



**REGION NINE**

 **DEVELOPMENT  
COMMISSION**



# **ANNUAL REPORT**

JULY 2023-JUNE 2024

# Executive Statement

This year has marked a period of significant achievements and firsts for Region Nine Development Commission (RNDC) as we continue to strengthen our commitment to the communities we serve. Through strategic partnerships and targeted initiatives, RNDC has been at the forefront of regional economic growth.

One of our most notable accomplishments this year was securing the State Competitiveness Grant. This grant enabled us to provide technical assistance and grant-writing support to local communities. By positioning our region to compete for funding through the Inflation Reduction Act, we laid the groundwork for long-term resilience.

Our region also achieved national recognition with several firsts. Region Nine received the first-ever Bioeconomic Development Opportunity (BDO) Zone 'A' Rating in the nation for the availability of corn stover. This prestigious designation highlights our region as a prime location for future investments in sustainable economic development. Additionally, St. James became one of only nine communities in Minnesota to earn the nation's first "EV-Ready" designation, positioning the area as leaders in the transition to clean energy. Both of these designations grew out of the Region Nine Learning Exchange with North Rhine-Westphalia in 2022.

The completion of the Highway 14 four-lane expansion was another major milestone for our region. RNDC has supported this project for years, as active members of the Highway 14 partnership. The completion of this expansion significantly reduced travel times and enhanced connectivity between communities, providing substantial economic and safety benefits.

On a personal note, I was honored to be elected to the Executive Committee of the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO), serving as Board Secretary. We were also pleased to welcome NADO staff to our region providing an opportunity for them to better understand the work of Economic Development Districts (EDD).

Our region's commitment to environmental stewardship was further recognized when the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) awarded grants to Saint Peter and Comfrey to enhance their resilience to extreme weather. These grants allowed Comfrey to develop a community resilience plan with RNDC to address the challenges of a changing climate and will enable Saint Peter to study and manage water flow during high rainfall events.

It has been incredibly inspiring to witness Region Nine communities embracing infrastructure solutions to benefit their residents. Because of this increased interest, we were able to secure funding through a partnership with the University of Minnesota Climate Adaptation Partnership (MCAP) to create a Deputy Director position to assist with organizational operations and help guide regional resilience work.

As we reflect on the successes of this year, we remain dedicated to fostering a prosperous future for our region.



**Nicole Griensewic**  
RNDC Executive Director



# Board Chair Statement



As we look ahead, Region Nine Development Commission is fully equipped and ready to support our counties, cities, townships, and school districts in a wide range of areas. We've approved a budget that empowers our staff to tackle both ongoing needs and new challenges as they arise. Our team is agile, adaptable, and committed to working alongside local governments to navigate the issues they face. Together, we're poised for success and excited about what we can achieve in the coming year.

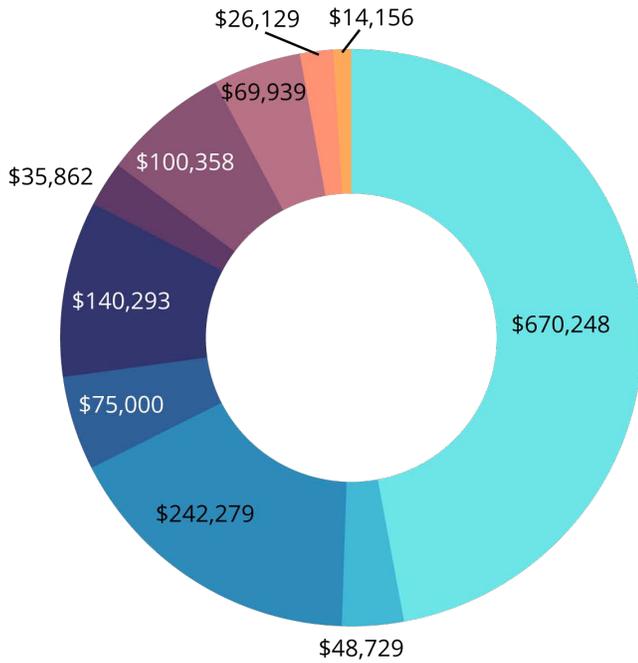
**Mike Laven**  
RNDC Board Chair

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# FINANCE REPORT

Total RNDC Programs including General Fund, Revolving Loan Funds, and Capital Fund



