

# QUARTERLY REPORT

Q3 2020



## VISION

The Greater Freeport Partnership is the place where organizations and people unite to advocate for the region, drive economic growth and champion a talented, workforce-ready community.

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## NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

On behalf of the Greater Freeport Partnership, I would like to thank you for your continued support. I hope that you, and your family are in good health and your business is holding steady in the face of the constraints and restraints caused by the pandemic.

### **Industrial Sector**

Several value-added agriculture/food producers in Stephenson County are planning and expanding production operations. This past month the Partnership coordinated a tour with Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) of Stephenson County Dairy/Cheese/Vegetable operations. The tour provided our state partners with a better understanding of the dynamics of this industry in relation to its growth, the demands/limitations on workforce and the need for investments in infrastructure all due to the remote locations within the county.

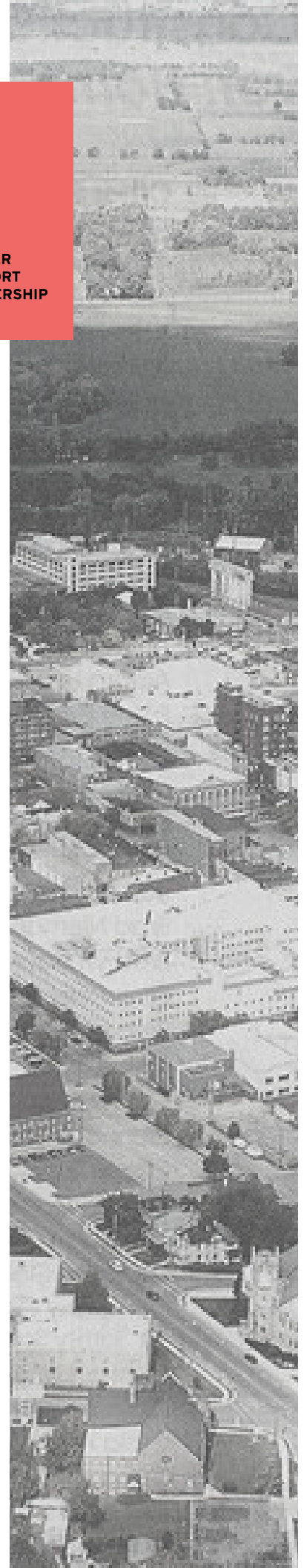
### **Mill Race Crossing**

Facilitated a meeting with City of Freeport staff and Stephenson County Chairman and staff along with engineering consultant to move forward discussions on developing a cooperative effort to extend water and sewer infrastructure to Mill Race Crossing.

Concurrently we are actively meeting with national developers with national developers that bring with them relationships with business clients and rail users.

### **Downtown Focus on Redevelopment Opportunities**

Starting in the 3rd quarter we began focusing on inventorying redevelopment opportunities within Downtown Freeport along with cost reduction tools (incentives) available for each building and site. We have begun meeting with developers experienced in large redevelopment, adaptive reuse projects that utilize the tools available.



## **Commercial/Retail Sector**

in the Greater Freeport region has been hit extremely hard by the Pandemic through the forced closings and social distancing requirements. Much of our work has been focused on transitioning from providing relief assistance to recovery assistance as businesses start to phase in reopening from COVID-19 restrictions and from civil unrest damages. We continue to meet with and provide information to owners and representative brokers of large retail centers in Freeport. In an effort to retain current retail operations, fill vacant space with new retail and explore repurposing possibilities for different mixed uses. You will also see in later in this report that we have held several ribbon cuttings with many planned in the near future.

## **Public Sector Partners**

- Held bi-weekly meetings with the Freeport City Manager to discuss ongoing projects related to City economic development projects and provide support when needed.
- Met regularly with County Board Chairman to discuss County economic development projects and provide support when needed.
- Provided update and report at the County Planning and Development Committee meeting.
- Participated as a Board Member on the Workforce Connection annual meeting
- Participated as a Board Member in the Quad City Regional Economic Development Authority meeting Participated as a Board Member in the Blackhawk Hills Regional Council meeting

## **Private Sector Partners**

As Executive Director I continue to hold scheduled meetings with Partnership Board members, Partner Level members and business community leaders to introduce myself and learn about their businesses in our region.

## **Enterprise Zone**

- Continue to work with solar energy company on plans to expand 100 MW solar farm.
- This past quarter there were \_\_\_\_ applications submitted for building materials sales tax exemption representing a total capital investment of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_ new jobs.
- Continue to work on the application to delete undevelopable areas from the enterprise zone in order to free up capacity for future boundary expansions.
- Met with enterprise zone administrator to begin plans to expand enterprise zone boundary for future projects and update digital enterprise zone map.

