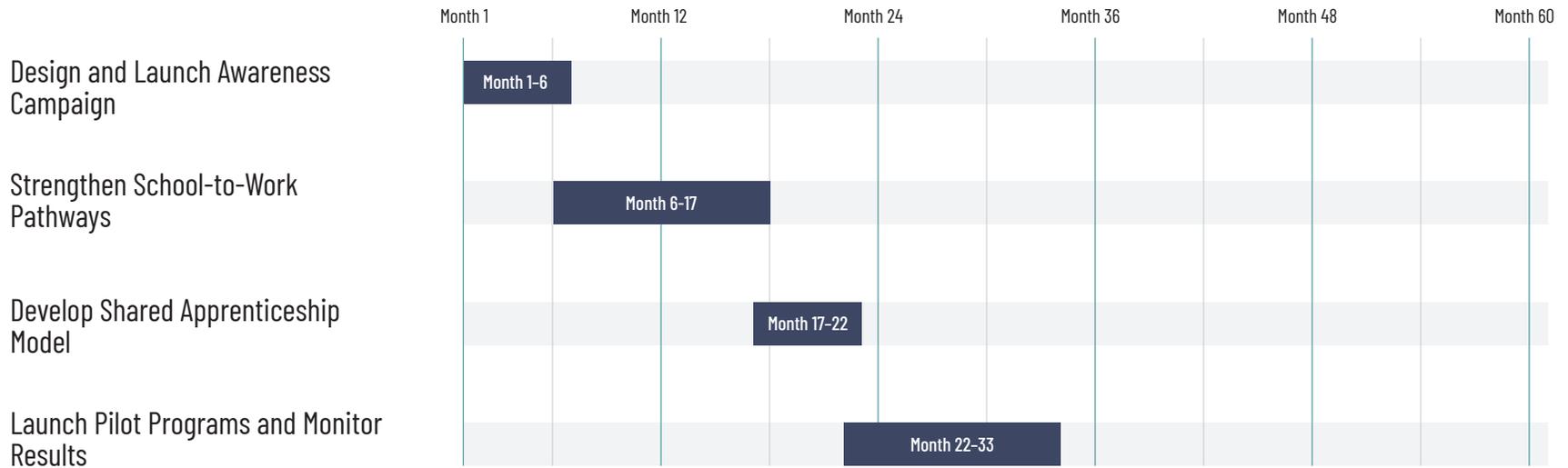**STEP 4** **Launch Pilot Programs and Monitor Results**
Initiate pilot apprenticeship cohorts in 2–3 high-demand trades. Track:

- Employer participation and trainee progress.
- Program completion and job placement rates.
- Lessons learned to inform program scaling across the region.
- Pilot programs should launch within 12–18 months of the working group's formation, with results evaluated after one full training cycle.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) – States' Economic Development Assistance Program (SEDAP)	TBD	$500,000	Varies	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) – Delta Workforce Grant	Typically Dec. 20	$300,000	10%, but applicants located in distressed counties do not need to demonstrate match	Reimbursable
U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) – Workforce Opportunities for Rural Communities (WORC)	TBD	$1,500,000	None	Reimbursable
Kentucky Community & Technical College System (KCTCS) – TRAINS	Contact KCTCS to request application materials			
Kentucky Department of Education – Perkins V	Contact Lori Looney, Office of Career and Technical Education (502)564-4286 | lori.looney@education.ky.gov			
Employer contributions and local funding matches				

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Design and Launch Awareness Campaign — Month 1–6

Strengthen School-to-Work Pathways — Month 6–17

Develop Shared Apprenticeship Model — Month 17–22

Launch Pilot Programs and Monitor Results — Month 22–33

STAGE 3: REGIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE HUB

Partner with Murray State University, WKCTC, and local employers to provide short-term, on-site training in high-demand fields, reducing geographic and scheduling barriers for adult learners and job seekers.

IDEAL LEAD WEST KENTUCKY COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE (WKCTC)

with potential support from Murray State University

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Local school districts and public libraries
- Area Technology Centers and CTE coordinators
- Four Rivers Career Academy
- Employers and industry associations
- Kentucky Education and Labor Cabinet
- Chambers of commerce
- Nonprofit adult education and training providers

GOALS

- Expand short-term, job-focused training programs in high-demand industries.
- Reach adult learners and underemployed workers in rural or underserved communities.
- Create flexible, accessible delivery models (e.g., mobile, on-site, hybrid, online) using pop-up or mobile training sites where possible.
- Strengthen employer partnerships to ensure training relevance and placement.
- Reduce geographic, financial, and scheduling barriers to postsecondary training.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1 **Assess Community Needs and Facility Gaps**
Work with local governments, libraries, and schools to:

- Identify underserved areas with limited access to training.
- Inventory available facilities that could host temporary or mobile training programs.
- Document key logistical needs (e.g., internet, classroom space, parking).

STEP 2 **Engage Higher Education Partners to Design the Hub Model**
Collaborate with Murray State, WKCTC, and other providers to:

- Use results from the regional workforce study (Stage 1) to help select relevant credential programs and identify delivery gaps.
- Select high-demand credential programs that can be delivered flexibly.
- Develop course delivery models (e.g., pop-up sites, hybrid formats, online modules).
- Define operational roles, scheduling structures, and support services.

STEP 3 **Identify Pilot Sites and Employer Partners**
Choose 2–3 locations for early implementation, based on community need and employer demand. Involve employers by:

- Identifying training gaps tied to local hiring needs.
- Coordinating guest instructors, equipment, or internships.
- Supporting outreach to prospective students.

STEP 4 **Launch Initial Training Programs and Outreach Campaign**
Implement training at pilot sites with:

- Tailored student support services (e.g., childcare referrals, transportation stipends).
- Outreach strategies targeted to adult learners, including support from community members or program graduates.
- Flexible enrollment and class schedules to meet working adults' needs.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 5
Monitor Outcomes and Refine the Model
Track participation, completion, and employment outcomes across all pilot sites. Adjust course offerings, outreach methods, and scheduling based on:

- Student and instructor feedback.
- Employer satisfaction and placement success.
- Community demand for additional locations or programs.

The lead institution(s) should coordinate data collection and reporting to ensure consistency across pilot sites.

Pilot programs should launch within 12–18 months of the planning process and be evaluated after one full training cycle.
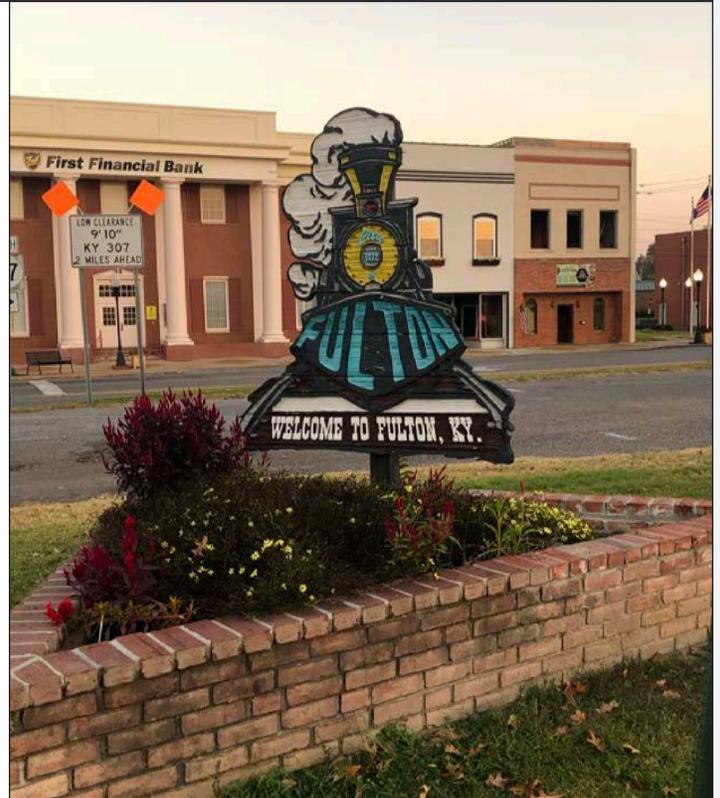
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure the hub model complements, rather than competes with, existing local training options.
- Focus early implementation on communities with high workforce need and limited postsecondary access.
- Embed wraparound supports such as career coaching, digital literacy, and financial aid navigation.
- Coordinate with adult education providers and incorporate credential pathways ranging from short-term certifications to associate and bachelor's degrees.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) – Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants	Typically September	$5,750,000	None	Reimbursable
U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) – Build to Scale Program	Typically October	$5,000,000	1:1	Reimbursable
U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) – Workforce Opportunities for Rural Communities (WORC)	TBD	$1,500,000	None	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) – Delta Workforce Grant	Typically Dec. 20	$300,000	10%, but applicants located in distressed counties do not need to demonstrate match	Reimbursable
Kentucky Statewide Reserve Fund	1st Wed. of Each Month	N/A	N/A	Direct
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) – States' Economic Development Assistance Program (SEDAP)	TBD	$500,000	Varies	Reimbursable
Local philanthropic and employer contributions				

