REGIONAL
OPPORTUNITY
INITIATIVES

INDIANA
UPLANDS | PROUD PARTNER
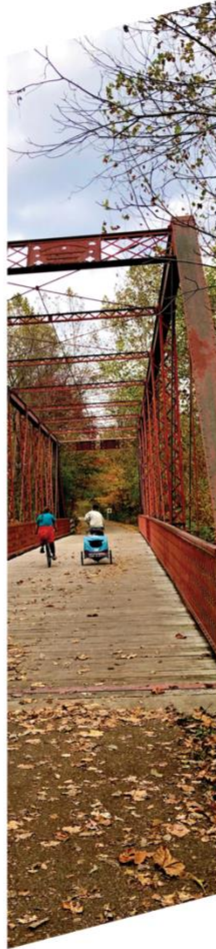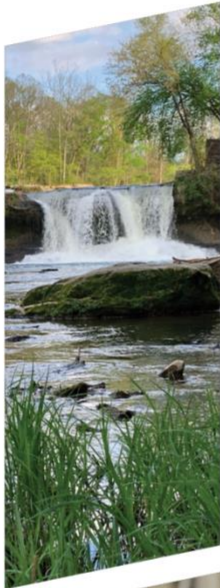
INDIANA UPLANDS
DIGITAL TOWNS GRANT GUIDELINES

SUMMER 2024

Introduction

Regional Opportunity Initiatives, Inc. (ROI) was established in 2016 with a mission to advance economic and community prosperity in the 11 counties of the Indiana Uplands. ROI is growing potential and possibility through a focus on advanced sectors, regionalism, transformative school and workforce redesign, and placemaking strategies.

In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Holcomb noted that affordable, high-speed broadband had become a business and personal necessity, and that Hoosiers should be able to connect to high-speed broadband wherever they live, work, or attend school. He allocated $100 million of state funding to bring high-speed fiber optic broadband access to unserved and underserved areas of the state.

As the COVID public health emergency clearly showed, communities with inadequate connectivity and/or digital know-how struggled to implement mitigation strategies such as e-learning and remote work. Beyond COVID recovery, it has also become clear that digital inclusion strategies must be interwoven into any community and economic development efforts moving forward if individuals and communities are to thrive in an increasingly digitized society and economy.

In support of its mission, ROI partnered with the Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD) in 2021 and worked with community digital advisory teams in each Uplands county in 2022 to gather broadband and digital inclusion data and develop county by county digital inclusion plans. The objective of these 2023 plans is to make the region more digitally inclusive by focusing on digital literacy, access to and adoption of devices, and access through broadband infrastructure expansion.

Since ROI's study with PCRD, the state of Indiana has also taken steps to advance digital equity. PCRD partnered with the state in late 2023 to create a statewide Digital Equity Plan. Additionally, Indiana has released state grants around equity in 2021 and 2022, and is pursing federal funding through the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program (BEAD). Purdue University also created the Digital Divide Index after the creation of the Uplands counties' digital inclusion plans. These additional resources have helped to inform digital equity work in the Uplands region.

In the Spring of 2023, ROI opened a first round of grant opportunities through the Digital Towns initiative, and awarded funding to four projects:

- Crawford County Public Access Wi-Fi Equity Program
- Ivy Tech Digital Hope+ Program
- Owen County Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Corporation County Connect Program
- Washington County Community Hotspots and Digital Literacy Classes

For more information on these projects, please see [ROI's Broadband and Digital Inclusion webpage.](#) These projects are working to create a digitally inclusive region, both through region-wide projects and those more community focused. ROI is excited about the expansion of digital literacy goals through this second round of grant funding.

Purpose

Regional Opportunity Initiatives (ROI) will offer a second round of grant funding to implement strategies supported by the digital inclusion plan, build upon recent activity, and that improve digital equity and inclusion across the Indiana Uplands. The Digital Towns Grant program will provide Uplands communities and organizations with resources needed to develop and implement projects and programs to ensure Uplands citizens can participate fully in a digital society. Up to $200,000 has been allocated to support this grant program. See "Eligible Applicants" on page 6 to determine if your organization is eligible to apply.

Background

What is Digital Inclusion?

Digital inclusion is not limited to broadband expansion. Successful digital inclusion ensures everyone has access to affordable internet connectivity that meets the needs of households, local governments, and businesses. It also is a vehicle for ensuring that individuals and organizations have reliable and appropriate devices and sufficient digital skills/ literacy to fully participate and prosper in the digital age. Examples of the type of strategies a community might adopt to advance digital literacy include but are not limited to:

- Establishing and/or expanding community-based or governmental social media and website presence,
- Assisting local businesses with technical resources and/or training to expand their e-commerce opportunities,
- libraries administering device loan programs, or access to digital resources and training, or
- digital skill-building classes.

It is critical for communities to expand their digital footprints and ensure they adopt new technologies to ensure the community and its residents remain resilient in the digital age.

Why Digital Towns?