Levy	670,248
EDA Planning Grant	48,729
Other Federal Grants	242,279
Transportation	75,000
Other Grants	140,293
Contract Revenue	35,862
Deposit Interest & Dividends	100,358
Loan Interest Earned	69,939
Transfer Funds	26,129
Other Revenue	14,156
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,401,532</b>

Expenditure Description	\$
Salary & Wages	831,006
Fringe	214,667
Indirect Costs	240,137
Consultants	215,701
Staff Travel	25,337
Supplies	5,442
Copying	2,159
Postage	69
Phone	7,784
Staff Development	16,602
Software	23,002
Dues, Membership, Registration	10,285
Marketing & Publication	9,928
Rentals	2,556
Bank Service Charges	7,436
Service Fees	2,454
Insurance	291
Legal Fees	18,598
Catering & Event Meals	2,773
Service Contracts	534
Bad Debt Expense	44,246
Equipment	59,551
Subgrantee	30,312
Bus Tour	1,815
Miscellaneous	
Commission	26,392
Debt Service	3,490

## FY24 EXPENDITURES

**Total Revenues = \$1,401,532**

**Total Expenditures = \$1,802,102**

**Revenues Over Expenditures = -\$400,570**

**Indirect Rate of 23.00%**

**Fringe Rate of 25.83%**

# REVOLVING LOAN FUND

RNDC operates several Revolving Loan Funds (RLF) within the organization. RNDC is a gap financier that partners with other financial institutions to make up a portion of the approved lending difference to the full request. This allows for new or existing businesses to meet capital goals when they may not otherwise be able to. The primary goal of the RLF is to create jobs within the nine-county area.

The RLF program was funded by the counties in the region, disaster and economic recovery aid, and the repayment of previous loans. Being a gap financier, RNDC looks to partner with outside organizations as much as possible to leverage the program's funds.

The following are two of the businesses RNDC partnered with in distributing these loan dollars this year:

## Lykke Books

Lykke Books was able to use RNDC's RLF to help finance their new location. Owner Brie Taralson first heard about the RLF program from the consultants at the Small Business Development Center and her banker.

Brie reflected on her RLF experience, "RNDC has been wonderful to work with. I found the idea of securing financing to be daunting, but they were there every step along the way to provide guidance and insight that helped me navigate the process. I encourage people with a business idea to utilize these resources. I truly could not have done this without a village of people helping me along the way."



**Brie Taralson - Owner  
Lykke Books in New Ulm**

## Ryno Repair



**Ryne and Morgan Myers, Owners  
Ryno Repair in Blue Earth**

Being approved for the loan allowed Ryne and Morgan Myers, owners of Ryno Repair to relocate to a larger space. Morgan said, "Our experience working with RNDC was fantastic from start to finish. They were excellent with their communication throughout the process and kept our anxieties at bay. It is a very bumpy process full of so many different emotions, but they were so helpful in answering questions and easing any worries we would have."

Ryno Repairs can continue to provide professional automotive repair to the Blue Earth area. As their business grows Ryno Repairs will look to add additional jobs to their community.

# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

## Faribault County Strategic Economic Development Plan

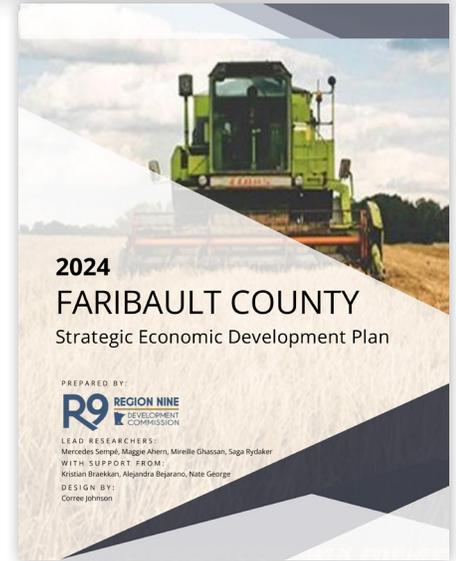
RNDC, with support from the Faribault County EDA, the cities of Blue Earth, Winnebago, and Wells EDAs, Community Economic Development Associates (CEDA), and local stakeholders, developed the Faribault County Strategic Economic Development Plan.