TIMELINE
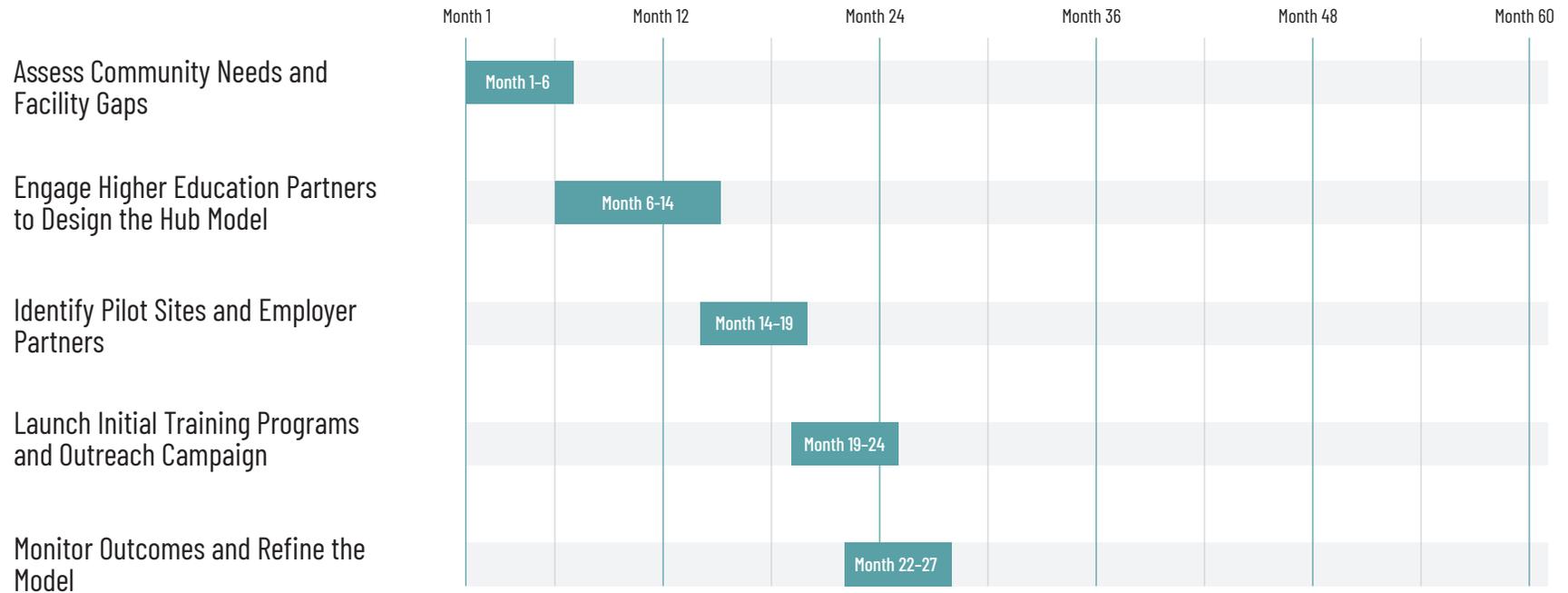
	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Assess Community Needs and Facility Gaps — Month 1–6

Engage Higher Education Partners to Design the Hub Model — Month 6-14

Identify Pilot Sites and Employer Partners — Month 14–19

Launch Initial Training Programs and Outreach Campaign — Month 19–24

Monitor Outcomes and Refine the Model — Month 22–27

STAGE 4: **REGIONAL WORKFORCE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION PROGRAM**

Build a regional workforce recruitment and retention program that connects employers with job seekers through targeted outreach, employer-led training, and retention incentives to strengthen workforce stability.

IDEAL LEAD   COUNTY GOVERNMENTS OR A REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ENTITY

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Local employers and HR associations
- Housing authorities and real estate professionals
- Childcare providers and family services
- Local workforce boards and PADD
- Marketing and branding consultants
- Higher education and adult learning institutions

GOALS

- Increase workforce participation among residents not currently in the labor force.
- Improve worker retention by addressing common barriers (e.g., housing, childcare, transportation).
- Attract new residents by promoting quality of life and employment opportunities.
- Support employers with tools and programs to stabilize their workforce.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1   **Conduct Regional Workforce Barrier Assessment**
Engage employers, workers, and community leaders to identify the top barriers to employment and retention. Use surveys, focus groups, and public input to gather data on:

- Housing availability and affordability.
- Childcare access and costs.
- Transportation reliability.
- Job quality and advancement opportunities.

The findings should inform the design of targeted retention and recruitment strategies in subsequent steps.

STEP 2   **Develop Regional Recruitment Messaging and Tools**
Work with local branding experts to develop a messaging toolkit that promotes:

- Career opportunities in high-demand industries.
- The lifestyle and cost-of-living advantages of the region.
- Testimonials from workers who have relocated or found success locally.
- Materials that employers can use in their own recruitment efforts.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 3   **Launch Pilot Retention Programs**
Collaborate with 3–5 local employers to test workforce support strategies such as:

- Employee relocation assistance.
- Childcare stipends or partnerships with local providers.
- Transportation vouchers or vanpool programs.
- Onboarding supports and mentorship for new hires.

STEP 4   **Establish Employer Resource Hub**
Create a shared online portal where employers can:

- Access retention strategies, templates, and success stories.
- Post jobs and connect with local training providers.
- Participate in regional workforce planning and collaboration efforts.
- Consider using local libraries or workforce board offices as optional in-person touchpoints.

STEP 5   **Measure Outcomes and Scale Successful Strategies**
Track participation, satisfaction, and retention data from pilot efforts. Adjust and expand programs based on:

- Employer and worker feedback.
- Cost-effectiveness and scalability.
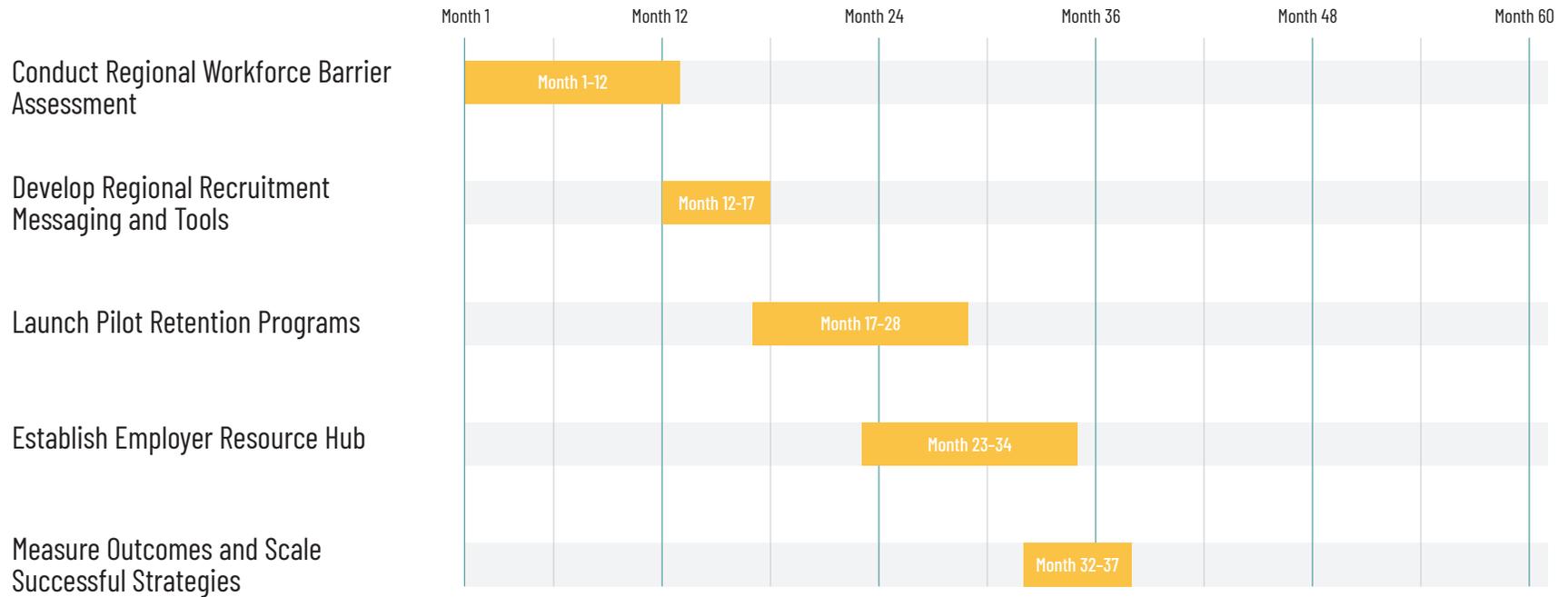- Geographic or sector-specific needs.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure the strategy supports both recruitment of new residents and retention of current workers.
- Design programs to be inclusive of low-income, entry-level, and underrepresented jobseekers.
- Align efforts with other regional projects such as housing development, training access, and economic growth.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Rural Business Development Grant	Typically Feb. 28	$500,000	Not required, but applicants are more competitive with a match	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) – States' Economic Development Assistance Program (SEDAP)	TBD	$500,000	Varies	Reimbursable

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Conduct Regional Workforce Barrier Assessment — Month 1-12

Develop Regional Recruitment Messaging and Tools — Month 12-17

Launch Pilot Retention Programs — Month 17-28

Establish Employer Resource Hub — Month 23-34

Measure Outcomes and Scale Successful Strategies — Month 32-37

RECRUIT AND TRAIN WATER/ WASTEWATER TECHS

Partner with the Kentucky Rural Water Association (KRWA) and the Kentucky Water and Wastewater Operators Association (KWWOA) to actively recruit, train, and certify unemployed or underemployed young adults (ages 18-25) for careers in water and wastewater operations.