Economic growth, job creation, better public services, and improved quality of life are some of the benefits of a digitally inclusive community. Digital Towns is a framework borrowed from Ireland that defines a digital town as a geographic information space that adopts and integrates information and communication technologies in all aspects of town life. (Lynn, et al., 2022).

Leveraging digital transformation will help build a more sustainable region where people and employees will want to work, live and play.

Digital Infrastructure

Currently, both the state and federal government are investing heavily in broadband infrastructure installation with an emphasis on underserved locations. Given the level of funding for physical infrastructure, this grant program will not focus on this category of need. To learn more about these programs go to BroadbandUSA, OCRA Next Level Connections, or Indiana Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program websites.

Program Description

The goal of this initiative is to financially support projects or programs that align with the strategies outlined in the Indiana Uplands Digital Inclusion Plan and as outlined below:

Key Strategies and Objectives

The main objective of the Digital Towns Grant Program is the advancement of a more digitally inclusive region by adopting and integrating digital information and communication in all aspects of our communities. For the purpose of this grant program, ROI will focus on the following themes:

- **Digital Citizens** – helping households connect to the internet, access devices and grow competence in usage of digital technologies to engage in internet services, e-commerce, educational opportunities, digital public services, and healthcare services

- **Digital Public Services** – supporting collaborations between local units of government, nonprofits, and/or health care services to provide access to online information and/or services, and telehealth access points

- **Digital Business** – partnering with businesses and entrepreneurs to maximize opportunities in the digital economy

Grants are intended to increase the digital capabilities of the region by providing funding for relevant professional services, training, digital products, equipment/hardware, or other products and services that advance digital inclusion and prosperity.

Digital Towns: a geographic and information space that adopts and integrates information and communication technologies in all aspects of town life.

The eight dimensions of the Digital Town Readiness Framework.
Source: Addressing the Urban-Town-Rural Divide: The Digital Town Readiness Assessment Framework.
More information on Digital Towns: https://www.weare.ie/ie-digital-town-blueprint-introduction/

Grant Guidelines

Prerequisites

ROI will host an **open office hour via Zoom on August 8, 2024, at 10:30 a.m.** to answer any questions potential applicants may have about the grant. While not required, potential applicants are encouraged to attend the open office hours if they are wondering if Digital Towns grant could prove beneficial, have questions about preparing a fundable proposal, or have questions about the grant application.

Zoom link: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84452511098

Proposals

Projects and programs must align with one or more of the following strategies:

- **Digital Citizen: Increasing Access and Digital Literacy**
  Examples: Public wi-fi spaces, device loaner/ownership programs, digital literacy classes, telehealth access points, digital skill building workshops to build workforce capabilities.

- **Digital Public Service: Engaging the Uplands Citizens**
  Examples: Developing systems for live-streaming and archiving public meetings, assisting nonprofits in the adoption and utilization of digital technologies, expansion of online services for the public

- **Expanding the Uplands Digital Economy**
  Examples: Development/build out of e-commerce websites for Uplands businesses, IT entrepreneurial support programming, assistance with Precision Ag opportunities, events such as "hack-a-thons"

Applications will be submitted via [ROI's online grant portal.](#) The following information will be required:

- Name of applicant organization
- Name and title of contact person
- Contact information
- Business type and Employer Identification Number (EIN)
- Project/program description
- Timeline for project/program
- Total project/program costs (budget breakdown)
- Amount of funding requested
- Strategy impact
- Regional impact
- Proposed outcomes
- Program sustainability (if applicable)

Projects that align with regional housing, childcare, or talent strategies will receive additional consideration in evaluation.

Project/Program Timeline

Grant funded projects or programs must be completed by June 30, 2025.

Match Requirements

Digital Towns grants require a 10% match. Match can be either cash or in-kind contributions. Cash match can include personnel expenses. In-kind match can include donation of professional services. Indirect/overhead expenses do not qualify as a match. Questions regarding the eligibility of in-kind contributions should be directed to Josie Smith at josie@regionalopportunityinc.org.

Grant Timeline

Applications are due on September 13, 2024. If selected, grants will be awarded no later than October 15, 2024.

Eligible Applicants

- **Incorporated cities and towns**
- **County commissions and councils**
- **Libraries**
- **Nonprofits, including foundations, agencies, and hospitals**
- **Public education institutions, including pre-K, K-12, and post-secondary**
- **Faith-based organizations**
- **Main Street organizations**
- **Chambers of commerce and economic development organizations that have an affiliated 501(c)3**
- **Organizations/programs that help business/entrepreneurs**

Funding Available

Applicants can apply for a grant in an any amount between $5,000 - $50,000. Projects with a regional scope, serving all 11 counties of the Uplands, can apply for up to $75,000.

Evaluation Process

Final proposal submissions are due electronically by 11:59 pm EST on September 13, 2024.

Applications submitted through ROI's online grant portal will be reviewed by the Grant Evaluation Committee. Applications selected by the committee will be forwarded to the ROI Board of Directors for final approval at the October meeting. The grant will commence upon the signature of the Grant Agreement.

For questions, please contact Josie Smith, Grants Management Specialist
Email: josie@regionalopportunityinc.org
Phone: (812) 287-8116