This plan aimed to assist the county in identifying economic opportunities and challenges. The plan also helped position the county to seek external funding and support to address the needs of the communities.

The plan consisted of four pillars: economic assessment and market analysis, community and stakeholder outreach, competitive positioning, and an implementation plan. The plan was one step to pave the way for higher paying jobs and new ideas to promote a higher quality of life for residents in the county.

The backbone of the plan was the participation of the residents of Faribault County. This was done through paper and digital surveys, community engagement, and the contributions of local EDAs. The survey aimed to learn about what people residing in the county thought of the quality of life in their communities, the decisive factors that prompted them to move or stay there, their level of satisfaction with amenities in their communities, and other demographic data.

The final report and recommendations were submitted to Faribault County officials in March. RNDC staff presented the results from the survey and the report to County Board Members in May. This plan was made possible through the support of the tax levy with no additional cost to the county.



## State Competitiveness Grant

RNDC secured a grant award of \$290,000 over the next three years from the Minnesota Department of Commerce through the State Competitiveness Fund: Local Grant Development Assistance Program. This grant will allow RNDC to support local communities with technical assistance and grant writing in the pursuit of climate smart solutions through the Inflation Reduction Act federal funding.

## Informal Economy Project

The Informal Economy Project, led by HACER with the support of the University of Minnesota Extension and RNDC, was focused on researching barriers that Latina entrepreneurs in Minnesota face to business formalization. As part of this project, a series of outreach and data collection activities took place to gather input from business owners and entrepreneurs, accompanied by a series of workshops and training sessions in southern Minnesota and the Twin Cities. The program aims to enhance entrepreneurial and business development technical assistance for Latina entrepreneurs in the region.

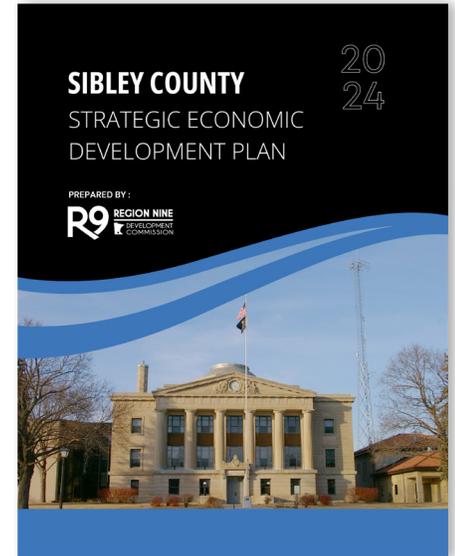


## Sibley County Strategic Economic Development Plan

The Sibley County Strategic Economic Development Plan was a collaborative effort led by RNDC, working alongside the Sibley County Economic Development Authority, local EDAs, and local stakeholders. The plan was funded by the tax levy with no additional cost to the county. The goal was to prepare Sibley County for sustainable economic growth and resilience by helping the county identify growth opportunities and to support the county wide needs.

RNDC teamed up with the Sibley County Commissioners to create a detailed survey for residents, including a special section for youth. The survey aimed to understand residents' views on the quality of life in their communities, their reasons for staying or moving, satisfaction with local amenities, and other demographic information.

In June, RNDC presented the final report and recommendations to Sibley County officials. Later that month, RNDC staff shared the survey results and the comprehensive report with the county board members.

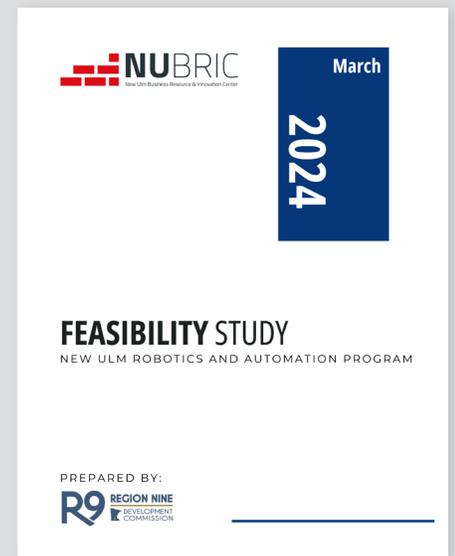


## Technical Assistance Studies with NUBRIC

RNDC, in partnership with the New Ulm Business Resource and Innovation Center (NUBRIC), completed a series of studies with partial funding from the federal Economic Development Administration (EDA). The first study was a needs assessment to explore robotics and automation needs across Brown County and neighboring communities. The study confirmed that there is a real need for robotics and automation training in the region to build economic resilience and future competitiveness in the global economy.