IDEAL LEAD   LOCAL UTILITIES *in partnership with the* Kentucky Rural Water Association *(KRWA)*

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Kentucky Water and Wastewater Operators Association (KWWOA)
- County governments and municipal utility boards
- Four Rivers Career Academy and local school districts
- West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC) and other training providers
- Kentucky Infrastructure Authority (KIA)
- Workforce boards and youth-serving organizations

GOALS

- Recruit and engage unemployed or underemployed young adults.
- Train participants in water/wastewater systems operations and safety.
- Provide certification pathways and on-the-job experience.
- Help local utilities address current and future staffing shortages.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1

Assess Utility Workforce Needs and Capacity

Work with local utilities to:

- Identify projected retirements and current workforce gaps.
- Inventory available roles and minimum qualifications.
- Determine capacity to host apprentices, interns, or entry-level workers.

STEP 2

Develop Recruitment and Outreach Strategy

Partner with schools, youth programs, and community organizations to:

- Promote careers in utilities through job fairs and information sessions.
- Target outreach to 18–25 year-olds not currently in school or employment.
- Highlight job stability, pay, benefits, and advancement potential.

STEP 3

Identify Training Providers and Certification Requirements

Coordinate with KRWA, KWWOA, and WKCTC to:

- Offer short-term certification programs tailored to regional needs.
- Align training with state licensure and operator requirements.
- Provide supportive services such as tutoring or exam preparation.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 4 **Launch Pilot Training Cohorts and Job Placements**
Start with a small group of trainees in each county or regionally. Include:

- Classroom instruction and hands-on technical training.
- Site visits to local utilities and mentoring from licensed operators.
- Structured pathways to licensure and job placement support.

STEP 5 **Track Outcomes and Build a Replicable Model**
Measure the program's success through:

- Participant enrollment, completion, and job placement rates.
- Employer satisfaction and retention of entry-level hires.
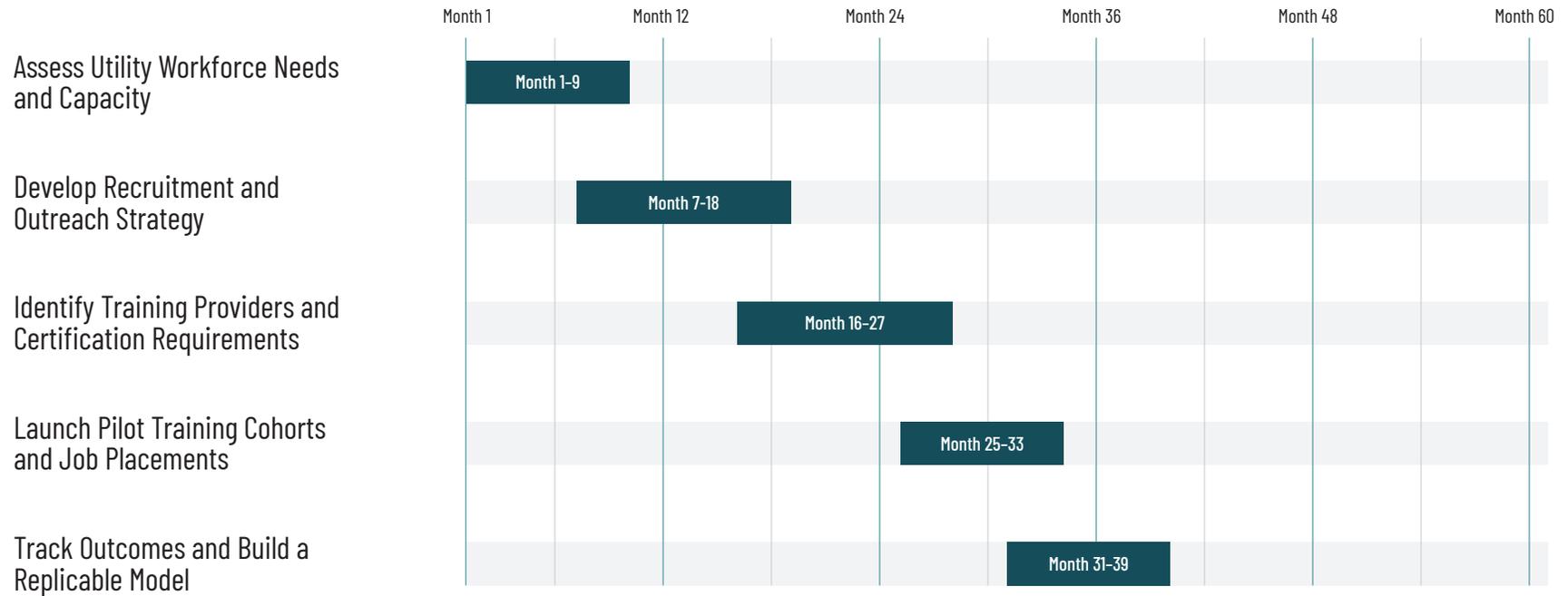- Lessons learned for scaling the program across additional counties.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure training is affordable or grant-funded for participants.
- Include soft skills, safety training, and professional development components.
- Address transportation and scheduling barriers for rural trainees.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) – Workforce Opportunities for Rural Communities (WORC)	TBD	$1,500,000	None	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) – Delta Workforce Grant	Typically Dec. 20	$300,000	10%, but applicants located in distressed counties do not need to demonstrate match	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) – States' Economic Development Assistance Program (SEDAP)	TBD	$500,000	Varies	Reimbursable
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Water & Waste Disposal Technical Assistance & Training Grants	December 31, 2025 (applications open October 1)	None	None	Reimbursable

Local utilities or philanthropic contributions

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Assess Utility Workforce Needs and Capacity — Month 1-9

Develop Recruitment and Outreach Strategy — Month 7-18

Identify Training Providers and Certification Requirements — Month 16-27

Launch Pilot Training Cohorts and Job Placements — Month 25-33

Track Outcomes and Build a Replicable Model — Month 31-39

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BEST PRACTICES & RESOURCES

Four-Stage Regional Workforce Initiative

Stage 1
- Upper Peninsula Labor Market Study RFP (2022)
- Upper Peninsula Labor Market Study (2023)
- Rapid City Tech Hubs Workforce Development Plan RFP (2024)
- DRA's Labor Market And Workforce Report (2021)

Stage 2
- Career Ready Berks: Career Ready Berks is an alliance developed by Berks County School Districts, post-secondary institutions, businesses and local business organizations to provide information, resources, and training programs to the 70,000 students in Berks County.
- West Virginia – Apprenticeship In Motion (AIM) Program: The Apprenticeship In Motion (AIM) program promotes and expands registered, nontraditional apprenticeship activity in West Virginia.

Stage 3
- West Virginia Junior College – Mobile Nursing Lab: The WVJC Mobile Nursing Lab is a 38-foot RV configured to include two fully functioning patient care rooms for students to complete high-fidelity simulations.
- Northern New Mexico Workforce Integration Network – Mobile Training Unit: The Mobile Training Unit delivers hands-on skilled trades training to rural and tribal communities and overcomes geographic barriers to workforce development.

Stage 4
- The Talent Continuum – Midland County, Michigan: Midland's approach to the talent continuum emphasizes community-wide efforts—from employers to educators to neighbors—to attract, retain, and support local talent by fostering connections, mentorship, and meaningful opportunities to grow and stay.
- MI Tri-Share: MI Tri-Share splits the cost of licensed childcare evenly between the employer, the employee, and the State of Michigan, helping working parents access affordable, reliable care.

Recruit and Train Water/Wastewater Techs
- Kentucky Rural Water Association (KRWA)
- Kentucky Water and Wastewater Operators Association (KWWOA)

HOUSING

OVERVIEW

The following key trends and challenges related to housing were identified through quantitative and qualitative research gathered during the Community Assessment of the Fulton region:

- **Homeownership Barriers:** Despite strong homeownership rates, rising costs and aging housing stock are making it harder for renters to become homeowners.
- **Infrastructure Constraints on Growth:** Limited new construction and wastewater capacity constraints are restricting housing development across the region, despite strong demand.
- **Vacancy and Blight Limit Availability:** High vacancy rates and blighted properties are limiting housing availability, but local efforts are laying the groundwork for revitalization and redevelopment.
- **Affordable Housing Shortage:** Low-income renters struggle with rising housing costs, limited affordable options, and a shortage of quality rental units.

In response to these key trends and challenges, the following strategic opportunities were identified for the Fulton region:

- **Homebuyer Assistance Expansion:** Expand homebuyer assistance programs that provide financial education, down payment support, and resources for first-time buyers.
- **Infrastructure Investment for Growth:** Invest in wastewater infrastructure upgrades to enable new housing development and support long-term growth.
- **Regional Land Bank Initiative:** Establish a regional land bank or revitalization program to streamline the acquisition, redevelopment, and resale of vacant properties.
- **Blight Reduction Program:** Implement a regional blight reduction program to identify, prioritize, and remove deteriorated properties, creating space for new housing and community development.
- **Affordable Housing Expansion:** Expand affordable housing initiatives, including rental assistance programs, incentives for rehabilitating substandard rental properties, and efforts to increase the supply of affordable rental units.

