



**Western Illinois  
University**

**ILLINOIS INSTITUTE FOR RURAL AFFAIRS:  
PROMOTING DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL REGIONAL PORTS**

**CORN BELT PORTS AND MID-AMERICA PORT COMMISSION 2025 ANNUAL MEETING**

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# Purpose

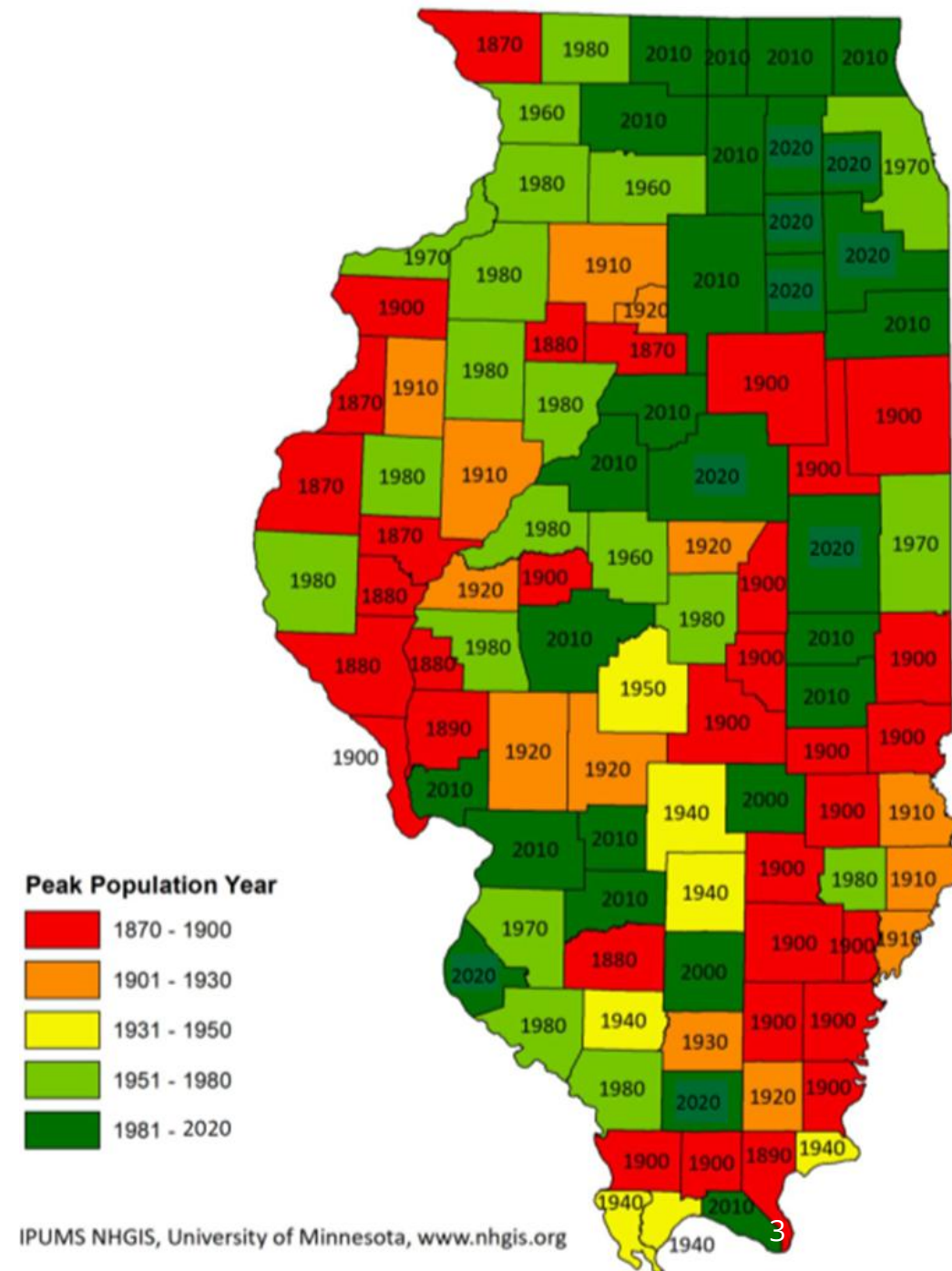
- IIRA has worked with communities in every county in Illinois that borders the Mississippi, Ohio, and Illinois Rivers
- Describe the ways that the IIRA can help support the communities in the Corn Belt Regional Ports