Building on that, RNDC carried out a feasibility study to evaluate the viability of a robotics and automation training center in New Ulm. The study investigated marketing strategies, operational needs, and financial feasibility, giving NUBRIC a clear, objective analysis. The recommendations included focusing on growing demographics to cut upskilling costs, offering hybrid training options, and forming strategic partnerships with colleges, universities, and industries.

Finally, a Strategic Implementation Plan developed by NUBRIC provides a detailed roadmap for bringing this project to life. The road map includes strategic partnerships, timelines, and other considerations for viable operations. RNDC staff was pleased to collaborate with NUBRIC for these studies as they emphasized the utilization of existing resources and capabilities identified through the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS; 2022-2026).



# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

## Mainstreet Businesses Focused on Food and Agriculture (MBFFA) Needs Assessment

RNDC, in collaboration with MBFFA partners, created a needs assessment to explore barriers faced by entrepreneurs from underserved communities. The project began with in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs and community advocates, providing a qualitative dimension to the data collection. These interviews allowed entrepreneurs to freely discuss the challenges they faced.

Surveys, one-on-one conversations, and both virtual and in-person meetings, were conducted to identify solutions and analyze successful models. Following the research phase, the project shifted to asset mapping, identifying strengths and potential challenges within the community, and actively seeking solutions to the concerns raised.

In the final phase, efforts were focused on compiling a comprehensive report. This involved summarizing all collected data and insights into a cohesive document, which now serves as a valuable resource for stakeholders and decision-makers in supporting local entrepreneurs in Region Nine. Video marketing materials were also developed to highlight the stories and successes of these entrepreneurs, aiming to raise awareness, inspire support, and to amplify their message.

Looking ahead, MBFFA partners will offer training and technical assistance tailored to the needs of small businesses to drive growth in the food-related sectors in Region Nine. The Strategic Partnership Center, which includes the South Central Small Business Development Center and the Center for Workforce Professional Education, will serve as the MBFFA Hub in downtown Mankato.



### MAINSTREET BUSINESS FOCUSED ON FOOD AND AGRICULTURE Needs Assessment

Region Nine Development Commission  
November 2023





## Global Talent Workforce Task Force

RNDC led a regional global workforce initiative focused on developing talent pipelines for international students and building pathways to retain them in local communities. The regional task force, formed with active involvement from cross-sector entities that met monthly to facilitate collaboration among local communities, regional institutions of higher education, and area employers. These meetings are ongoing.

Since its establishment, this initiative has supported regional and state efforts to educate employers in recruiting and retaining international students. Task force members and RNDC staff have organized events to raise awareness about visa programs and address common immigration and legal questions for employers and international students.

Staff also partnered with Workforce Strategy Consultants at DEED to host and present at “Workforce Wednesday” events. These events focused on current workforce challenges and solutions and was open to employers and organizations from across the state. Staff worked with DEED to host and present at the sessions focused on international talent recruitment strategies.

The task force members organized a reverse career fair between international students from Gustavus Adolphus College and Taylor Corporation which successfully hired an international student studying computer engineering. Also, Minnesota State University, Mankato, has collaborated with Kivu Immigration Law to have an immigration lawyer present during its career fairs to provide crucial information and support, addressing questions from both employers and students. This law firm now offers regular office hours at the university for students seeking advice.

## 2023 Local Foods Week

RNDC organized the 2nd Annual Local Foods Week July 24-30, bringing together eight restaurants and seven farms from the South Central Minnesota Growers’ Network. This event aimed to boost awareness and investment in local foods across the region.

The South Central Minnesota Growers’ Network, created and supported by RNDC, unites local farmers and food producers in fostering collaboration and to expand access to locally sourced products. Members of this network primarily sell through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), farmers markets, and their websites. Local Foods Week serves as a key opportunity to spotlight these growers and the availability of their products.



As a result of Local Foods Week, there was a significant increase in traffic and interactions on the growers’ websites and Facebook pages boosting public awareness of locally sourced products. The event also successfully drew more attention to the local farmers’ market through effective cross-promotion with the market stands.