PROPOSED PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

Based on the findings in the Community Assessment, the following proposed projects were shared with the Steering Committee for consideration and discussion:

- **Partner with Community Ventures on a County-by-County Housing Initiative:**
  - → Depending on the county this initiative may require:
    - ▪ A housing needs assessment
    - ▪ An inventory of available land
  - → Community Ventures housing programs include:
    - ▪ Homebuyer education
    - ▪ Homeownership support
- **Four-County Land Bank Feasibility Study:** Conduct a study to assess the viability of establishing a regional land bank, including legal, financial, and administrative requirements, and identify best practices from similar rural regions.
- **Blight Reduction Initiative:** Develop a regional blight reduction initiative to assess properties, secure demolition and rehabilitation funding, and partner with local governments to clear blight and prepare sites for housing and community projects.

During the Strategy Workshop, the Steering Committee agreed to prioritize all three proposed housing projects. Their decision was based on the viability of each concept, the availability of potential partners and resources, and the level of community support.

FINAL PRIORITIZATION

Following the Strategy Workshop and Core Team review, the list of housing projects was prioritized as follows. As part of this review, the original regional blight reduction and four-county land bank concepts were revised to focus on the county level:

1. Partner with Community Ventures on a County-by-County Housing Initiative
2. Blight Reduction Initiative *(to be implemented at the county level)*
3. Land Bank Feasibility Study *(to be implemented at the county level)*

These projects reflect shared housing challenges across the four river counties and are intended to address blight, expand homeownership opportunities, and explore long-term tools to improve housing conditions. Each project is described in more detail on the following pages.

PARTNER WITH COMMUNITY VENTURES ON A COUNTY-BY-COUNTY HOUSING INITIATIVE

IDEAL LEAD COMMUNITY VENTURES *working with each county government*

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Local planning commissions
- The Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- Housing authorities and nonprofit developers
- Local banks and mortgage lenders
- Real estate professionals and landowners
- School districts and large employers
- Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC)

GOALS

- Assess current housing conditions, affordability, and demand at the county level.
- Identify sites for new housing construction and infill development.
- Expand access to homeownership through education and financial tools.
- Support workforce and resident retention through housing investment.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1 **Initiate County-Level Housing Conversations**
Meet with county officials and local stakeholders in partnership with Community Ventures.
Define housing priorities and identify local opportunities or challenges. Topics may include:

- Senior housing, workforce housing, or mixed-income needs.
- Sites or buildings available for redevelopment.
- Alignment with broader economic or infrastructure projects.

STEP 2 **Conduct Needs Assessments and Site Inventories**
Where recent data is unavailable, Community Ventures may conduct:

- Housing needs assessments to evaluate demand, affordability, and conditions.
- Land and property inventories to identify infill, redevelopment, or greenfield sites.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 3   **Design County-Specific Housing Strategies**
Tailor the housing response to local conditions. Strategies may include:

- Launching homebuyer education programs or financial counseling.
- Facilitating new construction or modular home development.
- Partnering with local governments on infrastructure readiness for housing sites.

STEP 4   **Secure Funding and Begin Implementation**
Leverage Community Ventures' access to public and private financing tools to:

- Support homeownership or small-scale development projects.
- Identify state and federal programs that align with local housing goals.
- Apply for competitive grants or subsidies to increase affordability and reach.

STEP 5   **Monitor Results and Share Replicable Models**
Track results in each county—such as units built, families served, and funding secured. Share lessons learned across the four counties to:

- Build momentum and regional awareness.
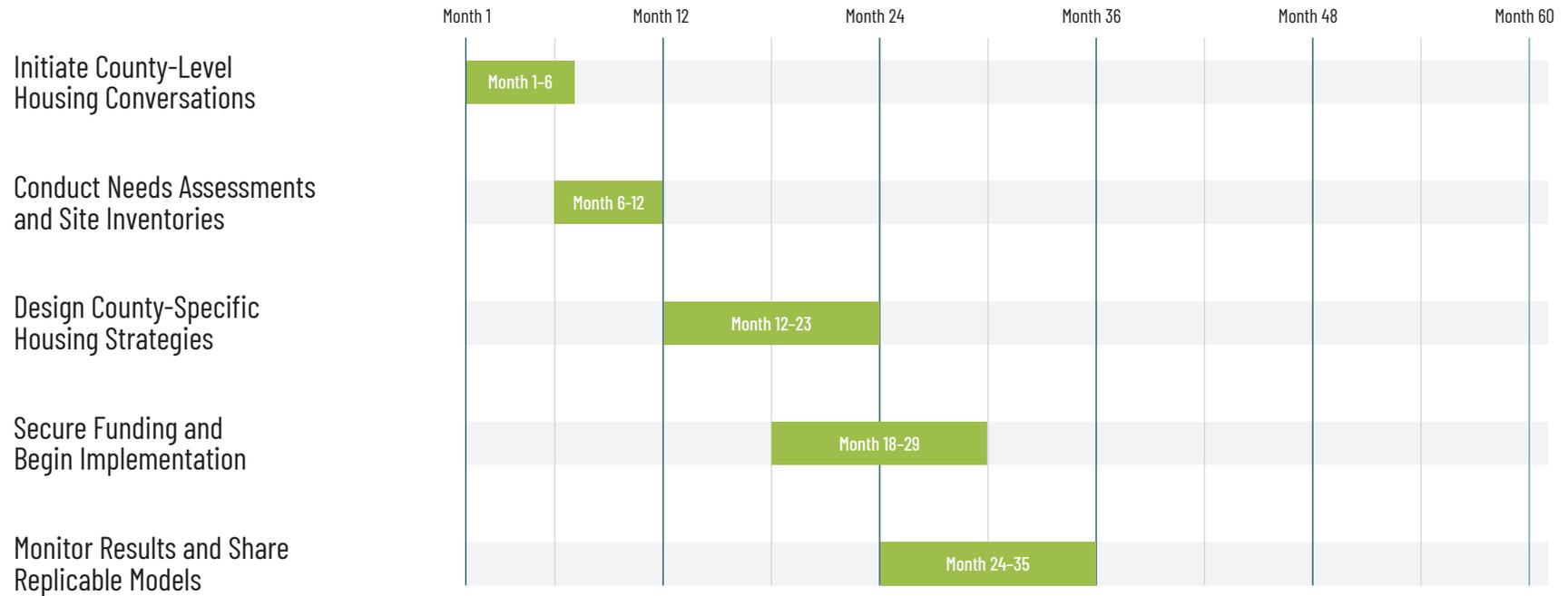- Promote replication in other rural Kentucky counties.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Housing strategies should be shaped by local stakeholders and aligned with workforce, education, and infrastructure priorities.
- Transparency and community engagement will be essential to building trust.
- Each county may be at a different starting point and should proceed at its own pace.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
Kentucky Housing Corporation – HOME Program				
Kentucky Housing Corporation – Affordable Housing Trust Fund				
Kentucky Department for Local Government – Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)	Typically January	$1,000,000	Up to 25% depending on priority	Reimbursable
U.S. Housing and Urban Development – Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant	TBD	$500,000	5%	Reimbursable
Federal Home Loan Bank of Cincinnati – Affordable Housing Program	July 7, 2025 (applications accepted annually in the spring and summer)	Dependent on project type	None	Direct
Community Ventures development and lending programs				
Employer contributions or foundation support				

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60
Initiate County-Level Housing Conversations	Month 1–6					
Conduct Needs Assessments and Site Inventories		Month 6–12				
Design County-Specific Housing Strategies		Month 12–23				
Secure Funding and Begin Implementation			Month 18–29			
Monitor Results and Share Replicable Models			Month 24–35			

BLIGHT REDUCTION INITIATIVE

Develop a county-level blight reduction initiative to assess properties, secure demolition and rehabilitation funding, and partner with local governments to clear blight and prepare sites for housing and community projects based on local needs and capacity.

IDEAL LEAD COUNTY GOVERNMENTS *in partnership with local code enforcement and planning offices*

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Local housing authorities and nonprofits
- Kentucky Department for Local Government (DLG)
- Local contractors and construction firms
- Code enforcement officers and legal advisors
- The Purchase Area Development District (PADD)
- Regional planning staff
- Community volunteers or youth employment programs

GOALS

- Identify and document vacant, abandoned, and blighted properties.
- Reduce safety hazards and neighborhood decline.
- Prepare cleared or stabilized properties for reuse or redevelopment.
- Involve residents and local leaders in efforts to improve their neighborhoods.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1   **Conduct Blight Inventories in Each County**
Work with local planning and code enforcement staff to:

- Develop criteria for identifying blighted properties, which may include:
  → Structures that are vacant and boarded up or open to the elements.
  → Properties with significant structural damage or code violations.
  → Sites with environmental hazards or signs of illegal dumping.
  → Buildings unfit for habitation due to lack of utilities or sanitation.
  → Parcels with years of unpaid taxes or unclear ownership.
- Map and catalog vacant or unsafe structures.
- Prioritize properties based on safety, visibility, or redevelopment potential.

STEP 2   **Align Blight Strategy with County Housing and Development Goals**
Use inventory results to:

- Determine whether properties are best suited for demolition, stabilization, or reuse.
- Identify clusters of blight that could support future housing or green space.
- Coordinate blight reduction with other infrastructure or housing projects.