# Outline

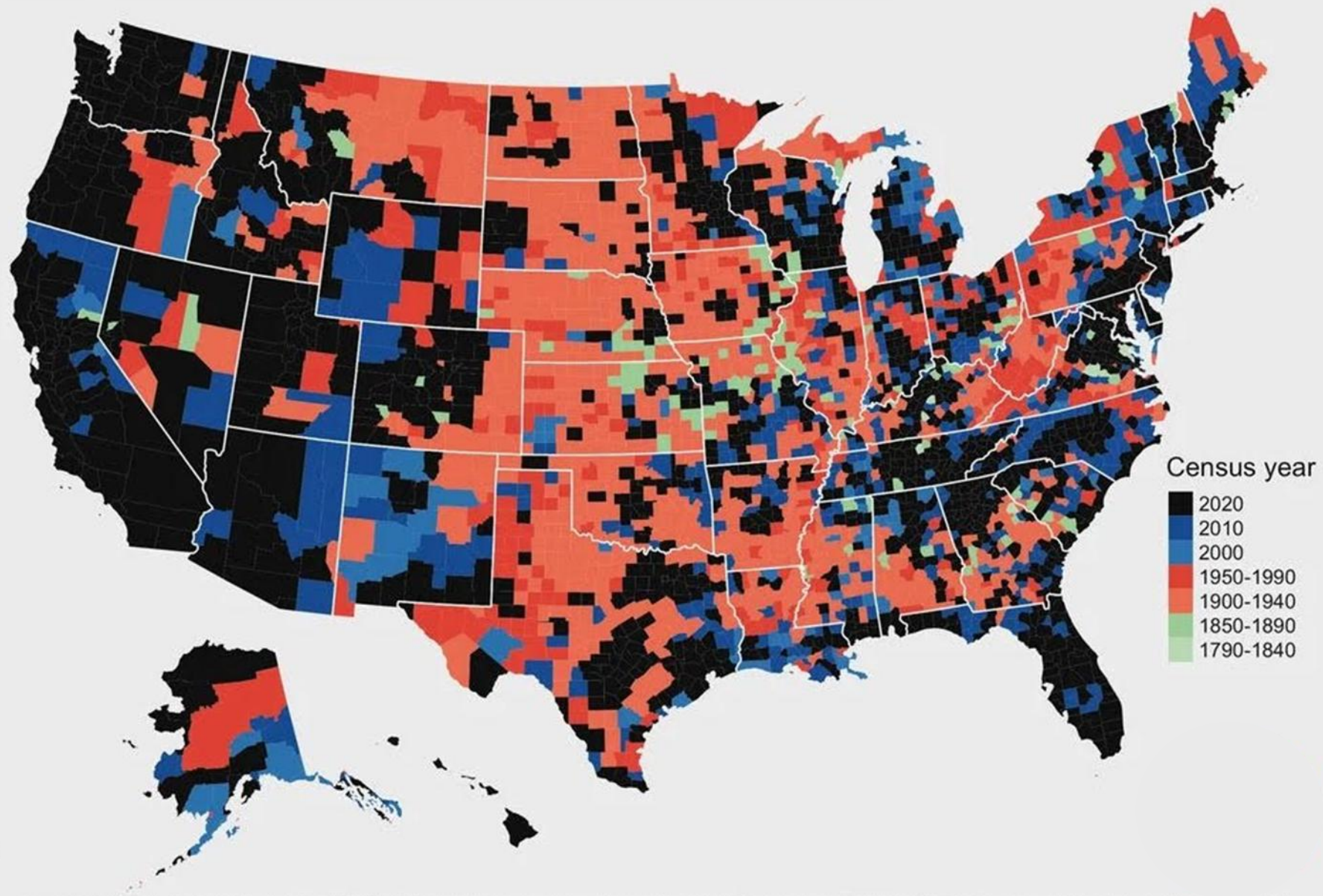
1. Rural Demographic Trends
2. Planning for Rural Development:  
The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
3. Conclusions and Q&A

# I. Rural Demographics

- **Rural population decline is a big issue**
  - Population decline in many river counties
  - Mississippi, Illinois, and Ohio Rivers
- **Drivers of population decline:**
  - Mechanization / Decline of:
    - Agriculture
    - Mining
    - Forestry
  - Declining birthrates
  - Slowed immigration
  - Rural outmigration
  - Globalization
  - Off-shoring manufacturing
  - Macroscale processes



# When each county reached its peak population



Map by John Johnson (@jdmke) using data from IPUMS NHGIS. A county has reached its peak population in every Census since the first one in 1790. The Census excluded most Native Americans until 1900.