## **Lena Economic Development Corporation**

Our staff met with the Lena Economic Development Corporation in Lena at Rafters to introduce ourselves and discuss the services we offer and how we can partner with them on projects.

## **Entrepreneurship/Innovation Ecosystem**

There are several thoughts of how and where new business and self-employment opportunities will rise from our pandemic induced economic crisis. Regardless of where the "place" of the worker or business is located, it will be paramount that we establish an Entrepreneurship Ecosystem that underpins and supports not only sustainable but agile business development. For this reason, staff has been mapping out the existing entrepreneurship resource network and identifying the service gaps. The next steps would be to: organically grow the services locally, connect to and leverage regional services and connect to services virtually outside the region. This past quarter our team met with the Freeport Public Library to introduce the ecosystem map and discuss how the Library would be integrated into the "map."

For the purpose of establishing a larger regional program, I have been meeting with Transform Rockford Economic Recovery Principal Organizations Team – developing a regional entrepreneurship/innovation ecosystem framework for Stephenson, Boone and Winnebago Counties. The team is now working with a consultant-led strategic doing exercise for the purpose of co-creating a regional innovation ecosystem model. As Executive Director of the Partnership, I sit on the Principle Organizations Committee coordinating the effort.

The framing question for our strategic doing process is: “Imagine if we are a globally recognized hub for aspiring entrepreneurs and innovative companies. What would that look like?”

Teams are set up including directors Nicole Haas, Andrea Schultz Winter, Bill Clow and myself sit on teams representing the Partnership in four different focused areas:

Narrative – Branding and Stories

Brainpower – Research and Talent

Support Networks – Startups and Innovation

Quality Place – Connected Spaces and Policies

The following pages represent the progress being made in our key initiatives for the 3rd Quarter 2020

*C. Mark Williams,*  
*Executive Director*

## **Q2 PROGRESS ON KEY INITIATIVES**

### *Workforce Development*

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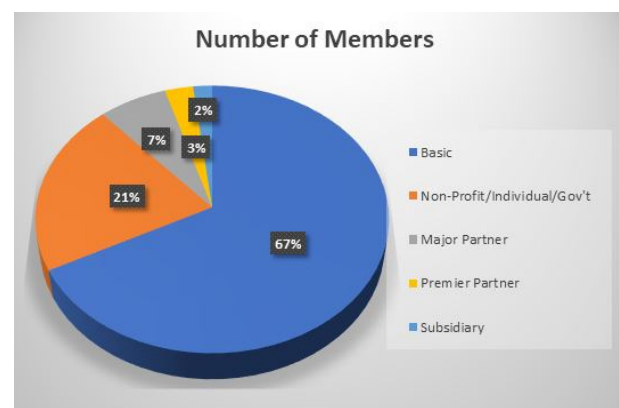
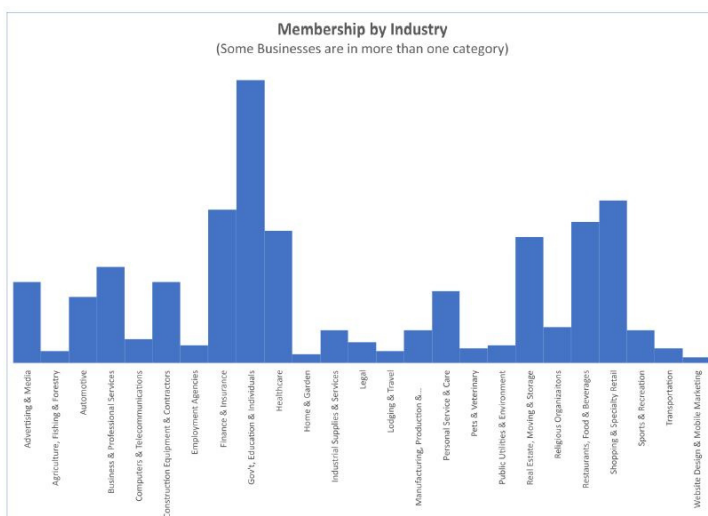
Due to COVID, Workforce Development efforts have been stalled, therefore, work over the last three months have been concentrated on evaluating where previous efforts left off, if they are still relevant and determining the best course of action moving forward.