STEP 3   **Engage Legal and Policy Resources**
Ensure counties are prepared to:

- Review the legal tools available to take action on problem properties, such as condemnation, foreclosure, or nuisance ordinances.
- Use tools like vacant property registries to support enforcement and planning.
- Consult legal counsel early to determine the best approach and help secure title to key sites.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 4
Secure Funding and Begin Implementation

Pursue funding for demolition, cleanup, and redevelopment through:

- State or federal grant programs (see below).
- CDBG funds or revolving loan programs.
- In-kind support from public works or local contractors.

STEP 5
Track Progress and Engage the Public

Set up a simple system to track which properties have been addressed and share progress with the public by:

- Sharing before-and-after photos.
- Highlighting cleared sites ready for redevelopment.
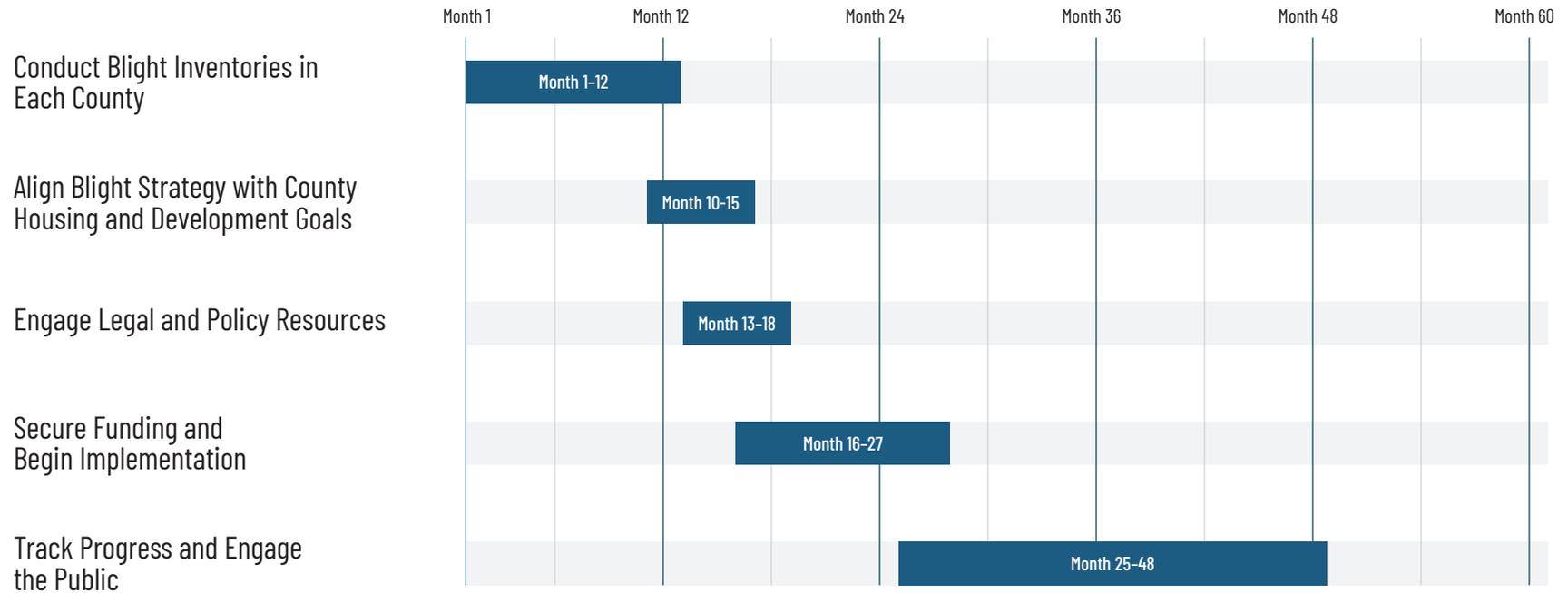- Celebrating community-led cleanup days or reuse projects.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Demolition alone is not a strategy—counties should plan for reuse or long-term maintenance.
- Consider environmental testing or cleanup for older properties.
- Encourage resident involvement to build local ownership and awareness.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
Kentucky Department for Local Government – Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)	Typically January	$1,000,000	Up to 25% depending on priority	Reimbursable
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Housing Preservation Grants	TBD	50% of state allocation	None	Reimbursable
Local government funds				

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60
Conduct Blight Inventories in Each County	Month 1-12					
Align Blight Strategy with County Housing and Development Goals		Month 10-15				
Engage Legal and Policy Resources		Month 13-18				
Secure Funding and Begin Implementation			Month 16-27			
Track Progress and Engage the Public				Month 25-48		

LAND BANK FEASIBILITY STUDY

Conduct a study to assess the viability of establishing a land bank at the county or regional level, including legal, financial, and administrative requirements, and identify best practices from similar rural areas.

IDEAL LEAD COUNTY GOVERNMENTS

with support from the Purchase Area Development District (PADD) or planning advisors

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Local planning commissions and code enforcement officers
- Kentucky Department for Local Government (DLG)
- County attorneys and local judges/executives
- Housing nonprofits and redevelopment authorities
- Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC)
- Local real estate professionals and title attorneys

GOALS

- Assess whether a land bank is a good fit for each county.
- Understand the legal and administrative steps needed to create one.
- Estimate start-up costs, long-term expenses, and possible funding sources.
- Explore how a land bank could support housing, cleanup, and redevelopment priorities.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1   **Engage County Stakeholders and Build Support**
Meet with county officials, planning staff, and legal advisors to:

- Explore interest in forming a land bank and review initial questions or concerns.
- Review how land banks have been used in other Kentucky counties.
- Identify common goals related to housing, property reuse, or blight reduction.

STEP 2   **Define Study Scope and Hire Consultant**
Develop a scope of work for the feasibility study that includes:

- A legal review of authority under KRS Chapter 65 and other laws, including whether counties could collaborate on a shared land bank.
- Administrative structure and staffing options.
- Start-up and long-term operating costs, along with possible funding sources.
- How a land bank would support existing housing, redevelopment, or blight reduction goals.

Once the scope is defined, issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) to identify and hire a qualified planning or legal consultant. The RFP should include:

- A clear summary of the study's goals and the broader purpose of exploring land bank feasibility.
- Expected deliverables, such as a final report, presentation of findings, and sample land bank models
- Project milestones and a proposed timeline for completion.
- Budget information and any available funding commitments.

Counties may consider sharing a common RFP or coordinating efforts to streamline consultant engagement across the region.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 3   **Conduct Study and Share Results**
The selected consultant should:

- Meet with county officials and review local policies related to property management and redevelopment.
- Analyze property data, tax foreclosure procedures, and local market conditions.
- Summarize the potential benefits and drawbacks of creating a land bank.
- Present findings to county leaders with clear, practical recommendations for moving forward.

STEP 4   **Consider Next Steps Based on Findings**
If land bank formation is recommended, counties may:

- Move forward with interlocal agreements or legislative steps needed to authorize a land bank.
- Secure initial funding and begin planning for staffing and operations.
- Start identifying properties that could be acquired, managed, or resold through the land bank.
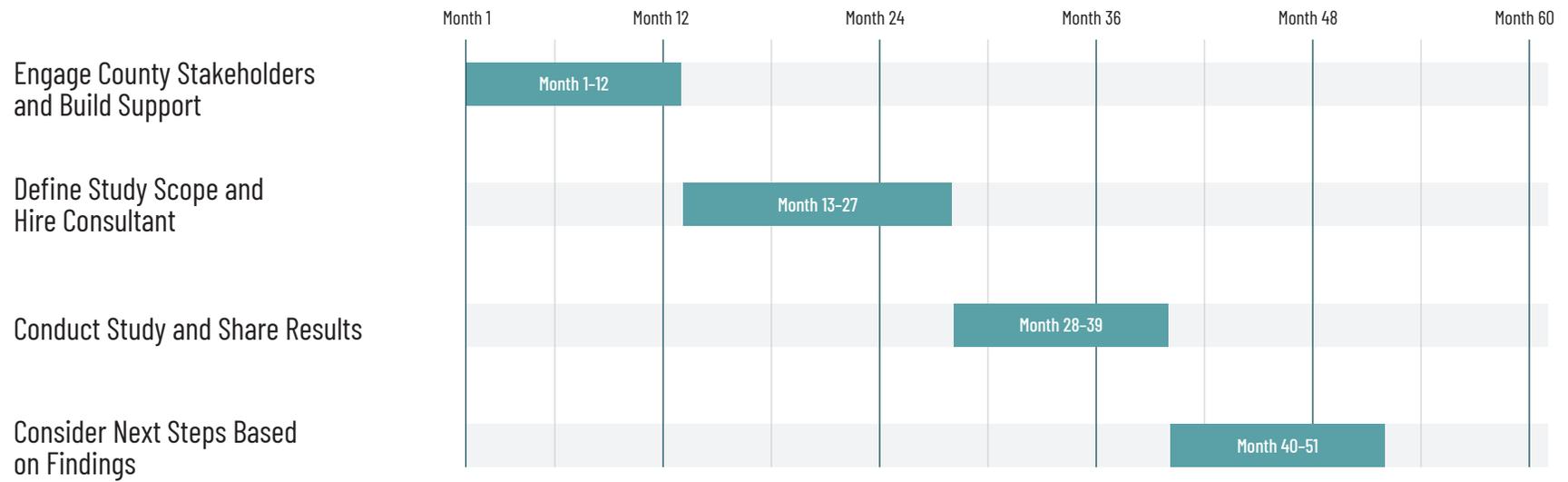
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Each county should consider whether it has the staff, legal support, and capacity to run a land bank effectively. Reviewing model examples or working with groups like PADD, KHC, or the Center for Community Progress can help clarify what's involved.
- Some counties may decide not to create a land bank, but the study can still point to other tools or partnerships for dealing with vacant and abandoned properties.
- Connecting this work to other housing or blight efforts already underway will improve coordination and impact.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
Kentucky Department for Local Government – Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)	Typically January	$1,000,000	Up to 25% depending on priority	Reimbursable
Center for Community Progress – Technical Assistance				Technical Assistance
Foundation support or cost-sharing between counties				