# I. Impacts of Rural Depopulation

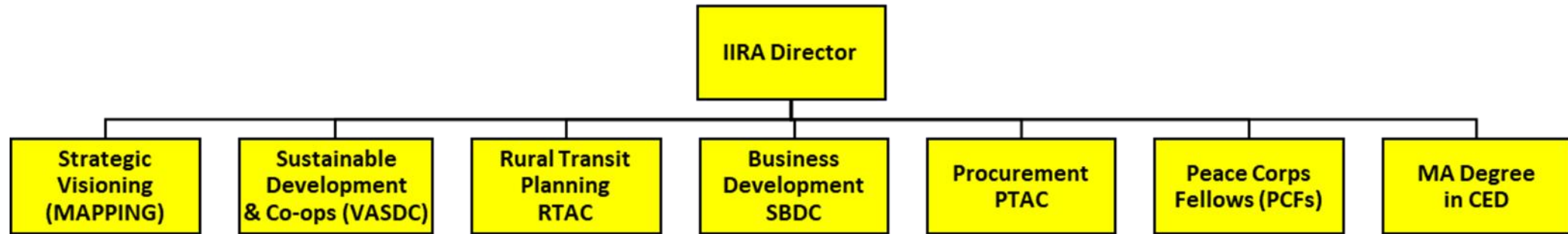
- Loss of anchor institutions (e.g., grocery stores, hospitals, schools)
- Declining tax base
- Education gap
- Loss of talent
- Digital divide is real
- Rural poverty
- Wage gap
- Aging population
- Youth outmigration
- Mobility issues
- Healthcare access
- Quality of life issues
- **How are communities doing in rural regional ports?**



## II. The IIRA – Promoting Rural Development

- Push back against the ***negative narrative*** of rural development
- ***Our Prescription***: Focus on **assets**, not needs, of a community
- **ABCD** = Asset Based Community Development
- IIRA Founded in 1989 at Western Illinois University
- IL Governor's Executive Order describes the IIRA as the, "State's academic clearinghouse for rural development data and initiatives":
  - Research
  - Outreach
  - Teaching
  - Policy Development

# IIRA Outreach: How can we help communities thrive?



## (1) Strategic Visioning

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- How do we get there?

### Goal:

*Create a set of prioritized CED objectives through a grassroots consensus-based process.*

## (2) Technical Assistance

- Business Planning
- Business Retention & Expansion (BR&E)
- Cooperative Development
- Economic / Fiscal Impact Analysis
- Education / School – Community Relations
- Entrepreneurship
- Feasibility Studies
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
- Health and Housing
- Implementation Planning
- International Trade
- Labor Market Analysis
- Renewable Energy (Wind, Bio-energy, Solar)
- Research / Survey Design & Deployment
- Retail Trade Analysis
- Sustainable Development