# RESILIENCE PLANNING

## Comfrey Climate Resilience Plan (CCRP)

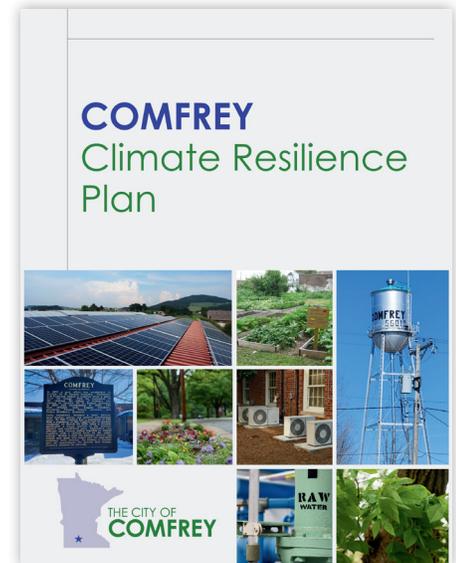
RNDC secured funding for Comfrey to produce the CCRP through the MPCA Stormwater, Wastewater, and Climate Resilience Grant. RNDC and members of the Comfrey community began work on the plan in the fall of 2023. The Comfrey Mayor Gary Richter, through his role as an RNDC Commissioner, recognized the need to prepare for future climate disasters.

The process and plan were generated to provide clear steps to the city in its efforts to protect the area's natural beauty, prepare for extreme weather events, reduce energy consumption, and meet other needs identified by the community. The development of this plan was based on community engagement including in-person forums with residents and physical and digital surveys.

The plan included a SWOT analysis which identified issues important to Comfrey's residents. The SWOT analysis was used to identify available opportunities for both governmental entities and residents. This included descriptions of green infrastructure, energy storage systems, active transportation, and ways to decrease household energy use.

The conclusion of the CCRP proposed potential goals, projects, and action items for the city, residents, and businesses. The proposed projects were based on the concerns of the community. RNDC will continue to partner with Comfrey as it works to mitigate the effects of severe weather events and the future of the community in mind.

Comfrey, with RNDC's assistance, is looking into opportunities to implement solar power at the wastewater treatment plant. Solar energy will offer a more affordable way to manage energy costs and the CCRP provides the city with a foundation to explore its options.



## **BD** | THE BIOECONOMY DEVELOPMENT **OZ** | OPPORTUNITY ZONE INITIATIVE

Region Nine has been awarded the nation's first 'A' Rating for a Bioeconomy Development Opportunity (BDO) Zone for the availability of corn stover. This zone covers a 75-mile radius centered in St. James, MN, and displays the region's potential in the bioeconomy sector. RNDC's successful application for the Energizing Rural Communities Phase I Prize from the Department of Energy (DOE) allowed staff to research initiatives to advance clean energy and connect rural areas with these economic opportunities.

As part of this initiative, RNDC brought together an Independent Review Committee (IRC) consisting of strategic partners from local, regional, and statewide backgrounds, including RNDC Commissioners. This group was involved with the BDO Zone technical assessment phase, meeting throughout the rating process to be kept informed of the project's progression and to offer insight and feedback to help ensure the rating was accurately depicting the region's identity. During the final meeting, the BDO report was presented, allowing time for the IRC to discuss and ask questions about the process, ultimately leading to a formal approval by the IRC to finalize and promote the rating.

The 'A' rating was granted due to the region's strong feedstock supply chains and infrastructure, particularly its abundance of underutilized corn stover. Region Nine is one of the top corn-producing areas in the country, yielding over 1.4 million bone-dry tons of corn stover annually. The region's strategic location near major metropolitan areas, combined with on-site utilities and interstate and rail infrastructure, further strengthens its competitive advantage.

The BDO Zone rating serves as a beacon, designed to attract investments that help local communities deploy powerful economic development tools. These tools drive, accelerate, and catalyze biobased investments and commercial projects within BDO Zones. The ratings also assist regions and communities in attracting new bio-based project developments by demonstrating the maturity and readiness of local biomass supply chains.



# TRANSPORTATION



## Walkable Communities Workshop

RNDC worked with the Minnesota Department of Health and Alta Planning + Design to host a Walkable Communities Workshop Facilitator Training in the City of Saint Peter in July 2023.