- Contacted Probation Department to see if the Job Readiness program will resume. Program continuation is undetermined for remainder of 2020.
- Met with The Workforce Connection Apprenticeship Navigator to understand program and how it might work for Stephenson County businesses.
- Continued to engage our Workforce Development partners: Bill and I met two new employees of The Workforce Connection Freeport Office. We explained what Partnership’s role in workforce development within Freeport/Stephenson County, and learned what their roles are within TWC.
- Continuous research into the remote workforce; how it is has impacted local employers, what challenges/opportunities does it afford Stephenson County. As of 2018, 5.8% of the County’s workforce population was working remotely.
- To re-establish a Workforce Development Committee, Mark, Tess, and I have compiled a list of potential committee members and met with Chris Kuberski, Workforce Development Chairperson, to discuss committee composition and goals of the group.

The Partnership recognizes COVID has been extremely disruptive to the business community, but we know there are many entrepreneurs forging ahead determined to start their own businesses.

- **Entrepreneurship Ecosystem:** To aid entrepreneurs we have begun to map what resources currently exist and identify where there are service gaps. We have engaged the Freeport Public Library as a partner because we understand many budding entrepreneurs will start their journey accessing resources at the library. To inform our work we have viewed a regional example, Rockford Public Library has an established robust system of entrepreneurial services.
- **Strategic Doing:** Additionally, we understand entrepreneurs thrive in a culture of innovation. To understand the connection more fully between entrepreneurs, innovation and the place we call home, Directors have been participating in a regional Strategic Doing exercise. (add what other directors are doing here as well?)
- **Enterprise Zone:** Our Enterprise Zone nears capacity. To facilitate future development the Partnership has been analyzing zone parcels to understand where future development could or couldn't occur because of the floodway. Parcels unable to support development will be removed from the zone to free-up zone capacity.
- **C-PACE (Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy) Program** is a financing structure in which building owners borrow money from energy efficiency, renewable energy, or other projects and make repayments via an assessment on their property tax bill. This is another tool in the 'project financing toolbox' but a county must pass an ordinance to enact the program. The Partnership engaged speakers to present the program to the County's Planning & Development Committee. Stephenson County is looking to enact the ordinance so the C-PACE program could be utilized locally.
- **Downtown Revitalization Loan Fund (DRLF):**
  - Met with two downtown building owners who are interested in redeveloping their building. Provided them information on the EZ and the loan fund.
  - Interviewed our first DRLF applicant to get their testimonial. The testimonial will be used to develop program marketing materials.
- **Mill Race Crossing:** working with Mark to understand the development potential for each parcel at MRC. This information will be used to inform a discussion with the County's Planning & Development Committee in October.

## Membership



## Business & Community Outreach

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- In the third quarter, the Greater Freeport Partnership conducted 10 ribbon cuttings of new businesses. These ribbon cuttings resulted in several new members for the Partnership, numerous positive media stories and a general sense that Freeport and Stephenson County are doing well and welcoming of new businesses and entrepreneurs. Several more ribbon cuttings are either scheduled or being planned for the fourth quarter.
- We have continued to look for business education opportunities that are beneficial to our local businesses. In the third quarter, we hosted some seminars and shared information about third party seminars that were relevant to issues local businesses are struggling with.
- Our Young Professionals Network (YPN) held two events in September. YPN members took responsibility for the landscaping around the Welcome to Freeport sign on Rte. 75 on the eastern edge of Freeport. They removed trash, trimmed branches and shrubbery, removed weeds and put down mulch. This was a member led initiative.
- The YPN also hosted a fun golf event at Wolf Hollow Golf Course in Lena. This first-time event featured games and challenges at every hole, a burger and brat meal and lots of fun prizes. This was a member-managed event.
- We have added three new Ambassadors in the third quarter, which has been helpful as several other Ambassadors have been isolating due to work or family health issues.
- Women's Enrichment Network (WEN): Over the last quarter the group has met monthly. Meetings are held both in-person (adhering to social distancing guidelines) and virtually. Many members have enjoyed the option of attending from their own offices. We have averaged 30 attendees each meeting, roughly evenly split between in-person and virtual attendance. Meeting topics have covered: 'Communication Strategies for Difficult Conversations'; 'Influencer Training'; and 'Leadership Matters'.



## COVID-19 Emergency Response

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- In April, the Partnership was awarded a grant from the Freeport Community Foundation and United Way's COVID-19 Response Fund for a program that would encourage shopping at local businesses. The program was titled, Partnership Cash 50% Off'. To date over \$14,000 has been spent at local small businesses.
- Continue to promote the Freeport Clean Hands, Open Doors web site and health campaign to instill consumer confidence.
- Prioritize daily web updates regarding COVID-19 financial resources and reopening information with additional web pages, links to partner agencies and webinar information.
- Communicated relevant information about the COVID-19 situation to industry groups and individual business as appropriate. Counseled individual businesses about how to access appropriate information and resources.
- Worked with the City of Freeport, Stephenson County and the Stephenson County Health Department to get accurate and timely information to businesses
- in Stephenson County.