## (3) Implementation

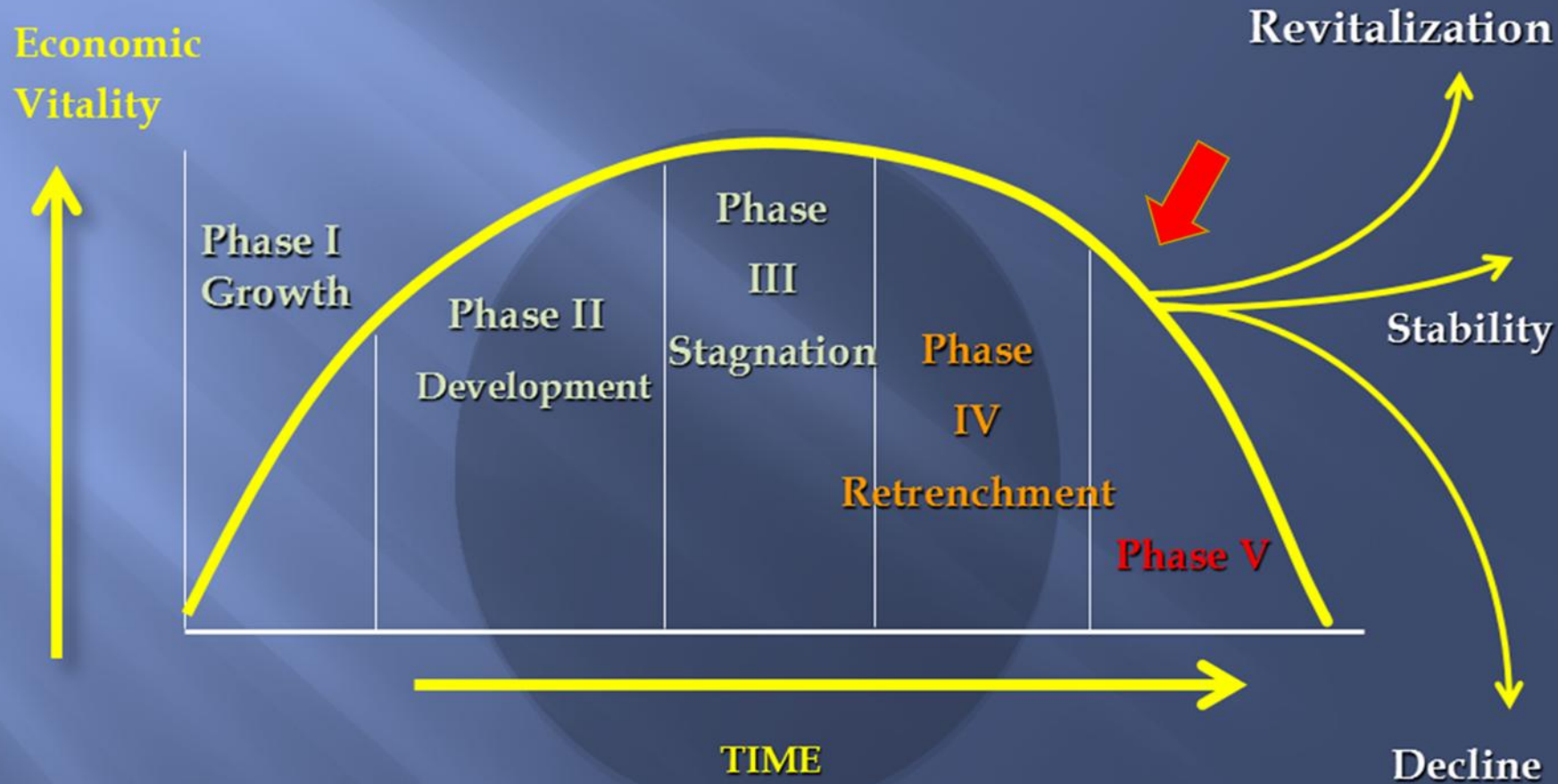
- Peace Corps Fellows
- IIRA Staff Follow-up
- AmeriCorps VISTA
- Volunteer Training
- Leadership Training
- Statewide Conference
- Regional Workshops
- Midwest CDI
- MA in CED
- Online materials
- Partners: UI Extension, USDA...