In this “train the trainer” event, city staff, elected officials, public health professionals, planners, and other bike and pedestrian advocates learned how to lead and facilitate Walkable Communities Workshops and effectively advocate for better transportation environments for people on foot or wheels.

The momentum generated from this event helped the City of Saint Peter secure \$100,000 worth of consultant support to create an Active Transportation Plan through MnDOT’s Active Transportation program. RNDC also assisted Saint Peter in writing the grant application.



## Active Transportation Summit

In September 2023, RNDC partnered with Greater Mankato Bike & Walk Advocates, Bike Walk Saint Peter, and Brown-Nicollet-Le Sueur-Waseca SHIP to host the Southern Minnesota Active Transportation Summit (SMATS) in North Mankato.

This summit covered a wide variety of topics, including the demographic and economic cases for active transportation investment, effective advocacy methods, walkable street design, active transportation funding and planning opportunities, demonstration projects, the Safe Routes to School program, and food security and transportation.

The SMATS fostered collaboration and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders committed to enhancing active transportation options in the region. By bringing together local advocates, planners, and policy makers, the summit created a platform for exchanging ideas and exploring innovative solutions tailored to South Central Minnesota’s unique needs.

The summit provided options for long-term improvement including increased funding for active transportation initiatives, the development of safer and more accessible pedestrian and biking infrastructure, and the integration of active transportation considerations into regional planning efforts.

# NADO IMPACT AWARD

RNDC was awarded an Aliceann Wohlbruck NADO Impact Award for its participation in a learning exchange with North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Germany. The Impact Award honors advances in community and economic development, including small business finance, energy and infrastructure projects, housing and human services, sustainable development, and workforce development across the nation.

The learning exchange started meaningful connections and collaborative efforts between both regions, positively impacting the global pursuit of welcoming and climate smart initiatives. As a direct outcome of the exchange program's focus on sustainable development, the region won the prestigious National Renewable Energy Laboratory's (NREL) HeroX Federal prize from the DOE. This resulted in the region pursuing a certification as a BDO Zone to position South Central Minnesota as an attractive destination for sustainable companies at the forefront of biofuel technology.



RNDC led the 19-person delegation to Düsseldorf, Münster, Saerbeck, and Senden. The learning exchange provided an opportunity for the two groups to share ideas on creating inclusive communities and climate initiatives as both regions work towards clean energy economies.



## BLUE EARTH COUNTY

Lyle Femrite  
Mike Laven, Chair  
Lisa Norton  
Patty O'Connor

## BROWN COUNTY

Andrea Boettger, Vice Chair  
Dave Borchert  
Robert Goblirsch  
Gary Richter

## FARIBAULT COUNTY

Tom Loveall

## LE SUEUR COUNTY

Stephanie Hilpipre  
Steve Rohlfing  
Scott Schlueter

## MARTIN COUNTY

Lee Baarts  
Elliot Belgard  
Elroy Glidden  
Phil Schafer

## NICOLLET COUNTY

Marie Dranttel, Treasurer  
Mary Milbrath  
Shanon Nowell  
Matt Peterson

## SIBLEY COUNTY

Dawn Kratzke  
Christian Lilienthal  
Bob Nielsen

## WASECA COUNTY

Brad Krause  
Julie Tesch  
Rob Wilkening

## WATONWAN COUNTY

Jim Branstad, Secretary  
Steve Cooling  
Paul Harris

## PUBLIC INTEREST GROUPS

Chris Dalton  
Katelynn Kratz  
Ayan Omar  
Mike Pfeil  
Rita Rassbach



## Administration



**Nicole Griensewic**  
Executive Director



**Sarah Janovsky**  
Executive Assistant



**Nate George**  
Communications Specialist

## Finance



**Ky Battern**  
Finance Director



**Kristian Braekkan**  
Economic Development  
Director

## Economic Development



**Alejandra Bejarano**  
Economic Recovery  
Planner



**Mercedes Sempe**  
PT- Economic  
Development Assistant

## Community Development



**Joel Hanif**  
Transportation Planner



**Sabri Fair**  
Environment and  
Sustainability Planner



**Samuel Sharp**  
Energy and  
Sustainability Planner

## Research



**Aaron Pacheco**  
PT - Research Associate

## Interns



**Mireille Ghassan**  
Economic Development  
Intern



**Saga Rydaker**  
Economic Development  
Practicum Scholar



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