### Tourism:

- Stephenson County Visitor Center attendance remains at about half that of the same time period last year. While much of this is to be expected with COVID-19 travel patterns, many visitors stopping have been extremely appreciative of the clean, hospitable atmosphere available to them.
- The new Stephenson County tourism brand campaign, ALL IN Stephenson County was launched on social media on July 10. This new brand will highlight the best in visual content to tell the story of Freeport and Stephenson County and all of its assets.
- Last year's digital Bikes & Brews campaign has been revamped and launched on the new ALL IN Stephenson County tourism brand pages. In the first week, the brand DOUBLED the traffic to our web site! Also, the web site visitors are spending an average of 6 ½ minutes on the site which is incredible.
- Annual billboard contract signed with Lamar for poster near Kent Rd on Highway 20. "Welcome to Stephenson County" currently features the three breweries for fall and winter but will change artwork for spring 2021.
- Billboards in southern Wisconsin were placed near Monroe and Janesville featuring bikes on the Jane Addams Trail because "Experiences Make Memories" in Stephenson County.
- Researched and created presentation on the economic impact of biking/hiking trails in a community to present to JAT member committees.
- Momentum Art Guild is on display at the visitor center from September 18- November 13. Holiday Gift Show will begin November 20 with 17 craft vendors and multiple local merchants as well.

### Events:

- All events for 2020 were cancelled or drastically modified which did not allow for event sponsorship or ticket sales revenue for the entire year.
- All three Music on Chicago events held virtually featuring local musicians in open air spaces throughout Downtown Freeport. All performers and vendors have been rebooked for dates in 2021.
- The Partnership golf outing was held on a very HOT August 27 at Park Hills Golf Course. We were very excited to have 100 golfers and support from many wonderful sponsors and donors. Thank you especially to Katie, Billy and the help of the Partnership Ambassadors for seamless execution.
- Cruise-Only Cruise Night was a great success on August 15. Over 1,200 people watched between 250-300 cars on the expanded route. The comments from callers and our social media followers have been very positive and they hope we will consider the expanded route in the future.
- After consulting with the Stephenson Co. Health Dept., Mistletoe Walk will proceed as usual on November 22. The Hero Tree will be displayed at the Stephenson County Courthouse and the Partnership will promote an afternoon of wonderful downtown shopping. Stores will receive reminders on health and safety protocols when preparing for the event.

## Marketing:

- Continue to create and publish ALL IN Stephenson County digital weekly events guide highlighting local events, specials, and notable milestones. We have now reached 769 subscribers.
- The Partnership's new web site design has been finalized. All previous content has been reviewed, rewritten and updated by staff and is being moved into the revitalized format and menu functions.
- Hired content creators for photo and video of specific locations and industries in Freeport and Stephenson County for use in web design, social media and other media.
- Redesigned and rewrote the 16-page recruitment booklet to be used by area employers and employment agencies to use in attracting talent to Stephenson County. It is available in print and digital versions for use by any member.

## *Beautification & Corridors Improvements*

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- Over the past quarter work has been concentrated on administering grant programs that had been established in the last quarter of 2019. Again, grant programming and promotion had been delayed due to COVID. Additionally, we continue corridor analysis in conjunction with the City's planned infrastructure improvement along the Adams Street corridor. Despite COVID, we were able to complete our downtown beautification goals for 2020.
  - #FreeportReflections, the grant funded downtown vacant window activation program restarted on July 30th. The goal of the program is to attract attention to vacant spaces in hopes they become leased. Four artists activated 5 vacant storefronts in downtown Freeport. To date, 2 of the 5 locations have been leased. Art has been relocated to other locations as space has been leased. As part of our grant reporting we are tracking in-person views of select installation locations and online views of the [greaterfreeport.com/freeportreflections](https://greaterfreeport.com/freeportreflections). There have been over 1,000 in-person views and more than 600 on-line clicks on our website.
  - CFNIL Streetscape Furniture Grant was awarded at the end of 2019 for over \$20,774.00 which funded the purchase of 6 new benches and 15 litter receptacles. We coordinated with the City Public Works Department as to installation location and removal of old furniture.
  - 2020 Beautification Goals:
    - 60 streetscape banners were designed and hung throughout downtown. Banners will remain up until Christmas decorations are installed in November.
    - A collaboration between the City of Freeport, Downtown Freeport Events and the Partnership paid for the purchase of plants and ongoing maintenance through the summer months.
  - Corridor Beautification: The Partnership is analyzing parcels data, vacancies, zoning and redevelopment potential along the Adams Street Corridor. We are having on-going meeting with City Community Development Department to share information and coordinate efforts.