### Outcome:

*Improve the quality of life for the residents of rural Illinois and beyond.*



# Community Life Cycle Model

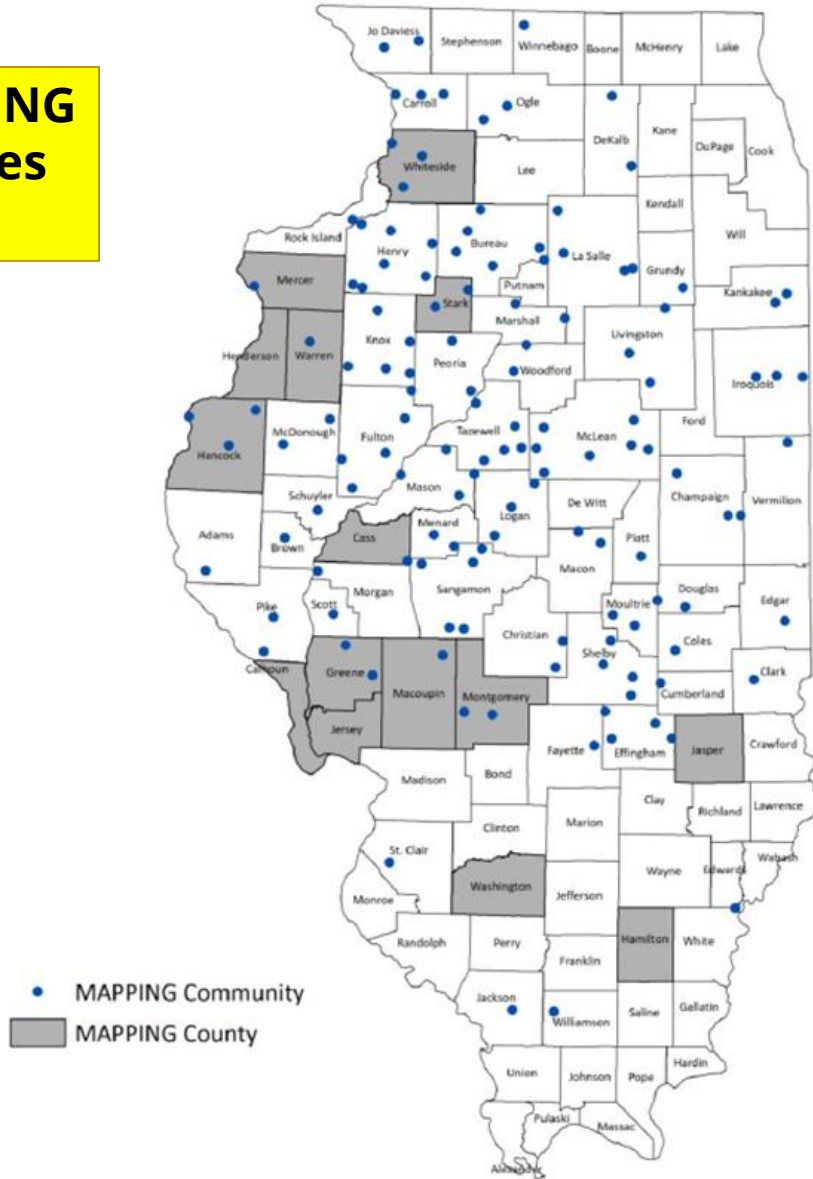


Many rural communities have experienced decades of population and quality of life decline.