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Engage County Stakeholders and Build Support — Month 1–12

Define Study Scope and Hire Consultant — Month 13–27

Conduct Study and Share Results — Month 28–39

Consider Next Steps Based on Findings — Month 40–51

Blight Reduction Initiative

- Shifting Focus – Blight Management for Economic Stability: This article explores how blight—neglected or abandoned properties that harm community well-being—can be addressed through locally tailored tools and policies.
- Comprehensive Blight Strategy Plan – Braddock, PA: A detailed plan outlining strategies for blight reduction, including code enforcement practices and community engagement initiatives.
- Optimizing Blight Strategies – New Orleans: A report presenting a two-pronged approach to blight reduction: minimizing harm to neighborhoods and acquiring/treating blighted properties for productive use.

Land Bank Feasibility Study

- Fort Collins, Colorado – Land Bank Feasibility Study: An in-depth feasibility study assessing the viability of establishing a land bank, including financial models, staffing considerations, and implementation recommendations.
- The Metro Atlanta Land Bank: The Metro Atlanta Land Bank is a mission-driven organization that identifies delinquent and dilapidated properties and works to convert them to properties with a productive use for the community.
- Burlington Community Land Trust: The Burlington Community Land Trust was created to provide affordable housing for low-income households in under resourced neighborhoods.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

OVERVIEW

The following key trends and challenges related to business development were identified through quantitative and qualitative research gathered during the Community Assessment of the Fulton region:

- **Regional Collaboration:** Strong partnerships across the four river counties are driving business growth, but addressing infrastructure, housing, and workforce challenges remains essential for sustained success.
- **Entrepreneurial Growth:** Local entrepreneurs drive investment and highlight the region's potential for growth and innovation.
- **Agricultural Growth:** Agriculture is a major economic driver, but aging infrastructure and limited processing capacity create inefficiencies and restrict opportunities.
- **Tourism Development:** The region has strong tourism potential, but limited amenities, marketing, and cohesive branding restrict visitor growth and economic impact.
- **Outdoor Recreation:** The region's outdoor assets attract visitors, but limited river access, trail connectivity, and supporting infrastructure hinder growth and economic impact.
- **Infrastructure Modernization:** Ongoing and planned upgrades are improving roads, utilities, and commercial space, but aging infrastructure continues to challenge business growth and regional competitiveness.

In response to these key trends and challenges, the following strategic opportunities were identified for the Fulton region:

- **Regional Collaboration & Planning:** Formalize regional partnerships and align economic development efforts to tackle infrastructure, housing, and workforce challenges through coordinated planning and shared investments.
- **Entrepreneurial Support & Growth:** Strengthen support for local entrepreneurs by expanding access to mentorship, training, and financial resources to help small businesses scale and sustain long-term success.
- **Agricultural Infrastructure & Innovation:** Invest in modern grain storage, transportation infrastructure, and value-added processing facilities while supporting agricultural innovation to improve efficiency, expand market opportunities, and strengthen the region's role in high-value agriculture.
- **Tourism Infrastructure & Marketing:** Enhance tourism infrastructure, strengthen regional branding, and expand marketing efforts to attract more visitors and maximize the economic impact of the region's unique attractions.
- **Outdoor Recreation Access & Development:** Expand and improve river access points, enhance trail connectivity, and invest in supporting infrastructure to increase visitor engagement and economic impact.
- **Infrastructure Investment & Modernization:** Secure funding and implement long-term infrastructure improvements to modernize roads, utilities, and commercial spaces, strengthening the region's capacity for business growth and investment.

PROPOSED PROJECTS & INITIATIVES

Based on the findings in the Community Assessment, the following proposed projects were shared with the Steering Committee for consideration and discussion:

- **WAVE Full-time Executive Director:** Hire a full-time executive director for WAVE to formalize regional economic development efforts, coordinate planning, and secure funding for shared infrastructure, housing, workforce, and business initiatives.
- **Processing Facility Feasibility Study:** Conduct a feasibility study to assess the viability of a middle- or end- agricultural processing facility, such as an oilseed crushing plant or grain mill, to expand market opportunities and support agricultural diversification.
- **Kentucky Great River Region Organization Partnership:** Partner with KYGRRO to identify tourism-related infrastructure needs and develop a plan to improve visitor experience through better signage, transportation access, and facility upgrades, while building on the organization's existing regional branding and marketing efforts.

During the Strategy Workshop, the Steering Committee agreed to prioritize all three proposed business development projects. Their decision was based on the viability of each concept, the availability of potential partners and resources, and the level of community support.

FINAL PRIORITIZATION

Following the Strategy Workshop and Core Team review, the list of business development projects was prioritized as follows:

1. Processing Facility Feasibility Study
2. Kentucky Great River Region Organization Partnership
3. Hire WAVE Full-Time Executive Director

These projects reflect shared economic development goals across the four river counties and are intended to strengthen the regional business environment, support industry diversification, and coordinate long-term planning and investment. Each project is described in more detail on the following pages.

PROCESSING FACILITY FEASIBILITY STUDY

Conduct a feasibility study to assess the viability of a middle- or end- agricultural processing facility, such as an oilseed crushing plant or grain mill, to expand market opportunities and support agricultural diversification.

IDEAL LEAD COUNTY GOVERNMENTS *or a regional group focused on agricultural development*

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Local farmers and producer cooperatives
- Kentucky Department of Agriculture
- University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service

- USDA Rural Development
- Local economic development organizations
- Agribusiness partners, including companies and local processing firms

GOALS

- Assess whether there's enough market demand to support value-added agricultural processing.
- Identify crops or products that are a good fit for processing in the region.
- Understand location, infrastructure, and workforce needs for a facility.
- Determine whether a facility would help farms stay profitable and create jobs.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1 **Meet with Agricultural Stakeholders and Set Goals**
Bring together producers, ag advisors, and economic developers to:

- Gauge interest in a regional facility.
- Identify key processing gaps and potential product opportunities.
- Clarify goals and the focus area for the feasibility study.

STEP 2 **Identify and Secure Funding**
Work with county governments, agricultural groups, or local economic development partners to identify and secure funding to support the feasibility study.

STEP 3 **Prepare and Issue Request for Proposals (RFP)**
Once funding is secured, prepare an RFP to hire a qualified consultant with experience in agricultural processing and regional economic development. The RFP should include:

- A clear summary of the project's goals and purpose.
- Scope of work, including market analysis, infrastructure review, and business model options.
- Timeline, key deliverables, and expectations for stakeholder engagement.
- Evaluation criteria and instructions for submitting proposals.
- Available budget and source of funds (if known).

Issue the RFP publicly and begin the consultant selection process.

STEP 4 **Conduct Market and Feasibility Analysis**
The consultant should:

- Review the region's agricultural production levels and capacity.
- Reach out to potential investors, operators, or companies with experience in processing to gauge interest.
- Analyze current and future market demand for potential products.
- Identify infrastructure and workforce needs to support a facility.
- Recommend possible locations and outline ownership or operating models.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 5   **Validate Findings with Stakeholders**
Host listening sessions or interviews with farmers, cooperatives, and potential buyers to:

- Check whether early ideas about supply and processing needs make sense.
- Ask if farmers, cooperatives, or businesses are interested in being involved or investing.
- Update recommendations based on stakeholder feedback.

STEP 6   **Share Findings and Evaluate Options**
Present the study to stakeholders and county leaders. Use the findings to:

- Evaluate whether the proposed facility would be economically viable to the region.
- Consider possible ownership and operating structures, such as a cooperative, private business, or public-private partnership.
- Decide whether to move forward with business planning and site development.