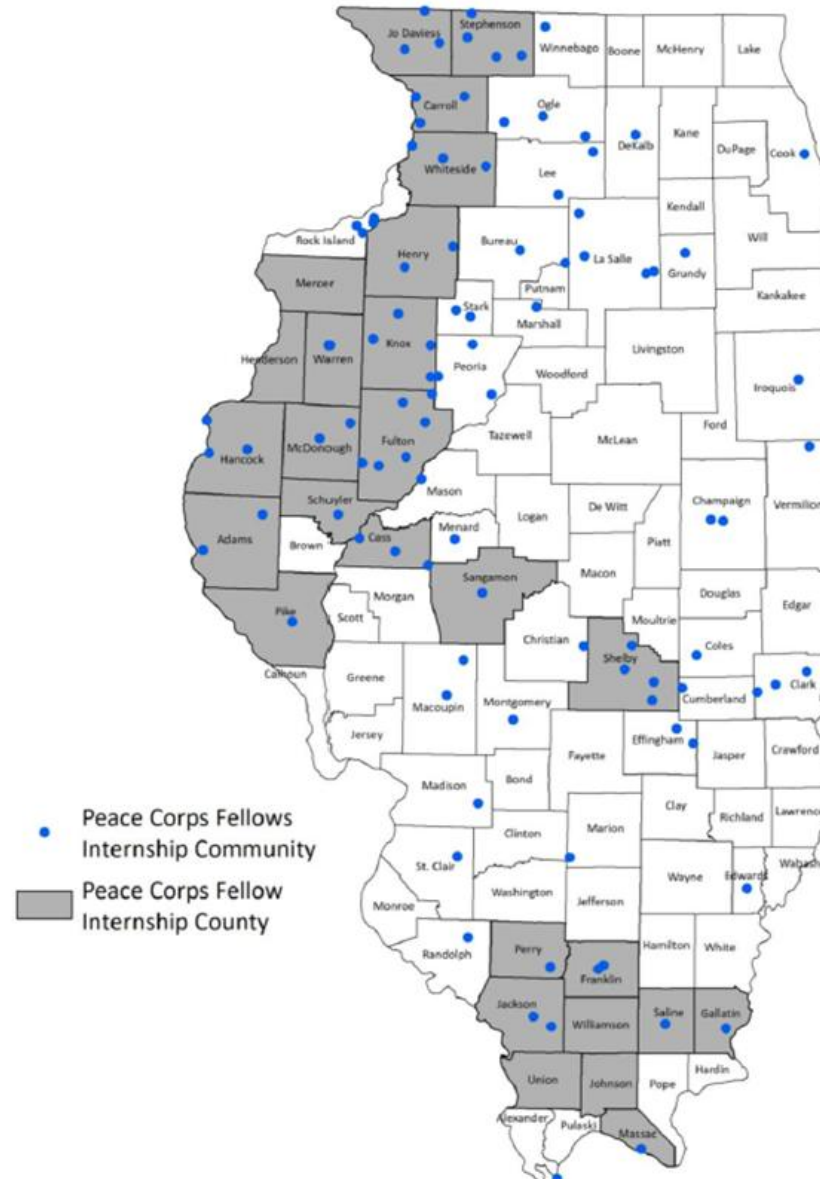


## MAPPING Communities, 1990 to 2024

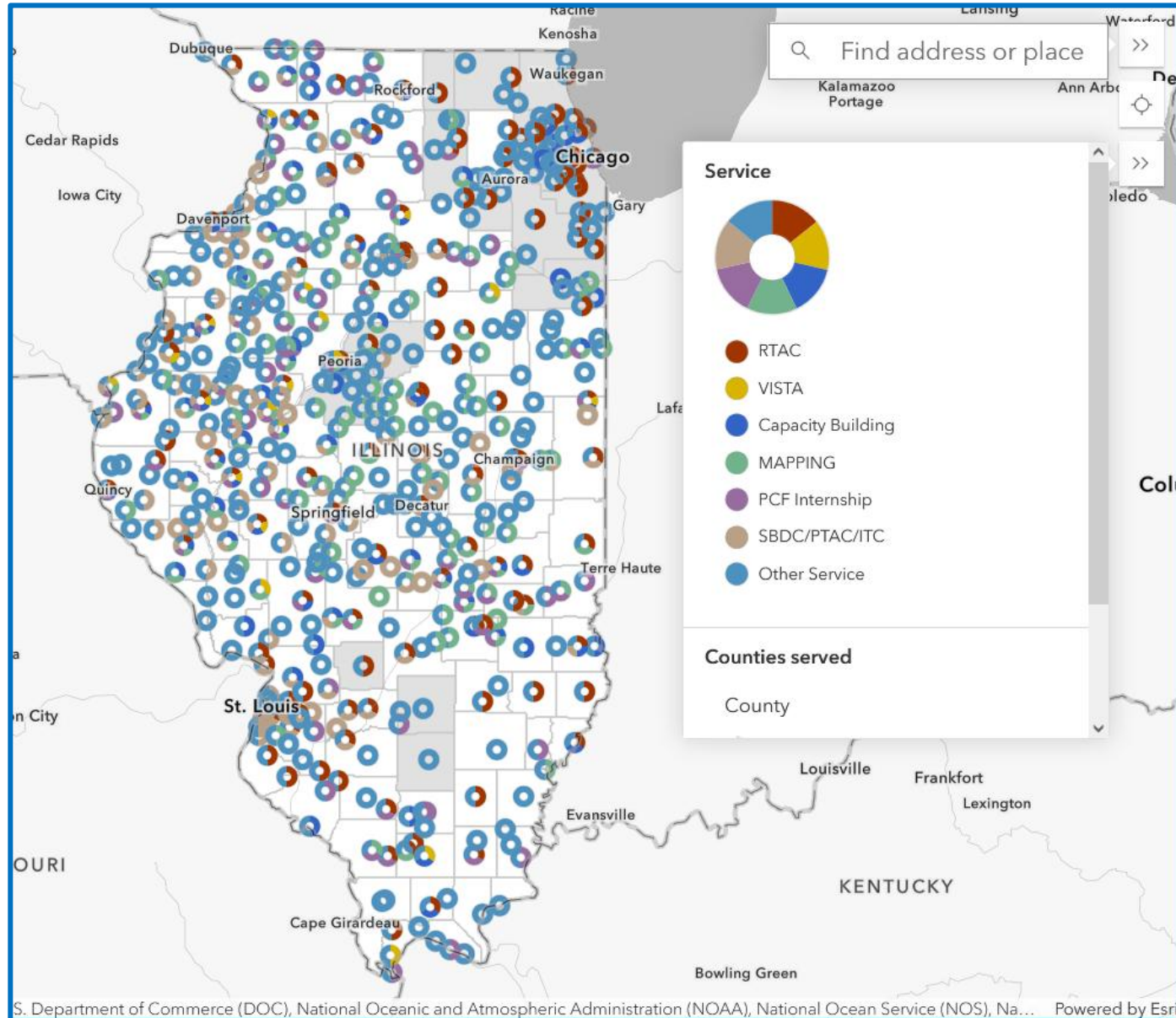
**150+ MAPPING  
Communities  
in Illinois**



## Peace Corps Fellows Communities, 1995 to 2024



# IIRA Services



Source: Chris Sutton (2025)

# Recent IIRA + Community Outcomes

- **Rushville.** The **\$7,000,000 Rushville Fitness** center opened up in November 2021. Online: <https://www.myjournalcourier.com/news/article/Anonymous-donor-antes-up-for-fitness-center-14001118.php>
- **Dieterich.** Dieterich MAPPING group raised over **\$3 million for their recreation/child care complex:** [https://www.effinghamdailynews.com/news/local\\_news/state-awards-dieterich-2m-grant-for-community-center/article\\_e6dca960-883a-11eb-b2c9-fb28bb0ba7c5.html](https://www.effinghamdailynews.com/news/local_news/state-awards-dieterich-2m-grant-for-community-center/article_e6dca960-883a-11eb-b2c9-fb28bb0ba7c5.html)
- **Pana.** “Pana Pride” completed an update in November 2021 and raised **\$72,000 for their Christmas lights** display in 2021: [https://www.wandtv.com/news/pana-pride-collects-72k-for-holiday-lights-display/article\\_add37786-53e9-11ec-b0af-bb9924f897d1.html](https://www.wandtv.com/news/pana-pride-collects-72k-for-holiday-lights-display/article_add37786-53e9-11ec-b0af-bb9924f897d1.html)
- **Assumption.** IIRA served as a catalyst for a community supported **childcare facility**
- **Hillsboro.** Hillsboro's Hilltop **Coop co-working space / business incubator** recently opened. The MAPPING program helped Hillsboro start this project: <https://www.thejournal-news.net/stories/the-coop-officially-opens-in-downtown-hillsboro,74779>.
- **West Central Illinois.** WIU secured \$300,000 from DCEO to improve **broadband access:** [https://www.wiu.edu/news/newsrelease.php?release\\_id=20486](https://www.wiu.edu/news/newsrelease.php?release_id=20486)

# Recent IIRA + Community Outcomes

- **Pittsfield.** The “Picture Pittsfield” group that formed out of the Pittsfield MAPPING process and the City completed a new walking path. The “Picture Pittsfield” group helped to raise **\$18,000 for the project:** <https://www.myjournalcourier.com/news/article/Pittsfield-finishing-up-new-walking-path-16483773.php>.
- **Mattoon.** The “Mattoon in Motion” initiative that grew out of the strategic planning process secured a **\$250,000 Google Impact Challenge Award to develop a business incubator:** <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/2/17/18314029/google-reveal-downstate-group-wins-250k-tech-giant-expanding-workforce-here>.
- **Corn Belt Ports.** Secured National Science Foundation funding to research how Corn Belt Ports could better function as **“business clusters”** to drive innovation and economic development: <https://gsunews.govst.edu/advancing-smart-logistics-project-led-by-gsu-iin-receives-1-million-nsf-engines-development-award/>
- **Winchester.** IIRA helped to start a **rural grocery store** cooperative to address rural food desert issues. This is one of five that my colleague Sean Park has started since 2018. The *New York Times* reported on this effort: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/us/rural-farm-market.html>.

# Great Scott Market, Winchester, IL



Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/us/rural-farm-market.html>

# III. Summary and Conclusions

- Working Collaboratively for Regional Ports
  - Prosody Group
  - Tri-State Development Summit
  - Southeast Iowa Regional Planning Commission
  - Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
  - Other great agencies too
- Focus on regional ports and investments that support them
  - Infrastructure
  - Workforce
  - Business development
- Collaborate to spur economic development that helps grow rural regional ports

# III. Conclusions

- Communities in the rural Midwest confront many challenges
- Rural communities also have many assets
- Community planning can help to identify and build on these assets for the future
  - Economic diversification
  - Promote the idea of regional ports as business clusters
- That is why organizations such as the Corn Belt Ports and Mid-America Ports Commission are so important
  - Progress starts with you... and we can help
- Questions and comments welcomed

**Thank you!**



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