STEP 7   **Prepare for Business Planning and Site Development**
If the study supports moving forward:

- Identify partners to help with business and facility planning.
- Create a project budget, funding plan, and outline for how the facility would operate.
- Start working on site control, permitting, and any needed environmental reviews.
- Coordinate with local officials early to confirm zoning, utility access, and transportation needs, and avoid last-minute delays.
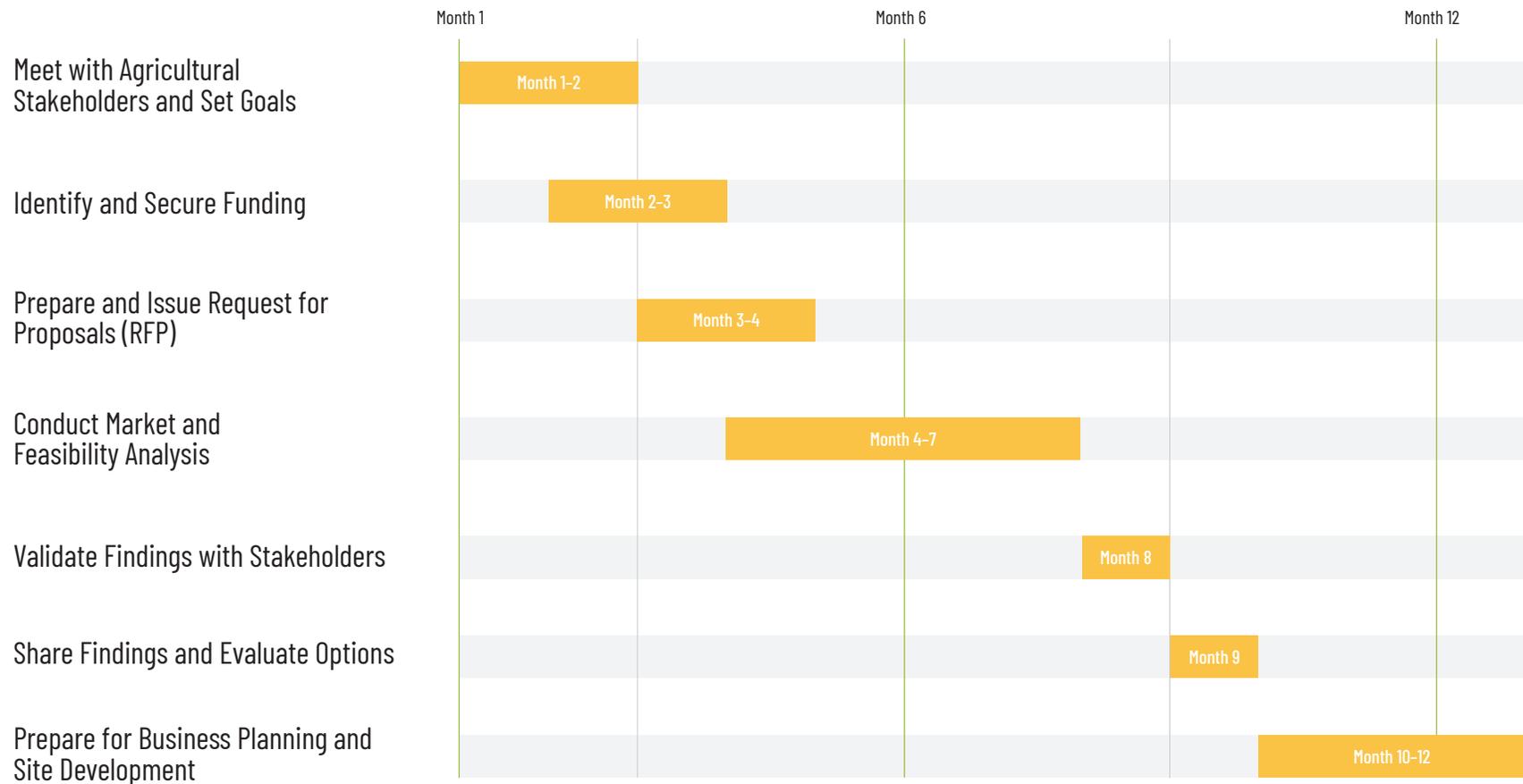
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- A facility will only work if it's sized to match what local farmers can realistically produce.
- The project will likely need major investment and leadership from a private company.
- The feasibility study should look at public-private partnership options, including things like infrastructure support, shared risk, and incentives.
- Factors like access to transportation, ease of permitting, and fairness in how sites are selected matter.
- Strong local leadership and community support will be key to getting the project off the ground.
- The study should account for changes in commodity prices, supply chain challenges, and long-term market outlooks.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
USDA Rural Development – Value-Added Producer Grants or Planning Grants	Typically April	Planning Grants: $75,000; Working Capital Grants: $250,000	1:1	Reimbursable
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG)	Typically Feb. 28	$500,000	Not required, but applicants are more competitive with a match	Reimbursable
Kentucky Department for Local Government – Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)	Typically January	$1,000,000	Up to 25% depending on priority	Reimbursable
U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) – Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Program	Rolling	$30,000,000	20-50%	Reimbursable

TIMELINE

	Month 1			Month 6			Month 12
Meet with Agricultural Stakeholders and Set Goals	Month 1-2						
Identify and Secure Funding		Month 2-3					
Prepare and Issue Request for Proposals (RFP)			Month 3-4				
Conduct Market and Feasibility Analysis			Month 4-7				
Validate Findings with Stakeholders					Month 8		
Share Findings and Evaluate Options						Month 9	
Prepare for Business Planning and Site Development							Month 10-12

KENTUCKY GREAT RIVER REGION ORGANIZATION PARTNERSHIP

Partner with KYGRRO to identify tourism-related infrastructure needs and develop a plan to improve visitor experience through better signage, transportation access, and facility upgrades, while building on the organization's existing regional branding and marketing efforts.

IDEAL LEAD KENTUCKY GREAT RIVER ROAD ORGANIZATION (KYGRRO)

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- County tourism commissions and chambers of commerce
- Kentucky Department of Tourism
- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet
- Local governments
- Public works departments and infrastructure staff

- Historical societies, museums, and local arts groups
- Trail and scenic byway organizations (e.g., Mississippi River Trail, local trail committees)
- Mississippi River Parkway Commission

GOALS

- Improve signage and visitor information throughout the region.
- Upgrade restrooms, parking, trails, and other public infrastructure that supports tourism.
- Strengthen regional branding and share local stories through signage, exhibits, and art.
- Help tourism efforts support small businesses and downtown areas.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1

Conduct Tourism Infrastructure Assessment

Partner with KYGRRO and county tourism staff to:

- Inventory current tourism-related infrastructure and signage.
- Identify gaps in public access, amenities like restrooms or parking, and visitor information.
- Prioritize improvements that make it easier to get around and enhance visitor safety and satisfaction.

STEP 2

Choose Priority Projects in Each County

Based on the results of the infrastructure assessment:

- Meet with local leaders to identify top tourism infrastructure priorities in each county (e.g., trailheads, restrooms, signage).
- Look for ways to connect these projects to existing attractions like museums, parks, and historic sites.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 3   **Align Projects with Regional Branding**
Make sure tourism infrastructure priorities match KYGRRO's regional branding and interpretation strategies by:

- Updating signage to reflect shared identity, local stories, and community character.
- Using tools like public art, exhibits, and mobile apps to share local history and culture.
- Making sure improvements fit into KYGRRO's larger scenic byway plan.

STEP 4   **Develop a Funding Plan and Timeline**
Work with partners to:

- Identify potential funding sources for infrastructure improvements.
- Group similar projects together to strengthen grant proposals.
- Create a timeline for implementation that accounts for seasons, events, and local capacity.

STEP 5   **Roll Out Improvements and Monitor Results**
As projects move forward:

- Track how visitors use new infrastructure and gather feedback.
- Share updates and promote new features through local and regional tourism channels.
- Adjust future plans based on what gets the most use or positive response.
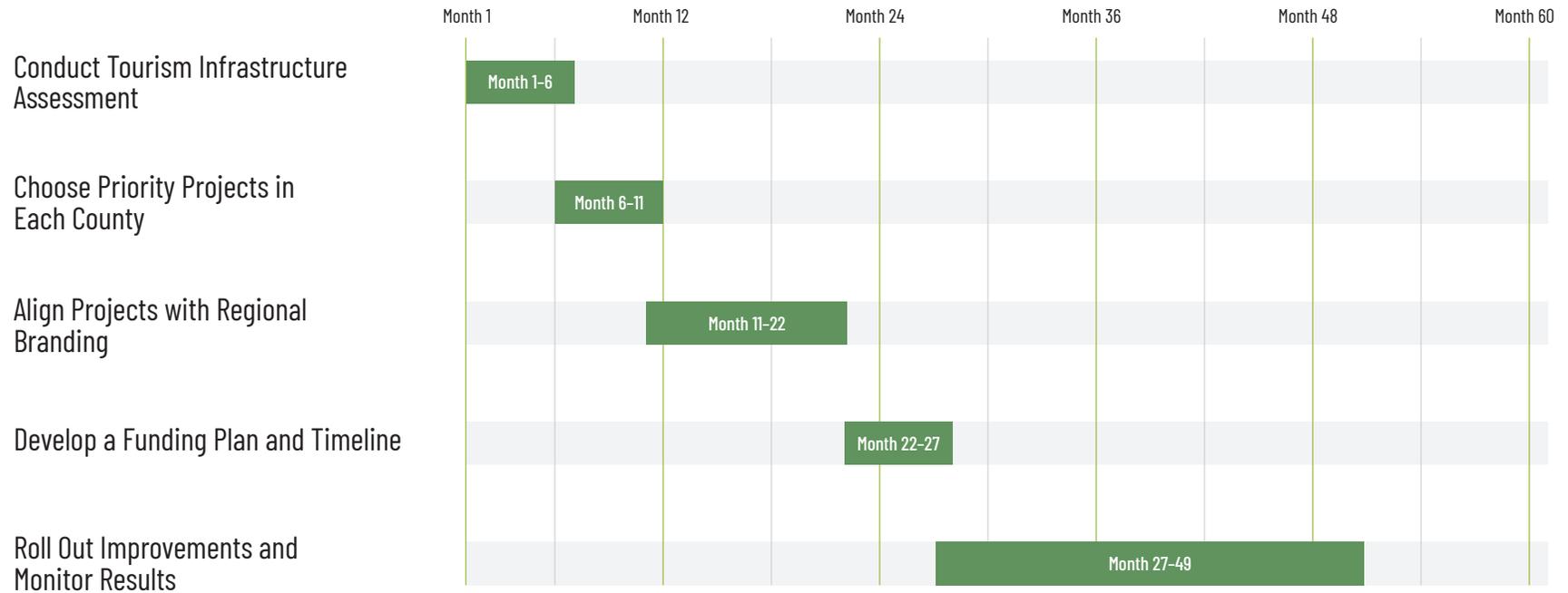
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Design improvements with local history, landscape, and community character in mind.
- Coordinate across counties and agencies to ensure the whole region benefits.
- Make sure new infrastructure works for both visitors and residents.
- Bundling signage, interpretation, and public amenities can make projects easier to fund.
- Build on KYGRRO's existing regional map, website, and branding materials to avoid duplicating efforts.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) – National Scenic Byways Program	Typically December	$4,000,000	20%	Reimbursable
Kentucky Department of Tourism – Matching Funds Grant Program	Typically June	N/A	Varies	Reimbursable
Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) – Transportation Alternatives Program	TBD	N/A	20%	Reimbursable
Delta Regional Authority (DRA) Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF)	Rolling	$2,000,000	None	Reimbursable
Kentucky Tourism Development Act	Rolling	Varies	N/A	
Local tourism taxes or other local funding sources				

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Conduct Tourism Infrastructure Assessment — Month 1–6

Choose Priority Projects in Each County — Month 6–11

Align Projects with Regional Branding — Month 11–22

Develop a Funding Plan and Timeline — Month 22–27

Roll Out Improvements and Monitor Results — Month 27–49

HIRE WAVE FULL-TIME EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Hire a full-time executive director for <u>West Kentucky Alliance for a Vibrant Economy</u> (WAVE) to formalize regional economic development efforts, coordinate planning, and secure funding for shared infrastructure, housing, workforce, and business initiatives.

IDEAL LEAD   WAVE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Local governments (county and city)
- <u>Purchase Area Development District</u> (PADD)
- Chambers of commerce and tourism commissions
- Regional nonprofits and community foundations
- <u>Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development</u>

GOALS

- Move WAVE from a volunteer-run effort to a staffed organization.
- Improve coordination across economic development, tourism, housing, and workforce efforts.
- Make WAVE a go-to partner for bringing people together, applying for grants, and speaking up for the region.
- Build the long-term capacity needed to carry out regional priorities.

NEXT STEPS

STEP 1   **Set Up Oversight and Administrative Support**
Figure out how WAVE will be organized to hire and manage a full-time executive director:

- Make sure there's a board or advisory group in place to guide the work.
- Identify an organization that can handle payroll, benefits, and financial reporting.

STEP 2   **Write the Job Description and Compensation Plan**
Draft a job description that reflects regional priorities and includes:

- Coordination and project management experience.
- Grant writing and fundraising skills.
- Public engagement and communication strengths.

Research compensation for similar roles in the region and define potential benefits. Start building a long-term funding plan alongside recruitment planning.

STEP 3   **Line Up Funding and Start Recruitment**
Secure initial funding for the position through one or more of the following:

- County and city contributions.
- Grants from foundations or philanthropic partners.
- State or federal programs that support capacity-building.
- Shared-cost arrangements with PADD or other partner organizations.

Start developing a strategy to sustain the position beyond the first year. Begin recruitment as soon as funding is in place.

STEP 4   **Support the Executive Director and Set Priorities**
Help ensure a strong start by:

- Giving the director an overview of regional plans, projects, and partners.
- Setting short-term goals with clear milestones.
- Clarifying how the director will support grant writing, communication, and coordination.
- Holding regular check-ins with key partners to build trust and align efforts.

NEXT STEPS *(continued)*

STEP 5   **Evaluate and Sustain the Role**
After the first year, evaluate how the director's role is working—what's going well, what's not—and make a plan to sustain or adjust the position moving forward:

- Review WAVE's structure to make sure it supports a full-time staff member; update policies or procedures if needed.
- Build a long-term funding plan using a mix of strategies (e.g., admin fees, member dues, state support).
- Get input from partners and adjust the director's responsibilities if needed to reflect what's working best.
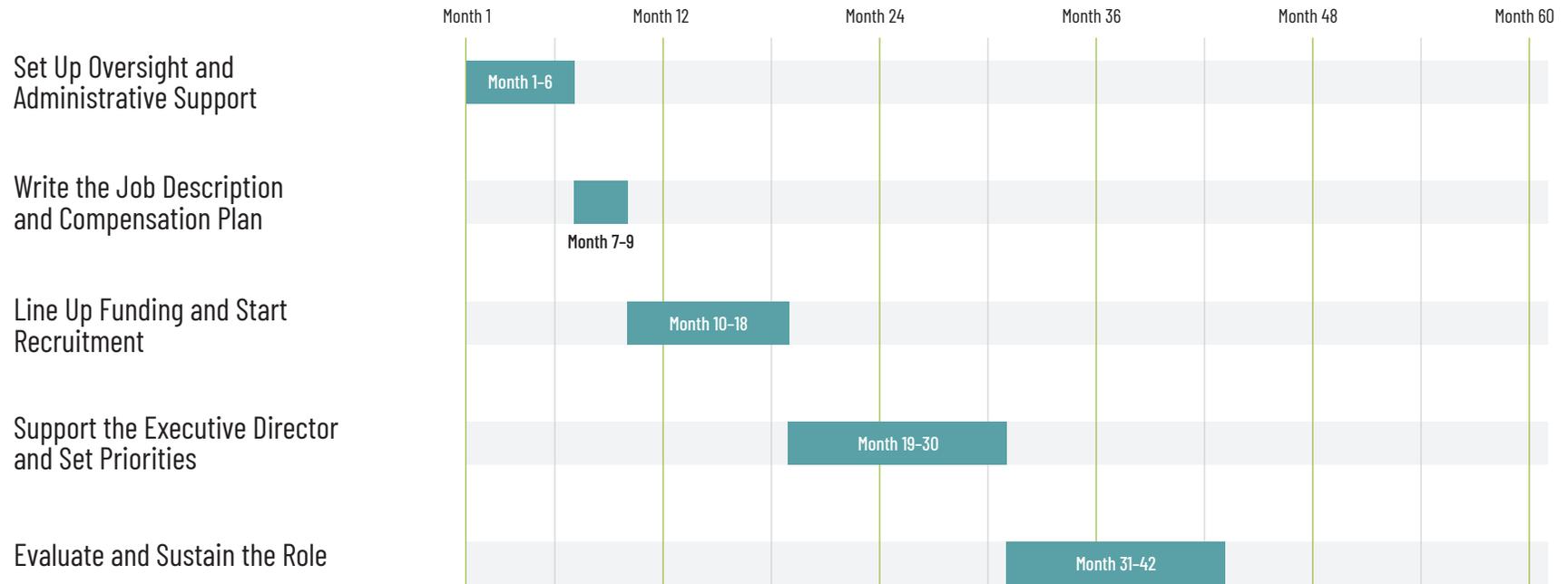
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- WAVE needs clear governance and financial systems to support the role over time.
- The executive director should have the authority to make decisions and represent the region in public and with funders.
- Getting some early wins—like securing funding or launching a visible project—can help build long-term support.
- Regular check-ins with partners and ongoing evaluation will help keep the role on track and responsive to the region's needs.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

Source	Deadline	Max Award	Cost Share	Assistance Type
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development – Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI)	Typically July	$500,000	1:1	Reimbursable
Local government contributions or cost-share models				
Philanthropic or foundation support (e.g., community foundations, regional funders)				

TIMELINE

	Month 1	Month 12	Month 24	Month 36	Month 48	Month 60

Set Up Oversight and Administrative Support
Month 1-6

Write the Job Description and Compensation Plan
Month 7-9

Line Up Funding and Start Recruitment
Month 10-18

Support the Executive Director and Set Priorities
Month 19-30

Evaluate and Sustain the Role
Month 31-42

Processing Facility Feasibility Study

- Humboldt County – Industrial Hemp Processing Plant Feasibility Study RFP
- Shenandoah Valley Agriculture Enterprise Center Feasibility Study
- SnoValley Tilth Produce Processing Feasibility Study

Kentucky Great River Region Organization Partnership

- Fall Line Trail – Central Virginia: The Fall Line is a world-class, paved multi-use trail in Central Virginia that promises to transform the region for active transportation, connecting communities, and economic development.
- Destination Development & Marketing Action Plan: Red River Regional Council, North Dakota - This plan outlines strategies for tourism infrastructure improvements, including signage, transportation access, and facility upgrades, to enhance visitor experiences and regional branding.

Hire WAVE Full-Time Executive Director

- The 10 Main Responsibilities of a Nonprofit Executive Director
- Executive Director: Job Description, Responsibilities, Salary Ranges
- Wall Economic Development Corporation Executive Director Job Description
- Economic Development Director Job Description - Sherman County Community Development

APPENDICES *(click to view)*